A compelling read...thrillingly moving.
About the Author


He lives in London with his wife and their three children.
ALSO BY SEBASTIAN FAULKS

A Trick of the Light
The Girl at the Lion d’Or
A Fool’s Alphabet
Birdsong
The Fatal Englishman
Charlotte Gray
On Green Dolphin Street
Human Traces
Pistache
For Gillon Aitken
‘It is a small part of life we really live. Indeed, all the rest is not life but merely time.’

From *On the Shortness of Life* by Seneca, AD49
My name is Mike Engleby, and I’m in my second year at an ancient university. My college was founded in 1662, which means it’s viewed here as modern. Its chapel was designed by Hawksmoor, or possibly Wren; its gardens were laid out by someone else whose name is familiar. The choir stalls were carved by the only woodcarver you’ve ever heard of. The captain of the Boat Club won a gold medal at an international games last year. (I think he’s studying physical education.) The captain of cricket has played for Pakistan, though he talks like the Prince of Wales. The teachers, or ‘dons’, include three university professors, one of whom was on the radio recently talking about lizards. He’s known as the Iguanodon.

Tonight I won’t study in my room because there’s the weekly meeting of the Folk Club. Almost all the boys in my college go to this, not for the music, though it’s normally quite good, but because lots of girl students come here for the evening. The only boys who don’t go are those with a work compulsion, or the ones who think folk music died when Bob Dylan went electric.

There’s someone I’ve seen a few times, called Jennifer Arkland. I discovered her name because she stood for election to the committee of a society. On the posters, the candidates had small pictures of themselves and, under their names and colleges, a few personal details. Hers said: ‘second-year History exhibitioner. Previously educated at Lymington High School and Sorbonne. Hobbies: music, dance, film-making, cooking. Would like to make the society more democratic with more women members and have more outings.’

I’d seen her in the tea room of the University Library, where she was usually with two other girls from her college, a fat one called Molly and a severe dark one, whose name I hadn’t caught. There was often Steve from Christ’s or Dave from Jesus sniffing round them.

I think I’ll join this society of hers. It doesn’t matter what it’s for because they’re all the same. They’re all called something Soc, short for Society. Lab Soc, Lit Soc, Geog Soc. There’s probably a knitting group called Sock Soc.

I’ll find out about Jen Soc, then go along so I can get to know her better.

I won a prize to come to my college and it pays my fees; my family’s poor. I took a train from school one day after I’d sat the exams and had been called for interview. I must have stayed in London on the way, but I have no memory of it. My memory’s odd like that. I’m big on detail, but there are holes in the fabric. I do remember that I took a bus from the station, though I didn’t know then what my college looked like. I went round the whole city and ended up back at the station, having made the round trip. Then I took a taxi and had to borrow some money from the porter to pay for it. I still had a pound note in my wallet for emergencies.

They gave me a key to a bedroom; it was in a courtyard that I reached by a tunnel under the road. I imagined what kind of student lived there normally. I pictured someone called Tony with a beard and a duffel coat. I tried really hard to like the room and the college that was going to be mine. I imagined bicycling off to lectures in the early morning with my books balanced on a rack over the back wheel. I’d be shouting out to the other guys, ‘see you there!’ I’d probably smoke a pipe. I’d also probably have a girlfriend – some quite stern grammar school girl with glasses, who wouldn’t be to everyone’s taste.

In fact, I didn’t like the room I was in that night. It was damp, it was small and it felt as though too many people had been through it. It didn’t seem old enough; it didn’t seem 17th century, or modern: it was more like 1955. Also, there was no bathroom. I found one up the stairs. It was very cold and I had to stay dressed until the bath was run. The water itself was very hot. Everything in the room and on the stairs smelled slightly of gas, and lino.

I slept fine, but I didn’t want to have breakfast in the dining hall because of having to talk to the other candidates. I went along the street and found a café and had weak coffee and a sausage roll, which I paid for from my spare pound. I re-entered the college by the main gate. The porter was sullen in his damp lodge with a paraffin heater. ‘G12, Dr Woodrow’s rooms,’ he said. I found it all right, and there was another boy waiting outside. He looked clever.

Eventually, the door opened and it was my turn. There were two of them in there: a big schoolmasterly man who showed me to a chair, then sat down at a desk; and a younger, thin man with a beard who didn’t get up from his armchair. Teachers at my school didn’t have beards.

‘You wrote well on Shakespeare. Do you visit the theatre a good deal?’ This was the big one talking. It sounded too much like an ordinary conversation to be an interview. I suspected a trap. I told him there wasn’t a theatre where we lived, in Reading.
I was watching him all the time. How grand, to be a Doctor of whatever and to weigh up and decide people’s future. I’d once seen a set of table mats in a shop which had pictures of men in different academic gowns: Doctor of Divinity, Master of Arts and so on. But this was the first real one I’d seen. He asked me a few more things, none of them interesting.

‘. . . the poetry of Eliot. Would you care to make a comparison between Eliot and Lawrence?’

This was the younger one, and it was his first contribution. I thought he must be joking. An American banker interested in the rhythms of the Anglican liturgy and a pitman’s son who wanted to escape from Nottingham, maybe via sex, or by his crude paintings. Compare them? I looked at him carefully, but he showed no sign of humour so I gave an answer about their use of verse forms, trying to make it sound as though it had been a reasonable question. He nodded a few times and looked relieved. He didn’t follow it up.

The big one leafed through my papers again. ‘Your personal report,’ he said at last, ‘from your teacher . . . Did you have difficulties with him?’

I hadn’t been aware of any, I said.

‘Is there anything that you’d like to ask us about life in college? We try to make everyone feel welcome.’

It seemed wrong not to ask something; it might look as though I didn’t care. But I couldn’t ask any of the things I really wanted to know. In the silence we heard the college clock chime the half-hour. I felt them both looking at me. Then I felt a trickle of sweat on my spine. I hardly ever sweat normally, and it gave me an idea.

‘What’s the thing with laundry?’

‘What?’ said the big one, gruffly.

‘Do you have . . . Well, like, washing machines? Is it done centrally or do I take it somewhere or what?’

‘Gerald?’

‘I’m not quite sure,’ said the younger one.

‘Each undergraduate is assigned a moral tutor,’ said the schoolmasterly one. ‘A Fellow of the college who can help you with all your personal and health questions.’

‘So he’d be the one to ask?’

‘Yes. Yes, I imagine so.’

I thought that now I’d broken the ice, it might be good to ask another question. ‘What about money?’ I said.

‘What?’

‘How much money will I need?’

‘I imagine your local authority will provide a grant. It’s up to you how you spend it. Do you have questions about the work?’

‘No. I read the prospectus.’

‘Do you find the idea of Chaucer daunting?’

‘No, I like Chaucer.’

‘Yes, yes, I can see that from your paper. Well, Mr Engle . . . er . . . ’

‘Engleby.’

‘Englebury. You can go now, unless . . . Gerald?’

‘No, no.’

‘Good. So we’ll look forward to seeing you next autumn.’

I didn’t see how they could let me go without telling me how it had gone. ‘Have I won a prize?’ I said.

‘We shall be writing to your school in due course. When we’ve completed the interview process. It’s an exceptional year.’

I shook his offered hand, waved at the seated one and went out, down the oak stairs. What a pair of frauds.

In the evening I tear a ticket from a book and take it to the college dining hall, which was designed by Robert Adam. You have to buy a book of thirty-five every term; you don’t actually have to use them, but the cash you pay in advance keeps the kitchen going. I’m wearing a long black gown over my jeans and sweater and there are candles in sconces on the painted plaster walls. We stand up when a door behind the top table opens and the Fellows of the college come in to dine. The Master is an oceanographer, who once drew maps of undersea mountain ranges. He knows how Australia was once attached to China or how Ghana sweated in the foothills of the Andes. I think he imagines that New Zealand once broke free from Germany.

The crystal glasses glitter in the candlelight. They drink wine. We drink water, though you are allowed to ask for beer if you like. Stellings is the only man to do this.

‘A pint of ale, please, Robinson,’ he says to the stooping butler. ‘Beer for you, Mike?’

I shake my head. Stellings brews his own beer in a plastic barrel. He calls it SG (short for student’s gin: drunk for a penny, dead drunk for twopence) and once forced me to drink it, even though it made me sick, with its powerful
taste of malt and raw alcohol, which he achieves by doubling the sugar input recommended on the side of the kit. There is no bathroom near his room, so I had to vomit into a plastic watering can on the landing.

I sometimes don’t take dinner in the dining hall. I’ve found some places I like better. One of them is a pub, a walk of ten or fifteen minutes away, over a green (there are a lot of greens or ‘pieces’ as they call them here), down a side street, up a back street. The beer there tastes much better than Stellings’s homebrew. It’s made by a brewery called Greene King. One of the King family, they say, is a famous novelist. The lights here are low, the floor is made of wooden boards; the other people are not from the university. They are what are called ordinary people, though each person is really too specific to be ordinary. It’s quite dark, and people talk softly. Although the barman knows me, he doesn’t intrude. I often have a baked potato, or a cheese and ham pie, which is messy to eat because the melted cheese is stringy and there’s so much of it between the layers of filo pastry.

I also drink gin and vermouth, mixed. I like red vermouth better than white. When I’ve drunk two or three of these, I feel I understand the world better. At least, I don’t mind so much that I don’t understand it; I can be tolerant of my ignorance. After three or four, I feel that my ignorance is not only tolerable, but possibly in some way noble.

Other times, I go into the middle of the town. There’s a bright Greek restaurant there, where it’s embarrassing to be seen alone – but I like the food: they bring moussaka with rice and with chips and with Greek salad and hummus, so if you’re hungry it’s a good place to go. Sometimes I don’t eat for two or three days, so I need to load up. With this Greek food I drink white wine that tastes of toilet cleaner, and they go together well.

I also take drugs. I’ve tried most things. My favourite is opium, though I’ve had it only once. It’s really hard to get hold of and involves a palaver with a flame and a pipe. I bought it from a boy who got it from a Modern History Fellow in Corpus Christi who had recently been to the Far East. The thing about opium is that it makes pain or difficulty unimaginable. If while you were under its influence someone were to tell you about Zyklon B and your parents dying and life in a dementia ward or Passchendaele, you might be able to understand what they meant – but only in a hypothetical sense. You might be interested by this idea of ‘pain’, but in a donnish way. I mean, I’m ‘interested’ in the special theory of relativity; the idea that there’s a dimension in which space rolls up and time distorts and you come back from a journey younger than you left is certainly intriguing, but it doesn’t have an impact on me, day by day. That’s what opium does to suffering: makes it of hypothetical interest only.

I mostly smoke marijuana, which I buy from a boy called Glynn Powers. I don’t know where Glynn buys it, but he has several kilos of it in the built-in bedside locker in his tiny room in the new Queen Elizabeth block, a short walk beyond Fellows’ Pieces (i.e. grass area reserved to dons). The block was opened by a princess only three years ago and in the entrance hall of the building, next to the commemorative plaque, there’s a picture of her standing in one of the little cells, smiling at the president, with the bedside locker in view behind them. The brickwork of the wall is exposed because they discovered when the building was completed that the size of each room was smaller than the minimum required for single human habitation by the Department of Housing. By removing the plasterboard they were able to add just enough volume to go legal.

In his bedside locker, Glynn keeps polished scales and brass imperial weights. Mene, mene, tekel, upharsin: you have been weighed in the scale, balanced and found wanting. Not that I’d argue with Glynn Powers or tell him he was wanting in any way at all. He wears a leather jacket with a thin fringe of tassels halfway down the back; he has a thick, trimmed beard and a motorbike. I have neither. He is studying Engineering. He doesn’t smoke himself, which I find sinister.

And tonight is Folk Club, as I said. This happens in the college bar, because you can’t have folk music without beer – in this case Double Diamond or gassy Worthington E. Brian, the professional barman who does the first two hours (after which the students take over), offers a free pint if you can drink one in less than five seconds. I have seen it done.

Bicycles start to arrive at about seven. There are striped scarves, coats; small, cheap cigarettes; most of the boys have hair to their shoulders, much of it grown out from a previous schoolboy style, so they still have a parting in the undergrowth. There are printed posters in the quads and linking passages. Hobgoblin, they announce. Avalon. With special guests: Split Infinitive.

When there are enough people in the bar, I move in among them. It must once have been a cellar, I suppose. The walls are white brick. They start to sweat.

I’ve drunk some gin in my room and have taken a Nembutal, which makes you feel detached. I’m smoking a cigarette. I really love cigarettes. I like the moist fragrance of the ones you roll yourself and I like Rothman’s King Size, advertised by a man’s hand emerging from a sleeve with gold hoops to grasp a gear lever. (Why is the pilot or naval officer still wearing his uniform in his car? Is he trying to impress an unseen woman? Is the gear lever a symbol? In which case, shouldn’t it be her hand on it?) I like the small piece of paper, like a miniature bookmark, that you pull up inside to arrange the fags in a little castle shape that makes it easier to extract the first one. (Now I
come to think of it, this is one of the most courteous, customer-loving things any manufacturer has ever done. To go
to the trouble of folding in this thin strip of paper, just so the smoker shouldn’t be irritated by trying to fish the first
one out of a tightly packed bunch and risk squashing the others . . . Ingenious, thoughtful and quite irrelevant after
the first cigarette, whose absence leaves space for the remainder to be slipped out easily. One day an accountant will
calculate that the infinitesimal saving of not including the strip, magnified by the huge number of packets sold, will
enable the companies to make an extra one thousand pounds a year profit, and they’ll stop doing it. For the sake of
one thousand quid.) Another thing I like about smoking is allowing a small amount of smoke to escape from my lips
then reeling it in again with a fast and deep inhalation. I like Gold Leaf, which used to be advertised on television by
a man on a hillside with a red setter, or was it a spaniel? I like the mildness of Piccadilly. I like the toasted taste of
Lucky Strike and Chesterfield and the way that French cigarettes hit the back of the throat like a blowtorch when
you inhale. The best thing is the combined effect of nicotine with alcohol, greater than the sum of the two parts.

I change brands a lot. I’m smoking white-tipped Kent tonight and have a pleasant taste of tobacco and red
vermouth, which I’ve bought from the bar. The boy on the bar doesn’t know how much to pour, which is all right
because he’s given me a full wine glass, into which I have put ice. I’ll try to make this last an hour.

On the sofas and armchairs there are piles of coats, and as the evening goes on and people dance, there are also
sweaters, jackets, bags. I can see Jennifer and Molly and Anne, and I keep a close watch on them. Avalon have a
violinist and a girl with very straight long hair in a crushed velvet dress who sings with a warble in her voice.

I imagine these folk songs go back many years, into some oral tradition. I make a note of some words. ‘I have for
to say,/My own true love,/Is gone far away/In the [inaudible] lights of noon./And weep shall I never/Keen no more’/Neath the mantle of the moon./ So fare thee well and fare thee well/Said the sailor to his lass/For the silvery
light of the Hebden Down?/Has brought us to this pass, kind sir,/Has brought us to this pass.’ It’s hard to hear
exactly what she sings because the drums are so loud. I don’t think the first bard envisaged a mike with a grey
blanket in the body of the bass drum.

I’m now propped up by a sweating pillar . . . I’m watching. My body stays supported. ‘Neath the mantle of the
moon, kind sir . . .’ I shall return to Folk Club, to the present moment, loud and smoky, but for the moment I let
myself go.

I have a car which I keep in the car park of the Queen Elizabeth building, which is reserved for the Fellows.
Sometimes the porters glue pieces of paper with strong reminders (and a split infinitive as a matter of fact) to the
windscreen to dissuade me from parking there. I peel them off.

Then I drive out to one of the villages. They have three-digit fingerposts dug into turf in the triangle where the
roads meet. They have war memorials (which I, perhaps alone, read) and brick-and-flint churches. They have
pubs. Above all, they have pubs, and the beer in them doesn’t come like the stuff in the college bar from a metal
cask, pressurised by the addition of carbon dioxide, which makes it taste of chemical soda water. In these pubs the
untreated beer is drawn by a hand pump from the cellar through a long thin tube and makes a whoosh as it swirls up
the glass, chestnut-amber, then falls as the handle is returned to its upright; then surges again, sparkling to the rim as
the handle is pulled a second time; stops with a thin white froth, then receives a final half-squirt; after which the base
of the glass is wiped on the towelling mat where you leave it for a moment for the beer to catch the light from the
false-antique light brackets of the Wheatsheaf, the Green Man, the Red Lion – a place where anyone can go, where
social ties are cut, so you’re frictionless, you’re no one.

Does it sound as though I’m trying to keep something at bay here? Perhaps, but I don’t know what.

Occasionally I stay the night, but not because I’m worried about driving. They normally have a room or two:
damp, with a candlewick bedsread and a bathroom at the end of the landing. It’s not an idyll. I don’t bother with
breakfast. I just want to be on the road. Undergraduates aren’t allowed cars, but I joined a golf club called Royal
Worlington (I never go there) and that was enough for them to make an exception. They encourage sport. My car’s a
bottle green Morris 1100, bought fourth-hand for £125, most of which I earned by working in a factory. It’s never
broken down, though once the exhaust pipe fell off and I had to wire it back. I drive all over eastern England, in fact.
Sandy, Potton, Biggleswade, Newport Pagnell, Huntingdon, Saffron Walden; even up to King’s Lynn or Lincoln.
There are houses on modern estates, houses by the side of the road, houses up drives with laurel hedges.

Who are these people? I ask myself. Who on earth are they? I carry golf clubs in the boot of the car and
sometimes stop and play a few holes when I see a course. Usually, the club secretary is unfriendly and the green fee
is expensive.

. . . And now, back live, we have special guests Split Infinitive. No one can hear themselves talk. I see Jennifer crane
up to Nick, who bends his head to bellow in her ear, but she pulls away and smiles and shakes her head to say she
sometimes I imagine what it must be like to be in a young women’s college. this is what I think it could be like:

with a suggestion of the cartridge belt or Sam Browne.
grey cashmere. she was gathering papers into her bag and saying goodbye to people; her bag was of dark tan leather
when she pushed it back behind her ear on one side I saw a couple of small moles beneath her ear, just above the
neck; the collar fell away at the front, as part of the design, like a small hood in reverse. I don’t know what that’s

flared jeans over leather boots and a grey polo neck in what might have been cashmere. in fact, it wasn’t quite a polo

like? Lymington High School. did her parents still live there? Where exactly was Lymington? she was wearing new
relaxed and indiscriminately friendly, despite the Paris thing. I wondered what her room was like. What was her life
Antoinette. the word ‘working class’ was used by one, of himself, and caused a warm ripple; I sensed at least two
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Managua, it seemed, was out of the question, but Paris was a possibility. Several boys complained that they didn’t

milligram pill I take each evening. then there was the question of the summer outing and where this should go.

by the time I found the room in a creeper-covered courtyard such as Billy Bunter might have lived in, the meeting
was under way. I crept in to see a vote being taken on what our line was on Allende’s Chile, whether we should vote
aid to Nicaragua, if the sub should go up to fifty pence a time and if so whether this should include wine or only, as
now, coffee and biscuits. I was for wine, perhaps from Chile, but didn’t think I should say so at my first meeting,
especially since on the way I’d drunk two pints of Abbot’s Ale at the Footballers to wash down the blue ten-
milligram pill I take each evening. then there was the question of the summer outing and where this should go.
Managua, it seemed, was out of the question, but Paris was a possibility. Several boys complained that they didn’t

have enough money; they did this in such a way as to make Jennifer (who’d suggested Paris) sound like Marie
Antoinette. the word ‘working class’ was used by one, of himself, and caused a warm ripple; I sensed at least two
of the girls edge in their seats towards the boy who wouldn’t go to Paris.

after the meeting we hung around and talked and worked through the coffee and the biscuits. Jennifer remained
relaxed and indiscriminately friendly, despite the Paris thing. I wondered what her room was like. What was her life
like? Lymington High School. did her parents still live there? Where exactly was Lymington? she was wearing new
flared jeans over leather boots and a grey polo neck in what might have been cashmere. in fact, it wasn’t quite a polo

neck; the collar fell away at the front, as part of the design, like a small hood in reverse. I don’t know what that’s
called; but it showed the skin of her throat, which was slightly flushed. her hair was fair and wavy, but quite fine;
when she pushed it back behind her ear on one side I saw a couple of small moles beneath her ear, just above the
grey cashmere. She was gathering papers into her bag and saying goodbye to people; her bag was of dark tan leather
with a suggestion of the cartridge belt or Sam Browne.

sometimes I imagine what it must be like to be in a young women’s college. this is what I think it could be like:

It’s teatime on Friday in November. Mist is coming off the river and is drifting up towards the Victorian
buildings where the girl students live, a short distance out of town. the road is lit by the lamps of bicycles; cars
pass at their peril, slowly, because the pedalling girls, some frizzy and stout, some slight and eager, the girls
with their lights front and rear, are the queens of the highway.

in the college, the kettle’s on and the curtains are drawn since there’s no daylight left in the Fens. East of the
town, there are no hills until you come to the Urals, so they say, which explains why it’s so cold, because
there’s nothing to stop the wind from the Russian steppe. this is one of those things they tell you when you
first arrive, and you’re meant to pass it on or tell your family about it in a letter. It’s like a shibboleth or
password, to show you’re local now.

Back from games, the girls are flushed; their faces are red from the Ural wind. Red Russian wind from
communist mountains, from the giant Soviet factories. some girls are returning on foot from town, where
they’ve been to the University Library or to the shops. Jennifer is running down the corridor, lively with the
sense of her good fortune. Her friend Anne’s a Northern girl, dark. They’re having tea now in Anne’s room,
which has a gas ring. Molly comes in with cake she bought in town: a sponge cake with cherries. They sit on
chairs and floors and beds. There isn’t much room, but there’s always music on Anne’s cheap record player at
this time of day: a balladeer, a minstrel, shock-haired with a guitar – afternoon songs for girls in jeans with
coloured silk scarves knotted or held with silver woggles from Morocco. They wear little make-up; Anne has
small round glasses. Cat Stevens is the singer. it’s said the Jewish Chronicle had an article wondering if his real
name was Steven Katz. he looks quite Jewish; he could be.
They ought to work, but they have to go to dinner in the dining hall at six-thirty and by the time they’ve finished tea it won’t seem worth opening books for half an hour. So they talk instead. Jennifer’s reading Carlos Castaneda, Anne has *Jonathan Livingston Seagull* hidden under a pillow. Anyway, they’ve already been to lectures today in History, Physics and Anthropology, and to supervisions with a don. They talk and talk over the music. Molly’s family is from Portsmouth. She talks of her boyfriend and whether he’ll come to visit; her breath is warm with tea and cherries. Will he at least come to the summer ball? The other two are sympathetic. Boys are difficult to understand, in their opinion. They’re like stage flats: colourful, exciting. Flat.

Jennifer has enough friends in her girls’ college not to mind about boyfriends. Anne sometimes tries to make her more interested in them because she finds Jennifer’s detachment unconvincing. She doesn’t want to admit how much she herself thinks about men, or more particularly, a man, the man — a being as yet so incompletely imagined that all aspects are provisional, except one: he’s male.

There are noises in the corridor. Laughter, crockery, music suddenly through an open door, which is then banged shut.

The lives of these young women make a sort of harmony. Their goodwill towards one another sets a tone in which intimacy can flourish; they’re happy.

Dinner bell rings. Lights fade . . .

That’s what I think it might be like, but I don’t really know. Perhaps all that mist and goodwill, that music and cake . . . It’s just sentimental.

The truth is probably more like this:

Anne, Molly and Jennifer are, like all women, weirdly obsessed by appearances – looks, colours, fashion, surfaces; they have no interest in ideas or deeper truths, only ‘style’ and status and the rapacious purchase of goods to underline them. Their cordiality conceals a sense of bitter rivalry that they’ll carry to their deaths, without ever acknowledging it. Anne and Jennifer pretend to care about Barry or Gary or whatever Molly’s boyfriend is called, but what they’re really both intent on is finding a richer, handsomer and better man of their own.

They have no genuine interest in one another, because they are beings who live close to the ground. For all the lecture notes they’ve taken today, they’re really machines for surviving in the competition for resources. Carrying the species in their wombs, they have to be.

Maybe that’s a little too much the other way, a bit severe. I wonder if we can ever know what it’s like to be someone else. I doubt whether even Jennifer or Molly or Anne really know what it’s like to be themselves. They probably take the crucial things for granted – because they’ve never known what it’s like not to have them. What they talk about, or try to change, or think of as being important, are really trivial things, I expect. They’re like a cat who wonders about its tail or eyes without knowing that the really distinctive thing about it is that it’s feline.

I don’t imagine they can help that. They can’t see it any more than I can see what’s peculiar about me. One thing I feel reasonably certain about, however, is this: that these girls are better adapted than we are. They have balance; they have a flair for living.

Most nights, I go out alone. There’s this hotel called the Bradford where the barman’s a transvestite. I quite often look in there for a drink. Come to think of it, the barman in the Waterfall is also a transvestite; at least, he has a wig and make-up, though he does wear men’s trousers. No one seems to comment on the fact that the barmaid in the Bradford is obviously a man, but I quite like it. There are a lot of pubs in this city. There’s a tiny one called the Footballers just near the one I mentioned before, where I go for dinner. In the Footballers, the landlord sleeps on the floor behind the bar all afternoon and you have to wake him up at six o’clock when he’s meant to reopen. His dog does a trick with bottle tops.

After the Bradford, I usually go to the Kestrel, where American aircrews burned their names into the ceiling while they were stationed nearby in the War. There are too many alcoholics in the Kestrel for my taste. What is an alcoholic? Someone who’ll steal money from his only friend to buy a drink because the drink is more important and he’d rather lose the friend. I can’t admire that.

A pair of goofy scientists came swaggering into the Kestrel at lunchtime one day many years ago to say that – just an hour earlier – they’d figured out the shape of human chemistry, of the molecule itself. I don’t think the boozers in the Kestrel were impressed. I don’t think this discovery was an answer to any of the top one hundred questions the Kestrel regulars would have liked an answer to – even if you allow for the fact that numbers one to fifteen were probably ‘Whose round is it?’
That’s part of the trouble with science. It doesn’t always help. I don’t find it useful to know that particles may appear in different places without having travelled the distance in between. I don’t find it enlightening that the only truthful way of thinking of Herr Schrödinger’s cat is as being simultaneously alive and dead. In fact, I don’t believe it is the only truthful way of thinking of it. It may be the only logical way of thinking of it, but that’s a different matter, isn’t it? The real problem, though, is that I don’t recall asking after the welfare of his cat in the first place.

‘Here, this’ll interest you . . .’ I used to dread what was to come when someone said that to me as a child. Or worse still, ‘Have I told you my cat story?’ ‘Do you have a dog story?’ I felt like countering. Or rather, ‘I’ll tell you what would interest me. Then you tell me if you have anything in that line.’

Heisenberg and Bohr and Einstein strike me as being like gifted retriever dogs. Off they go, not just for an afternoon, but for ten years; they come back exhausted and triumphant and drop at your feet . . . A vole. It’s a remarkable thing in its way, a vole – intricate, beautiful really, marvellous. But does it . . . Does it help? Does it move the matter on?

When you ask a question that you’d actually like to know the answer to – what was there before the Big Bang, for instance, or what lies beyond the expanding universe, why does life have this inbuilt absurdity, this non sequitur of death – they say that your question can’t be answered, because the terms in which you’ve put it are logically unsound. What you must do, you see, is ask vole questions. Vole is – as we have agreed – the answer; so it follows that your questions must therefore all be vole-related.

After the Kestrel, I sometimes drive out to one of the villages, it doesn’t matter which one or what it’s called – it might be Great, Little, Much or Long Standing. I listen to the car radio, which has been adapted by a garage to take audio cassettes, and I put the music up loud and think of Julie, my younger sister. She’s keen on music, though of course we don’t like the same things because she’s only twelve. T. Rex, she likes. ‘She’s faster than most./And she lives on the coast.’ Get away, Jules. When she was very small, we used to put the record player on and make her dance. She used to like that. She wasn’t much good at dancing, she just used to jump from one foot to the other in a short dress and you could see a big bulge of nappy under her navy blue woollen tights; but she had this look on her face, as though she was surprised at her good fortune in being alive at all.

I prefer not to think of it because it makes me feel bad.

I don’t like staying in my room at night. I want to go out. There’s nothing to do in my room. It has a poster for a concert by Quicksilver Messenger Service and a cork noticeboard on which I’ve stuck some pictures I pulled out of magazines. It has a sort of drinks cupboard in one corner, though I don’t suppose it was intended for drinks. I keep some glasses and a bottle each of red and white vermouth in it. Plus gin if I can afford it. I have a plastic ice bucket I got from a petrol station and there’s a fridge in the communal kitchen halfway up the stairs where I can get ice. The furniture is about twenty years old. It was worn out by people discussing Jean-Paul Sartre and the Korean War. I wouldn’t say it has seen better days, because by all accounts that I’ve read, those days weren’t better: the 1950s were like a tundra that they had to cross; but it’s certainly past its best, the furniture.

On the other side of the sitting room, I have a bedroom. Just off it is a shower. It’s in a glass cubicle, and the shower head is on a three-inch spout. Most students have to walk a long way to a bathroom block because their rooms were built before people understood about washing. To have your own shower is pretty much unheard of; I think it’s a privilege that may be connected to the prize I won.

I tried it once. The nozzle of the shower head is about the diameter of a ten-pence piece. The water was very cold, then very hot. The degree of wetness I achieved was about what you might expect from the thing that squirts a car windscreen, but without the wipers to spread the water round.

There was something typical of my university in this, I thought. At some places, the senior dons go on television. They sit on panels and give opinions on the news, write columns in the papers or get paid to travel the world explaining the origins of language, minerals or cave paintings. They turn up at the Prime Minister’s birthday party or at the opening of a new play at the National Theatre. They’re pictured at the Ritz or driving down Piccadilly with a slightly intellectual actress. But the most famous philosopher from my university spent the last ten years of his life in his college room designing the lettering for his headstone.

I sleep late in the morning, and the woman who’s meant to clean my room, the bedmaker as she’s called, doesn’t disturb me. I’ve only met her once. She looked like a female impersonator. Now I lock the outer door when I go to bed. This means that my room is not very clean, but then again the terms are quite short. And if I know I’m going to sleep out somewhere, I leave the outer door open, so this woman can come in occasionally and change the sheets.

When I was young, I used to worry a good deal. We lived in a red-brick terrace in a dingy part of town where the malt smell from the brewery hung over us. My father worked in a paper mill and suffered from asthma. He also had a heart murmur and we were afraid he might not be able to go on working. Disability pay, early retirement, chronic
invalidity . . . These were the phrases I overheard; I didn’t know what they meant, except for one thing: no money. My mother worked as a receptionist at a hotel called the Waverley on the Bath Road. She tried to be at home when I came back from school, but from the age of ten or eleven I was given a key and told to make my own tea. This was fine by me, as I could watch television without fear of being nagged to do homework. I also read books which I took out of the library on my way home, and there was no charge for them. This struck me as inexplicable, but good.

I knew we were poor, but I also knew there were people poorer than us. The Callaghans, for instance. There were twelve of them in a house smaller than ours, two streets away. It smelled damp and stale. They had an outside toilet – a double-seater, as I knew from having used it when my mother left me with Mrs Callaghan one afternoon. And all those places by the railway. You’d see the laundry flapping in the soot-grimed yard. How would it ever be clean?

There was a pretty young woman I used to see pegging out sheets and I was worried that she would grow old there and that no one would know how beautiful she was. And maybe she would die without ever having really lived.

I was concerned about West Germany as well. I’d seen newsreel pictures of how their cities had been bombed by our planes in the War and wasn’t sure how they could manage to get going again. Then they were occupied by us and the Americans and this must be humiliating because it wasn’t as though they were savages in far-off islands who knew no better. It was like being in permanent detention. It was like being forced to wear short trousers even when you were a man. I wondered how I’d feel if I was little Hans or Fritz in Düsseldorf or Hanover. I didn’t think I’d like my life to be restricted by the consequences of what my parents had done.

I waited for my father’s step on the path every night and the rattle of his key in the lock. I ran out from the kitchen to see how he looked in the light of the sixty-watt hall bulb. I became an expert in summing him up. By the time I’d reached him to say hello I knew by the movement of his ribs beneath his work shirt whether his breathing was constricted or relatively free.

It bothered me that people had so many children. There didn’t seem to be enough food in the world for everyone even as it was, and we’d have to build more and more houses which meant that in England at any rate there would soon be no fields left. And then where could we grow the food?

Perhaps when the next world war started, all this would become irrelevant, because the next world war, which would be between us and the Russians, would be a nuclear one. I knew that my grandfather had fought in the first one, my father in the second, so it followed that my turn would come in the third.

Near the railway bridge was a large institutional building. I never knew what it was, but it made a big impression on me. Was it a hospital, or a poorhouse? Or a workhouse? What was the difference? In the winter, when the lights were on, you could see figures moving behind the uncurtained windows. There was something in the lights themselves that made me anxious. They can’t really have been gaslight, but they looked like it; perhaps they’d wired up the old gas brackets and put low-wattage electric bulbs in them. That was probably it. Certainly it gave the building a look of something from another time, from the last century. The men I glimpsed through the windows were old. Perhaps they too belonged to that century; in fact, they must have been born in it.

I think I once saw a matron with a starched headdress. Because I could only see into it on winter afternoons, it seemed to me that it was always teatime in this place. This didn’t mean nice food or cake or anything. It meant the beginning of a long institutional evening. And I always had this feeling that somehow the inmates of this place were immune to time, that they were somehow stuck at five o’clock in perpetuity.

I knew somehow what it was like inside. It’s possible. Whether I dreamed it, whether my intuition just works well in this case or whether I have in some way lived before, I couldn’t say. But almost every detail of it was known to me and I identified with these old men.

Something of the atmosphere of that place was universal, at least in England then. The clamp of institution. Gaslight, grey. Like the metal ache of an injection when it fills your arm. No colour, no home; no sister, daughter, lipstick, smile or music; only gaslight and vault, and arched corridor with tiled wall and stone floor for ever.

I feared to find myself in such a place. And I was always agitated for the men who were there. I wanted to look after them, put pipe tobacco wrapped in scarlet paper in their hands and lead them into colour.

For some reason, it was my responsibility.

It’s going well with Jennifer. I see her at the Soc meetings and I’ve started going to history lectures with her. She’s doing an interesting combination of topics, I must say, and it wouldn’t surprise me if she did well in the exam coming up in the summer. The Unification of Germany is one of her strong suits. I don’t think she’s quite got to the bottom of Vichy France, but there isn’t much material to work with, outside the archives. The German ones are hard to get at if you don’t speak German (she only has O level) and the French have locked theirs up. (I know this because we covered this topic for A-level History at school.) She’s pretty steady on the old schoolbook stuff – the Stewdors, the Frog Rev – but on Africa I think she’s been misled by the Marxists. I mean misled about what actually
took place, because as far as exams are concerned, of course, the Marxist interpretation will do fine. Most of the history dons are Marxist. They are careful to define whether they are ‘pure’ Marxist-Leninist, or Communist (which means Stalinist, in favour of the invasion of Hungary and Czechoslovakia because although those peoples didn’t like being invaded or living under Communism, the Communists knew better and it was for their own good) or Trotskyist or Menshevik or Gramsci-ist or Eurosocialist or Lukácsist or something even more refined. They do change, however, and they are hugely interested in their own small changes, like people in psychoanalysis. About once a year a rumour runs round that an important announcement is about to go out: Dr R— has moved position. There is a flutter in the faculty. After months of wakeful nights and self-questioning, after re-reading the key texts, Dr R— has made all the intellectual reconciliations necessary; he is ready to declare that he is now definitely a . . . Maoist. His students nod their heads. Mao. Of course. Some of the girls will want to sleep with Dr R—, to experience such rigour at first hand. By day, the Hist dons teach the dictatorship of the proletariat, and at night they read the Sits Vac column in the education supplements and apply to other universities where there’s a better chance of tenure.

Yet from what I know of Mao he doesn’t sound like a nice man at all. Doesn’t that count for anything?

Incidentally, no one seems to mind my turning up to lectures with Jennifer, even though I’m reading Natural Sciences.

I should have mentioned that I switched out of English at the end of the first year. I went to see my Director of Studies to tell him and he spoke to his equivalent in Nat Sci, who then called me in to his rooms in New Court (which is the oldest court, but called new because it was once new, compared to the ruined priory in which the college was first incorporated by seven Puritan divines in 1662).

The Sci don, whose name is Waynflete, made me do a catch-up exam of his own devising, but allowed me the summer vacation to prepare. It wasn’t very difficult – rudiments of cell biology, physiology (including some neuroscience), biology of organisms, much of which I remembered from school – and he was then obliged to accept me. For the second year, or Part One B exams, I’ll tackle animal and plant biology and biochemistry. I fancy genetics as a Part Two option. Although there was a bit of evolution in biology of organisms, I look for the human angle – the big picture rather than the molecular stuff – in Arch and Anth lectures given by a bearded Fellow from Melbourne known as the Australopithecine.

I don’t miss English at all. No one explained what we were meant to do. They leave you to work it out for yourself. This is done in the name of respect for you; they call you Mr or Miss and treat you as equals, so it would be impertinent of them to tell you how to go about your studies. It may be a coincidence that this not-giving-guidance also gives them time to spend on their own work. Woodrow, the big schoolmasterly one, for instance, is writing a book on German engraving from Dürer to the Present Day (he doesn’t seem to teach English at all), and the younger one, Dr Gerald Stanley, is writing a novel, I believe, set in a Cornish tin mine but written in the style of Firbank. (Can’t wait.)

I did ask him – Stanley – once what the purpose of our work was.

‘Are we meant to offer new insights into these books or what?’

He looked appalled.

I went on: ‘I mean, it’s unlikely that I’ll find something in Urn Burial or Bartholomew Fair that people before me haven’t seen.’

‘Yes, Mr Engleby. Very unlikely.’

‘Or should we be trying to find out more about the life of the author or how the times in which he lived affected his work?’

‘Good God, no. That’s journalism.’

‘So what are we doing?’

‘Studying the text and reading round it.’

‘To what end?’

‘Scholarship.’

I felt: a) that he had outflanked me there; b) not really satisfied. Perhaps it was the old logic/truth separation again.

In fact, I did briefly see a way in which English could be studied. This was what they called ‘Practical Criticism’. They gave you unidentified bits of poetry or prose and you had to deduce from the words alone when they had been written and by whom; then give reasons for your conclusions and a critical commentary. This was easy, but enjoyable; and it had a purpose – to demonstrate the range of your reading, and the subtlety of your ear for the rhythms of the 1780s, say, or the 1920s. You came to grief, though, if you picked up on some autobiographical clue that identified the author; that, too, was thought to be ‘journalistic’. So when a religious sonnet in the language of the 1660s made reference to its author’s loss of sight or an ode in 1820 high Romantic contained a bout of coughing, I made out that my oddly precise dating of the text relied on analysing the vocabulary alone. I came top of the
college in this paper in the first-year exams, but it was really just a parlour game that I happened to be good at. It didn’t seem like scholarship, which ought to have been harder.

I told Stellings this and he started calling me ‘Groucho’. I liked this better than the nickname I had had at school.

Something else looked briefly promising. This was called ‘Theory’ and it was just coming in. The point about Theory was that it didn’t matter if you read Jane Eyre or a fridge installation manual: what you were doing was studying how you studied them, and the important thing now was not the (anyway unquantifiable) ‘value’ of the original work but the effectiveness of the theory. Vanity Fair or Biggles was the guinea pig; the vaccine being tested was the -ism. Some of the theories came from the study of linguistics, which was partly based on neuroscience, and for a moment the poor English dons, so fed up with being looked down on by their scientific colleagues, could boast that they too had a ‘real’ subject with truths that could be tested in a lab.

The linguistics side of it hasn’t been fruitful yet because the people writing about the basis of language don’t seem to be able to write.

Other theories are coming in, but they’re based on Marxism or psychoanalysis and other doctrines which haven’t cut the mustard in their own world and now look as though they’re just trying their luck on defenceless Eng Lit – like soldiers cashiered from the regiment turning up as teachers at a struggling private school.

So for Gerald Stanley and the rest it looks like it’s back to Jane Eyre.

You can see why, personally, I prefer to take my neuroscience straight, with options in genetics and pathology.

More to the point, however, than my academic work is this: an unexpected but very good thing has happened.
Two

I’d better explain. It’s October, the beginning of my final year. I left off this story all of a sudden because I had to do some work for exams. They didn’t go as well as I’d hoped, but that doesn’t matter.

This does matter, though.

In the summer vacation, I worked in my father’s old paper mill for four weeks to make money. The work was boring (I pushed a rubber-wheeled wagon round the factory floor), but it wasn’t hard. At some time the union had agreed that in return for deferring a pay rise, the workforce would have a ten-minute break each hour – excluding lunch and tea and the official tea breaks of fifteen minutes and the five-minute two-hourly toilet breaks. You could roll all the minutes up, if you liked, and leave an hour early. As a casual, I wasn’t officially in the union, but I followed their rules and got paid in cash in a crinkly grey envelope on Friday afternoon.

Jennifer was going to Ireland to make a film with some people from Trinity. The director was called Stewart Forres and there were maybe thirty or so people, cast and crew and a few hangers-on, girlfriends, boyfriends, going to a large old country house near Tipperary.

There wasn’t room for everyone in the main house, so some people put up tents in the grounds and some took rooms in the local village. I found one above the butcher’s shop. The proprietor was called Michael Clohessy and we joked about having the same Christian name. His wife called me ‘little Michael’ and cooked breakfast of black pudding and bacon and sausage and soda bread. The rent was five pounds a week, and after Mrs Clohessy’s breakfast I didn’t have to eat again till the evening, when there’d be dinner on the lawn after the day’s filming was over.

‘You’ll not be wanting rain on your fillum, will you?’ said Mrs Clohessy every day as I left for the set. ‘Let’s hope you’re lucky again.’

The odd thing is that we were. ‘Tip’, as they called the local town, has one of the highest annual rainfalls of any town in Europe, you half expect it to have gondolas, but we never saw a drop.

Day after day the sun shone. The lawn of the old country house began to look bare and brown. The owners worked in horse-breeding and they had stables with thoroughbreds, but they hadn’t had much luck at the market or the races and they took in guests whenever they could. They were pleased to be full up, but after a week they said they wanted a day off, so we’d have to do dinner for ourselves.

In the morning I hitchhiked to Tip, where I found an off-licence. I’d noticed that the drinks stores were running down and I bought a dozen bottles of cider, some seven-pint tins of beer and half a dozen glass carafes of wine with sealed metal tops. The Clohessys’ rent was so small that I still had plenty of cash left from the paper mill. I bought a tray of cut-price chicken pieces from a supermarket and the ingredients for a barbecue sauce. I’d done a lot of cooking as a child because I got hungry waiting for my parents to come home. I had to feed Julie as well as myself and she was quite fussy about the way I did it.

It was tricky getting all this stuff to a point where I could hitch a lift back, but the man in the supermarket lent me a trolley. Everyone was off filming in a wood in the furthest part of the estate and there was no one around except a small girl called Jude, who had straight brown hair wrapped in something I think might be called a snood. She wasn’t needed that day and had been told by Stewart to get a meal together. She was sulking about this; she said he’d picked on her because she was a woman and that he’d never have told a man to cook. I gave her a Glynn Powers roll-up and said I could look after the dinner.

At five, I put up a trestle on the gravel by the kitchen garden and laid out the drink with some paper cups I’d got from the village. I stuck the chicken under a marinade in a huge pan I found in the kitchen. With old bricks and bits of stone I picked up near the bonfire site I built a base for a barbecue with a good draught running under it, laid some wire netting over it, then gathered armfuls of wood from the parched grounds. By seven I had orange-grey embers, and by eight I was ready to offer marinated grilled chicken with barbecue sauce, baked potatoes and salad to thirty people.

I tried to pass it off as Jude’s work, but actually nobody seemed to care who’d cooked it; no one even asked who’d bought it or got it to the house. A guy called Andy said, ‘Great sauce, man.’ Maybe he thought I was a caterer.

I noticed that Jennifer enjoyed it too. I’d bought apple pies and cheese from the village to have afterwards. She laughed when some apple squeezed from the piece of pie she was holding and dropped into her lap.

Jennifer was playing one of the main parts in the film, as it happened. Stewart Forres gave a talk before the camera rolled. He had a thin brown beard and Christ-like hair parted in the middle. He said, ‘You’ve all seen the
script that Dave and I have developed. We started with this heavy concept – an acid Twelfth Night, if you will – but we’ve finished with something more unstructured. Most of the dialogue is going to be improvised, so you’ll be work-shopping some of your scenes with me or Dave first. We’re going to light some Tibetan candles now and sit in a ring. This is a good-luck ceremony. I’d like you to respect it.

It looked really good with all the candles and everyone gathered round. The light from the flames shone up on their faces: Kathy and Dave and Amit from King’s, and Hannah and Holly from Newnham, and Hannah’s boyfriend Steve, and Stewart, of course, and Jennifer, who was sitting next to him, and all the others and the ones who did the lights and the sound and the runners and so on. I hadn’t seen the script myself, but there was a feeling of relaxation and people seemed happy to go wherever it took them. The night was warm and someone had a guitar. Sitting there, they looked like Jesus and his disciples. They gave me a feeling I’d seldom had before, like sometimes when I’d watch Julie and one of her friends from school when she was five or six. I used to sit on the other side of the room and just observe them playing.

Most nights in Ireland were similar, but the night I cooked the chicken was the best. After I’d cleared up the plates and stuff, some of the people went off to their tents or their rooms, but most of us, about twenty, stayed round the fire.

Steve had a steel-string guitar, and he began to strum it gently, sitting with his legs crossed, pausing to suck on a joint and pass it on. He then began to pick at the strings instead of strumming. He didn’t make a big thing of it; he played quietly, so if you wanted to listen you could, but it didn’t matter if you carried on talking. In fact everyone did stop what they were doing, and edged into the circle, looking over to where Steve sat. They held their paper cups and cigarettes and waited in the darkness.

The notes picked by Steve’s right hand began to form a melody. He played a Bob Dylan song, ‘Girl From the North Country’, which is like ‘scarborough Fair’, but somehow full of concern. He wants a girl he once loved to be all right. He’s worried that she’s cold. ‘Please see she has a coat so warm/To keep her from the howlin’ winds.’ (He’s already spoken of the snow and ice, where ‘the winds hit heavy on the borderline.’) I used to wonder if this was the border of Canada and America, maybe near the Great Lakes, but now I don’t think it matters. It could be any North Country. He isn’t worried for his own loss or his own feelings – only for the girl he loved. He wants her still to have her hair long, and to be warm. I don’t know why this is so sad.

We sat out there for hours and drank cider and wine and smoked more and listened to Steve’s guitar. Then Holly played a little, but she wasn’t such a good singer as Steve and she gave him the guitar back and he ended with a song called ‘Fire and Rain’. As he was singing, I noticed Jennifer get up and stretch in the night and she walked right past me and laid a hand on my shoulder as she passed and said, ‘Thanks for the dinner.’

I let myself in through the Clohessys’ kitchen and went quietly up the stairs and pushed my window open and wondered if I could still hear any music, just faintly on a breeze. It was a very still night, though.

The boy in charge of the camera was called Nick, and they called him the DoP, which means director of photography, or chief cameraman. ‘Ask the DoP,’ Stewart said ten times a day. I think it was Nick’s camera. It was quite large and could be mounted on a tripod, though for some shots Stewart used to put it under his arm and insist on walking around with it himself to give what he called a ‘New Wave texture’ (which is that thing where you feel seasick). Nick never seemed that keen on Stewart holding the camera and looked relieved to get it back on its tripod.

The other main female part was played by Hannah, who’d done a lot of stage plays earlier in the year, including Hedda Gabler, I think. She was confident and difficult to deal with; she often said things were ‘getting too heavy’ and she’d stop for a cigarette and Stewart had to be very gentle with her. Steve, her boyfriend, watched carefully.

There are lots of ways you can make yourself useful on a film set if you’re good with your hands and if you’re patient. When the sound man wants to go for a smoke, you can do the job for him. You put on the headphones and say, ‘Just hold it there, everyone, there’s a plane going over.’ It’s not that difficult.

I can also use a saw and a chisel and make things and paint them if I have to – not that Stewart required much extra scenery, what with it being a pastoral thing set mostly in the woods, except for the bits inside the ‘castle’, which was the house itself. If nothing else, there was always someone who’d like a cup of tea.

A few nights after the chicken evening, there was a shortage of dope and I had to go back to the Clohessys’ and dip into the stash I had in my sponge bag. I had a brought a hell of a lot over on the ferry from Fishguard. Glynn Powers had told me, just before the end of term, ‘Mike, you’ve been my best customer. I wonder if you’d like to do a bit of work for me. It’s like I can’t really handle it all.’ He opened his locker and showed me these spherical lumps of hash the size of tennis balls. He had half a dozen and I took a couple off him to dispose of and split the profit.

When I got back to the garden, I chopped some up into five-pound deals but sold it for a pound a go, credit accepted.

‘Hey, man,’ said Andy, ‘Mike the cook’s turned into Mike the pusher.’
The next morning, Stewart was serious when he called everyone together. ‘Listen,’ he said, ‘we’re having a closed set this morning. Just Geoff on lights, Tom on sound, DoP of course, me, and the actors – Alex, Jennifer and Hannah. No one else at all. Is that understood?’

‘What’s a closed set?’ I heard Steve ask Hannah.

‘It means Jenny has to take her clothes off.’

‘Tom’s not back from Tip,’ said Dave. ‘You know he and Bob went last night? He rang in to say he’s got a migraine. He gets them.’

They needed someone to do the sound because they couldn’t delay the scene. It was on the schedule for today and, who knows, it might rain tomorrow. I told Stewart I could do it.

‘You happy with the machine – the cans and everything?’

I told him I’d done it before, which I had, when Tom was off one morning. Tom’s heart wasn’t really in sound; he wanted to act.

Stewart nodded. ‘Everyone cool?’ He looked at Jennifer and Alex and Hannah. Alex looked terrified. Jennifer seemed close to tears.

It was a rape scene of course, but it was feminist in the way Stewart filmed it so you were meant to share the rage of the woman character, played by Jennifer.

There were a lot of planes going over towards Dublin, so we had to keep redoing the bit where Alex’s character pulled Jennifer to the ground and lifted up her dress. There was a problem with her underwear. It was difficult for Alex to rip it off without tearing it, and they didn’t have enough spare pairs. Also, it took too long to get it off and it looked as though the camera was sort of dwelling on it.

Jennifer didn’t seem to be enjoying any of this, but when Stewart asked if she wanted a break she made as if it was a test of her integrity not to complain.

Hannah suggested Jennifer should be naked under her dress because the pulling off the underwear was too much like a ‘male fantasy’, so it was agreed she shouldn’t wear anything.

Then the lights weren’t working so Stewart decided to start again using available light only and Hannah told him that’s what he should have been doing all along anyway, and that made an even tenser feeling on the set.

Everything seemed to go wrong that morning. Hannah said she didn’t think Jennifer should be naked if Alex wasn’t because that would exploit the woman, but the trouble with having Alex naked was that he was always excited and that was exploitative, according to Hannah, because no one was meant to be enjoying this. Alex said that if he wasn’t excited then there could be no rape and no point made, and presumably a rapist did enjoy it anyway, that was the point: he was sick.

Hannah told him not to give her any of that Method shit, but Stewart persuaded Hannah that Alex’s point was reasonable, but by this time Hannah had said so many disparaging things about Alex that he couldn’t get excited any more. So then we couldn’t film him naked because it was obvious that he couldn’t rape someone, so we were back to having just Jennifer naked beneath her dress when he lifted it up. Stewart said it didn’t matter in the long run if Alex was excited or not because these shots would be cut in the edit anyway.

Then Jennifer began to cry because . . . I don’t know why Jennifer cried.

Perhaps it was because she felt Alex didn’t desire her any more – even though it was only his character that was meant to desire her character, and even though he was a rapist and if you were a woman you wouldn’t want him to want you in that way.

She seemed really upset, though, and she couldn’t stop crying for about twenty minutes. Hannah told Alex he was a pig, and other things. Geoff the lighting man had been told to leave the set with his lights and the only person in the wood who seemed calm was the DoP, Nick. He had a pair of purple crushed velvet trousers.

I don’t remember how it got resolved. I know there was a tender scene when Hannah’s character came over from the big house to comfort the Jennifer character. Hannah said she should herself be naked for this, but Stewart would have none of it.

Then he and Hannah had another row about who was in charge and it was clear that Hannah knew more about acting, but it was Stewart’s film, and it was Nick’s camera.

Personally, I found it an interesting morning, but for fear of seeming voyeuristic and because I was only a stand-in for Tom, I never let my eyes leave Jennifer’s face.

The shoot took three weeks in all. Towards the end, the evenings started to draw in. There was some rain at night. People seemed tired. I heard Jennifer say she really wanted a hot bath, though I’m sure there was hot water in the main house, where she had a room. Perhaps she was thinking of her parents’ house in Lymington, or of a particular bathroom.

Stewart kept going well. He said he’d had inquiries from an ‘independent distributor’ and from the Student Film
Council, who had partly funded the operation.

A week before the end, Steve discovered that Hannah had switched her affections to Nick, the DoP. Steve was angry. Hannah told him he was immature. He said he was sorry to get heavy about it, but he thought she’d been dishonest. She said he was possessive and she couldn’t stand that. So he took his guitar and left in the night, like a thief, and it seemed to be his fault for not being cool about things.

I missed the music. Nick looked pleased but surprised, the new man in possession who has not sought greatness but had it thrust upon him. He was careful not to seem possessive, but Hannah was always lighting a cigarette then putting it in his mouth or listening with intense respect when he talked to Stewart about a shot. These break-ups often happen in September, I think. The end-of-summer winds make people restless.

We had a party on the last night and Stewart told us all we’d be invited to the screening room at Film Soc to see a rough cut in due course. The party was a good one. Everybody seemed to be back at their best and all the differences were forgotten. I made some chocolate cakes with about an ounce of hash in them and bought a whole lot more cider from Tip. The people who owned the house seemed sorry to see us go and they made a big casserole of beef that they’d bought from Clohessy’s, and rice with apple and raisins and red peppers for the vegetarians.

With the cider I took some Mandrax I’d been saving. Stewart did the thing with the Tibetan candles again and we all held hands – and this time I was in the circle, two away from Jennifer, and the light flickered up into her face. And that was the really good thing that happened. I thought it would carry on, this communal feeling when the new term began in October.

We’re now in the third week of it and final exams are still a long way away, next summer, but somehow people already seem preoccupied. I’ve been to Film Soc a couple of times, but not many of the Irish people have been there: Nick (without Hannah, who was in Uncle Vanya at the ADC), Amit and Holly are the only ones who’ve looked in so far. Stewart’s working with Dave on the edit. Apparently the rushes are promising.

But it’s already cold outside, the leaves are wet on the pavements and it seems a long way from Tipperary.

I have a new room this year, in Clock Court. It’s got its own pantry with a gas ring so I don’t bother to go to the dining hall any more. There’s no shower, but there’s a bathroom I share with only five other people and few of them seem to use it. So I work the bath over with a cloth and some Vim from a saucer that the bedmaker replenishes, rinse off, fill up and listen to The Archers on my small transistor radio. There’s a Northern Ireland barmaid called Norah who takes up too much story time, but I like the old man, Walter Somebody. He reminds me of the old men in the almshouse in the street where I was brought up. ‘Heh, heh, me old beauty, me old darlin’,’ he says. Or something like that. I don’t listen that carefully.

I’ve changed my routines a bit. For a start, I’ve almost given up drugs. This is partly due to the fact that my supplier has disappeared. I used to buy pills from a man in the Kestrel called Alan Greening. He had an executive metal briefcase that looked as though it might hold the secret plans of a Ukrainian nuclear reactor. All it had in fact were bottles of pills. He’s been in and out of various hospitals and he’s signed on with three different GPs. He has a pharmaceutical directory and he looks up the drug he wants, then describes the symptoms it’s prescribed for. He goes to different chemists to have them made up and no one checks up on the others. Tricyclics, monoamine oxidase inhibitors, benzodiazepines, all sorts of stuff – they make an awful rattle in his bag and most of them don’t do anything at all for you. There’s one called Nardil, an MAOI, that you have to take for weeks for any effect and if you eat cheese or Marmite or broad-bean pods it can give you a brain haemorrhage. Where’s the fun in that? But Tuinal, Nembutal, Amytal, I quite like them; and Quaaludes go well with gin. It all depends. I’ve tried almost all the sleeping pills, even the banned ones, and they don’t even make me feel tired. On the other hand, I’m susceptible to a patent hay-fever cure you can buy over the counter at Boots, which goes to show.

The only thing I wouldn’t do is amphetamines – or LSD. They synthesised that stuff in a lab twenty-five years ago when they were trying to induce human madness in guinea pigs. Why take drugs specifically designed to send you insane? If you’d even glanced at neuroscience in Nat Sci Part One, then, believe me, you wouldn’t go near those things.

The point is, I don’t need any of this stuff any more. (Apart from marijuana and alcohol, but they don’t really count, and anyway, I don’t need them, they’re just a habit, like cigarettes or going to the cinema.)

I don’t need drugs because I can deal with reality as it is. Reality is no problem for me. Poor old Eliot thought humans couldn’t stand too much of it. But I can stand as much of it as you care to throw at me. As much as D.H. Lawrence anyway. I should have pointed that out to Dr Gerald Stanley in my original interview. (He looks at me sadly when I pass him in the cloister nowadays – though I greet him cordially enough. ‘Ah, Dr Stanley, I presume. How’s Jane Eyre? Married yet?’)

I do keep some connection with Literature. I write poetry of my own in my room in Clock Court. With the proceeds of two of Glynn Powers’s tennis balls I bought a record player and some records – Mahler mostly,
some Bruckner, Sibelius and Beethoven. I first heard Mahler’s Fifth in the opening sequence of the film of Death in Venice, which came out in my first year. I liked it, but they shouldn’t have changed von Aschenbach into a musician. To show how dry and intellectual he was as a writer (so his passion for the boy is all the more unruly), all they had to do was have the hotel manager pick up a couple of his books and wince at the titles. But to create that dry impression with a composer meant they had to have flashbacks to Germany with him arguing embarrassingly with a colleague about Art and Life, as though Visconti had yielded these scenes to Ken Russell, or worse. Why do film-makers make life so hard for themselves by assuming that the original writer has got it all wrong?

While I’m listening to Mahler, I write poetry – in pencil, so I can revise it as I go along. I’ve completed a sonnet sequence (typewritten) and entered it for the university’s poetry medal. If you can picture Mahler’s Fifth, particularly the Adagio that plays over the opening shots of the film – that’s the kind of feeling I’m after. It’s not that easy to put into words because words have too many meanings that clutter everything up. Very blunt instruments, words – because of all those useless but unavoidable connotations. Though if you could find the words to go where Mahler went in that Adagio, I’m not sure you’d like it. A bit of the vagueness of music stops you going completely mad, I imagine.

Have you ever been lonely?
No, neither have I.

Solitary, yes. Alone, certainly. But lonely means minding about being on your own and I’ve never minded about it.

All right. I admit that before I knew Jennifer, I suppose there must have been times when I did mind a little. The times you might mind it are when your own company stops entertaining you. In your normal life that doesn’t happen, because the routines you develop are ones you like – ones that help you through. So you don’t get fed up. Another evening with Mike? Yes, that’s fine. I like Mike. Good old Mike. There’s also Gustav, there’s poetry to write and if it gets bad, stick a coat on and go out for a drink in the Bradford with the transvestite barmaid.

My first summer vacation, I worked for a few weeks in the paper mill to get money, then took a ferry to Le Havre. I thought I’d hitchhike somewhere interesting and do some reading on the way. I took big paperbacks I could tear the pages out of as I went along: The Wings of the Dove, The Magic Mountain, Pamela and Anna Karenina. I remember reading Pamela on a camping site near Tours and thinking I was glad I was becoming a scientist. I don’t think it’s famous because it’s a good book; I think it’s famous because hardly anyone else was writing novels in the eighteenth century. Posterity didn’t tell Richardson he’d done a fine job; posterity told him he’d done an early job. You wouldn’t want to fly in a Wright Brothers plane now.

There was something in those northern French towns, though, that did make me a bit lonely. I watched the widows with their raisin faces and young mothers with children. Red-faced old men in the cafés; young men absent, working. Those painters like Courbet and Millet, I think they’d seen something too: the peasant in the landscape, grey towns with shutters, churches – the solid-seeming apparatus of life that terrorised a generation of novelists with what Henry James called their ‘puerile dread of the grocer’, but which in reality was so fragile.

Homo erectus with his flint, sapiens with his empty church. Those speciating changes!

And the identical boucheries with their blood-smell and queues and the catechism of greeting and farewell that surrounds the purchase. Those cobbled squares and tricolores draped from the hôtels de ville. The red bulb in the window of the Auberge with the typical cooking of the region with its period beams and clanking soup tureens, potage du jour with a half-bottle of Saint-Émilion.

The churches, above all. Their emptiness. God has been to Earth – and gone away. That did occasionally make me feel lonely.

The worst thing that can happen when you’re away is that your mind tries too hard to make you feel at home. I remember this happening in a Turkish bus station, in Izmir. (Not much happened between Tours and Izmir, incidentally. Italy and Greece were fine.)

It was night and I was waiting for a bus. There were sodium lights over the grimy tarmac and the glass-sided shelter. There was that wailing Muslim music turned up louder than the cheap speakers wanted, so their tinny shuddering was added to the vibrato of the singer. For every would-be traveller, waiting for the overnight bus to Istanbul, there were two or three hangers-on, men with moustaches and worry beads, smoking cigarettes, approaching the waiting travellers and asking sly, brusque questions with their guttural voices and an aggressive jerk of the head, looking for . . . For what? Money? Sex? Something to pass the time? One came up to me and said something about ‘yellow picture girls’. Was he offering to buy or sell? He plucked at my sleeve till I pushed him away.

It was one a.m. in the grey sodium light with the wailing music and the black ground with its spattered chewing gum and cigarette ends. I had started to pay too much attention to things. It was almost as though I could see right
through them into the molecules that made them. And that awful music. I suppose my mind was trying too hard to get a grip on this place, to anchor it for me, because I had the strong impression that I was really outside time or place, that the hostile otherness of my surroundings was such that my own personality was starting to disintegrate. I was vanishing. My character, my identity, had unravelled. I was a particle of fear.

I guess I was a little lonely then.

In general, in less extreme moments, lonely looks after itself. It helps you develop strategies that reinforce it. The comfort of the dark cinema and the company of the screen actors prevent you meeting anyone. Lonely’s like any other organism: competitive and resourceful in the struggle to perpetuate itself.

I don’t remember how I got to Istanbul.

There was a meeting of Jen Soc on Monday, and Jennifer, who is now officially the secretary, was of course present at the meeting of her own society. She has had her hair cut a little shorter and she was wearing a corduroy skirt, just above the knee, with cowboy boots and navy blue tights. I don’t like the way people change over the long vacation. It’s not as bad as schooldays, naturally, when a May child returns a man in September, but it’s still unsettling.

Among the urgent matters we discussed were the mobilisation of American planes from the nearby airbase during the Yom Kippur War (I heard them thundering over Parker’s Piece on my way back from dinner in the cheese-pie pub; it was pretty exciting; I hope the crews will come and sign the ceiling in the Kestrel on their return) and the CIA coup that deposed President Allende in Chile.

We will no longer contemplate Chilean wine, though I’m happy to say that under Jennifer’s guidance we do now have bottles of something red called Hirolande, on sale for ten pence a glass. I think ‘hirolande’ means ‘swallow’ in French – the bird, that is, not the gulp, though gulp is what’s best to do with it, so perhaps someone at Peter Dominic’s had a sense of humour.

When we were clearing up, I noticed that a letter had fallen out of Jennifer’s bag.

Without thinking, I slipped it into the pocket of my coat. Back in my room in Clock Court, I examined it beneath the fixed Anglepoise. It was addressed in her writing to Mr and Mrs R.P. Arkland at an address in Lymington. It had a second-class stamp on it.

I should have taken it back to Jennifer, but I thought I’d just post it for her the next day. Then, at about eleven, when I got up, I remembered that there was a photocopier in the porters’ lodge. But those grey and surly men are nosey; they always read your stuff. There was also a copier in the issues section of the University Library, but that meant filling in forms. Then I remembered the general post office in St Andrew’s Street.

First I went to my small pantry and boiled the kettle. Then I held Jennifer’s letter in the steam and prised it open with a knife.

I took the letter to the post office and copied it on to slimy grey sheets that slid from the side of the machine. Then I returned to my room, refolded and reinserted the original and resealed the envelope, which was now dry, with the help of a trace of cow gum from a glass bottle. I tried to keep the glue light, to replicate the envelope’s own flimsy closure. Then I walked back to the post office (I didn’t want to stick it in the local box), posted it, returned – at last – to my room and sat down with a cup of Nescafé to read it. This is what it said:

Dear Mum and Dad,

Thank you for the letter and the tights and the cheque. All much appreciated.

It’s really great living in a house. Anne and Molly are sharing a room at the moment because there was some sort of flood at the back and Nick refused to budge, even though he’s got the best room by far. Typical man! Actually, it’s best that they share as neither wants to share with Nick . . .

I’ve done what you suggested, Mum, and painted the kitchen, and that has certainly cheered it up a lot. I also found a nice old armchair in a junk shop for my room.

The only thing is that it’s so cold! God knows what it’s going to be like in January. The gas fire in the sitting room works on a meter and no one ever wants to fork out for it. Nick always says he’s going out, so he won’t be using it.

As a result we don’t use that room much and everyone goes to her own room to work, which is fair but a bit antisocial.

We have a rota for cooking and a kitty for shopping. Anne’s the best cook but Nick complains she spends too much on food (meat especially) so we’re going almost completely vegetarian. As Anne says, we can always be carnivorous at lunchtime. We each have a separate shelf in the fridge for our stuff, but even between four of us there never seems to be any milk.

The other problem is keys. It’s just a single Yale lock, but Nick’s is on semi-permanent loan to Hannah, who’s meant to have one cut for herself but never seems to get round to it. So there’s often a late-night banging
at the door.

As well as a duvet and a rug, I sleep in my ski socks and don’t turn the gas off in my room till the very last thing. Then I sprint across the floor and fly into bed.

But I love getting up in the morning. There’s a tortoiseshell cat who lives opposite and he’s half adopted us. I pull back the curtain and see him on the roof, stretching in the thin early sun. I love the jumble of small slate roofs on the brick terraced cottages. I lie watching for a few minutes while an ‘inane disc jockey’ (Dad) babbles on the radio. Then I put on socks, slippers, sweater and coat and go down to the kitchen, and, while the kettle’s on, open the back door to the cat and call him in. He tumbles off the roof of the shed and comes shyly to the step where (if lucky) he gets a saucer of milk and a stroke.

I make tea and drop a mug off for Anne (not for Molly – no lecture till eleven) and go up and do my teeth (more toothpaste always appreciated: v exp). Do you really want to know all this?! Skip ahead if it’s boring you, Mum . . .

Find suitable clothes (i.e. woolly, thick ones), make sure I have all the right books and go down for toast, quick Nescaff (if time) and wheel trusty bike out of hall on to street.

It’s misty and cold, but bright as well, and the houses are so minute. They’re like dolls’ cottages. I bicycle slowly (beware Girton calves . . .) down the backstreets and many times see the same town people leaving home, walking to the bus stop, taking in milk bottles. I think this is my favourite time of day. Occasionally I see a furtive undergraduate (male) skulking back to his college after a night out. Naughty boy.

It’s wonderful to watch the town come awake, the shops opening, the buses pushing down St Andrew’s Street from the station. But I prefer the backstreets. I cut down Pembroke Street and Silver Street and over the river and I think of all the people who’ve gone before me – the men in the Cavendish Labs and the Nobel prize-winners and Milton and Darwin and Wordsworth, of course, but mostly of the generations of young men and women who weren’t famous but were so relieved to be here at last and to meet people like themselves, and didn’t mind the freezing cold and no money for the meter and the greasy college breakfast. I think of the men in their tweed jackets with the elbow patches and the bluestockinged women in their clunky shoes and I feel glad for them still.

Incidentally (or ‘incidently’ as Sally would spell it), I am still seeing something of Rob, though I promise you I am not ‘getting serious’ and no, I haven’t forgotten that I have all my life ahead of me, and no I haven’t forgotten that at my age ‘friendship is more important than romance’ (copyright © 1968 by R.P. Arkland, MA; copyright renewed each year since . . .)

I get to the Sidgwick Site at 8.45 and meet up with friends, including Rob, Stewart (if he’s not in London or Hollywood . . .) and various girls from college. The faculty has organised the lectures v well for poor third-years facing Finals Armageddon, so all courses over by lunch. Usu three lectures – say, nine, ten, twelve. From eleven till twelve I might be in the Faculty Library (provided roof not leaking: thank you, Mr James Stirling) or ‘Advanced Research Centre’ – i.e. tearoom. Best lectures from Dr Bivani (female: 19th century) or Mr Richardson (Mod. Europe); worst from horrid Dr Ditchley who is a monumental drag.

Often go back to coll for salad lunch in Upper Chamber (v good value) and in the afternoon I have volleyball on Tue and Thur, which I really enjoy. A lot. I always thought it was a bit of a joke at school, as you know, but in fact I really like it now. If not volleyball, often go to cinema (Arts or one of the mainstream ones) or coll library or to visit. Have met nice boy in Emmanuel (Charlie) reading English with amazing record collection and v amusing room-mate (Myles) from Leeds.

Early Fen darkness at five, sometimes tea in the Whim (known to Charlie and Myles by rude alternative name, I’m sorry to say), maybe go to bookshop or supermarket if I’m cooking. It’s lovely getting back to the house, being the first in and getting it warmed up and cosy – as much as possible, at any rate. Listen to music on big sitting room stereo while kettle boils and make toast. Charlie lent me record by a group called Focus. Dutch, with keyboards, beautiful guitar – ah, but you wouldn’t appreciate it!

On Monday, after supper, it’s Society meeting in Jesus, which means a bit of preparation and homework. Not many people last week, which was disappointing – just the hard core, three or four freshers and that guy Mike I told you about(!).

Most evenings I work for a couple of hours, but I do go out a fair bit too. Rob takes me to various college jazz or folk clubs or sometimes just for a drink to one of the town pubs. The Mitre has a great jukebox. There’s one called the Baron of Beef next door, which is also good fun. Best of all I like the ones in this part of town, away from the centre. Tiny backstreet rooms by the river with small coal fires. Don’t worry, we don’t get drunk.

I finally got to see a rough cut of the film we made in Ireland, and I must say I think it’s really good. Stewart is a very talented guy. There’s one scene I’m in which you’re not going to like – I might as well warn you now.
(Though you may never see it. It’s not obligatory. It won’t be on general release, so you’d need to go to a Film Soc special screening. But knowing you, you will. Like that rude book I warned you not to read and you went straight out and bought it.) Hannah is absolutely amazing and makes me look very inadequate. Even when someone else is speaking she seems to fill the screen. Alex is much better than I expected, though a bit eager in places.

There’s so much going on and not enough time to do it all. I’m doing extra French Lang (to help with document research) with a little old lady off Lensfield Road and when I walk back I see the posters in the cottage windows: University String Ensemble, 'Tis Pity She's a Whore, Julius Caesar at the ADC, Newnham Madrigal Society, The Good Person of Szechwan at St John’s . . . I know it’s a cliché, but there aren’t enough hours in the day.

Of course Finals are a worry, but I try not to think about it (them) too much. If I do get a youknowwhat (like the Scottish play, can’t mention the word) it could cause more problems than it solves by more or less obliging me to go into what Rob calls ‘research’. So might be better off with ‘gentleman’s’ degree, Dad. Qué sera, sera, that’s what I say. What an original daughter you have!

I’m glad you enjoyed Penny Martin’s wedding. If you couldn’t get an invite to Princess Anne and Mark Phillips’s, I’m sure Brian and Gail’s was the second best place to be. Did Gail do her special cheesy things? Did Brian make a speech? In case, is he still going?

It’s nearly midnight. Incidentally (Sally again), I read in the paper that Grocer Heath is thinking of introducing a three-day week. I told Rob last night and he said, ‘I’m not doing an extra day’s work for anyone.’ I thought you might like that.

Now I really must stop and go to bed. Before I turn the light off, maybe one final blast, Dad, of ‘deafening popular music’ . . .

Later: Ah, that’s more like it. Long guitar solo by Jan Akkerman, max vol through the headphones. Now I can sleep easy.

Lots of love from your loving, very hard-working, rather poor and exceedingly cold (but happy) daughter, Jen-Jen xxx

There was one bit in Jennifer’s letter I really didn’t like, and I expect you can guess what it was. What I really didn’t like was: (!)

Not even a word. A single vertical line and a dot, parenthesised.

For the rest, I quite enjoyed it. Of course, like all students she was giving only an edited account of what was going on. No mention of drugs, or cigarettes, for instance – or sex.

Duplicitious, you might call her. Tactful would probably be her own word.

You couldn’t help but warm to her father, though, could you? I pictured him a bit like Mr Bennett in Pride and Prejudice. (“Which reminds me, Dr Stanley, may I offer you four pages on “Mixed Motives for Marriage in the Novels of Jane Austen”? No? Are you quite sure?”)

I put Jen’s letter away in the third drawer of my desk and locked it.

Yes, Mr Arkland sounded nice. Did Jen have sisters, then, I wondered? If he was really a Mr Bennett type, then she must have. And he was MA, which meant that he had either done postgraduate work at an ordinary university or been to one of the ancient ones and paid five guineas to convert his B to an M.

If the latter, he must be quite grand, because in his generation you got admitted not by competitive exam but only if you could pay the fees. They didn’t have grants in those days. Their address sounded modest enough, but now I came to think of it, Jennifer is what you’d call ‘well spoken’ – not stuck-up, and with plenty of student ‘yeah’s and ‘like’s, but not common. Not like me. She’s got a lovely voice, in fact. It sounds as though she’s always trying to suppress laughter out of consideration for the person she’s talking to. You want to tell her it’s all right, you don’t have to be polite, you can let go and laugh.

The other striking thing about Mr Bennett, I mean Mr Arkland, the thing that really stirred me in the guts, is that he’s alive – and probably only fifty-odd.

My own father died when I was twelve. I can’t pretend we were surprised, obviously. I was looking after Julie one afternoon. She used to go to a free nursery in the morning, then my mother would drop her with the Callaghans or someone while she went back to the hotel and I’d pick Julie up on the way home from school.

I’d started at the grammar school, having done well in the eleven-plus despite going to a desperate catch-all primary called St Bede’s. The good thing about St B’s was that no one bothered you. There was no homework to speak of and you could wander from one room to another and see what lesson you liked the look of. I think it was a county council ‘initiative’ or something. I went mostly to science or history, but one girl I knew spent five years in
the craft room. (I believe she has her own design company in London now.) At St B’s you never got asked home by anyone because most of their mothers worked and didn’t want a stranger there. In my year at least five fathers were ‘away’ (i.e. inside) and the majority didn’t live with the mother any more; we, the nuclear Englebys, were considered odd.

At the grammar school, though, there was a different kind of boy. All the parents were married. Some of the fathers did things like dentistry; one was a ‘solicitor’, according to his son. I found it difficult to find much in common with these boys, though I liked the look of their new satchels and their racing bikes.

My bus stop was only ten minutes’ walk from the Callaghans’ and I banged on the door, holding my breath against the stagnant, stuffy smell when one of the twins opened it. Why do poor people’s houses always smell like that? Ours did, too, and I thought all houses did till I went to a reception for my year at the grammar school headmaster’s house and it smelt of – I don’t know, air and wood or something.

Julie came skipping out and took my hand and we set off down Trafalgar Terrace as we always did, past the sooty red brick and the small windows with china ornaments, brass pots and grey net curtains. I make it sound slummy, but actually I like weathered English red brick and it was all right. Take it from me, it was not too bad. Once we were home, I made a pot of tea and some toast and honey for both of us, then I sat Julie down in front of Crackerjack on the snowy monochrome Rediffusion TV and went to do my homework in the kitchen.

I heard the telephone ring and went to answer it.

‘Mike. Thank God you’re there. It’s your dad. He’s been taken poorly. He’s in Battle hospital. You’d better come over. Take some money from the pot on the kitchen mantelpiece. Ask for Lister Ward.’

‘What about Julie?’

‘You’ll have to bring her.’

Everyone knew where Battle hospital was, it was famous, but it took two buses and a fifteen-minute hike to get there. I carried Julie on my shoulders for the last bit. The reception area had that grey aspect I’d seen through the windows of the old men’s workhouse. We were directed down a long stone corridor, on which there were periodically signs to Lister, among the other notices – X-ray, Pathology, Mother and Child Unit, Rowntree Cancer Ward.

We found ourselves going through half-glassed swing doors and out into a courtyard with parked ambulances and dustbins. It was raining slightly and Julie was tugging at me, asking me to slow down. On the other side were more hospital buildings, low-built, more modern than the giant Victorian building we’d come through, but somehow already tinged with that same grey, as though prematurely aged by all the deaths they had housed and shipped on and forgotten.

Eventually we found Lister, an airless room with strip lights, full of screens and half-drawn curtains with old people lying flat, looking as though they were on their way out. There was a television showing an early evening news bulletin. I eventually made out my mother, sitting on the end of a bed near the window. She turned round when we approached, but didn’t say anything. She was wearing a headscarf and still had her overcoat on. She raised a finger to her lips. My father was lying on his back with a tube up his nose and a drip attached to his arm. His eyes were closed and his jaw had fallen. His skin was ashy-grey and there was short white stubble showing on his chin; someone had taken out his false teeth. His pyjama jacket was open and there were wires attached with pads to his bony, hairless chest. I thought of his heart, a fat muscle that had always shirked the job.

I tried to think back to when he’d been younger – healthier. There must have been memories – of the seaside, or of him playing football with me in the park, or carrying me on his shoulders or helping to decorate the Christmas tree. There weren’t. All I could remember was waiting for him at the side door of the paper mill on a Friday afternoon when he came out with his grey envelope. ‘That’s it then,’ he said. ‘Another week. Make sure you never end up here, Mike.’

I looked at him on the bed. He coughed once and a trail of brownish dead blood came out of his mouth and ran down the side of his chin. Then he stopped breathing. And I thought, I’ll make sure I never end up here, either.

In one way, Dad’s death was the making of me, and that way was the academic. At the funeral, the vicar took me strongly by the arms and looked me in the eye.

‘You may feel alone, but you’re not.’

I waited for the God-loves-you thing.

‘Others have been where you are. I have stood where you stand today. You will survive, however stricken you now feel.’

I pulled my arm away because I didn’t want to hear this. I actually needed to feel I was alone. Why did I need the grief of others? Wasn’t mine enough? Why did I need to feel that this abandonment was plural, when it was heavy enough singular? The best way ahead that I could see was to drag this thing off and digest it on my own, like a
python with an outsize kill.

Since we didn’t have the kind of house you could ask people back to, the vicar invited the mourners to the rectory. There were some people from the paper mill, a supervisor, a manager, a couple of workmates, some aunts, uncles and neighbours, about three dozen in all, a respectable number. The vicar’s charlady served fish paste and Sandwich Spread sandwiches and tea and fruit cake and sherry if you wanted it.

The vicar wouldn’t leave me alone. ‘I gather you’re at the grammar school,’ he said.

All the guests had now stopped being mournful and were making general chat, as though nothing had happened. I kept thinking of the damp earth on my father’s coffin, wondering how soon he would decompose. Did they put an accelerator pack in there, a chemical to kick-start the process, as you might with a compost heap? Was he clothed in there?

‘Have you thought of Chatfield?’

‘What?’

‘The naval school. I gather from the eulogy that your father was in the Royal Navy in the War and served throughout. You might be eligible for a scholarship to Chatfield. I’m a visiting chaplain. It’s worth considering, especially if you’re not settled at the grammar school. I shall have a word with your mother.’

I didn’t mind the grammar school, but nevertheless in March I did some exams in an unused room, invigilated by Miss Penrose, the art teacher. These were the scholarship papers for Chatfield, a ‘public’, i.e. private, school about an hour’s drive away. It was a famous institution, founded by some naval bigwig for the sons of sailors killed in battle, which had grown to take in ‘ordinary’ boys as well; in fact, I had the impression it was pretty keen to find pupils of any description who could pay the hefty fees.

Which we couldn’t. But the top award, the Romney Open, paid the lot for you. I had had a crash course in Latin, which I’d never done before, working evenings with Mr Briggs from the grammar school, who volunteered his services. I struggled with the prose paper, though the unseen translation from Latin into English was straightforward (a poem by Catullus and a bit of prose where I already knew the story). The other papers were easy. I was called for an interview with the headmaster, which we took to be a good sign.

It turned out my father had died just in time. They sent a letter to the grammar school and one to us at home saying they were offering me the Romney Open, the full fees, all expenses paid, to start in September, when I would be thirteen and a half. They sincerely hoped I would take up the place as the rest of the candidates had been retards.

No, they didn’t say that, but behind all the posturing and telling us just how old and honourable and important they were – and how incredibly fortunate I was – I did sense a whiff of desperation.

Why should that be? I wondered.
I walked up from the station to the outer gates, which gave on to a tarmac drive about half a mile long, fringed with dripping evergreens. Eventually, I came to the main building and asked a man in the lodge where I was meant to go.

‘Which house you in?’
‘Collingham.’
‘New man, are you?’
‘Yes.’
‘Go to the corner of the quad, through that door. It’s new men’s tea with the housemaster. You’re late.’
I went where he pointed, and knocked. The door was opened by a grey-haired man in a black gown.
‘You must be Engleby. You’d better meet the others.’

Three boys in tweed jackets and flannel trousers were hunched round a low table with teacups. I knew from a letter that the housemaster was called Talbot. There was a fair boy with glasses called Francis, a dark one called McCain and a third one with a black eye called Batley.

Mr Talbot explained that I’d lost my father and was on the Romney Open; the others looked at me fearfully. Batley lived on a farm in Yorkshire without electric light or running water; Mr Talbot seemed to like the sound of this, though I couldn’t see what was so great about it. Even in Trafalgar Terrace we had these things. I mean, even the Callaghans have electricity. Batley had scored 44 per cent in the entrance exam, though merely turning up and writing down your name got you thirty. Again, this didn’t seem to be a problem for Mr Talbot – rather the opposite. Batley seemed to have what Chatfield wanted. (The other two boys, McCain and Francis, had no distinguishing features.)

We went out into the quad and over to a stone staircase with iron bannisters. Talbot led us up two floors to some tall, battered double doors and pushed them open. And there was Collingham, ‘my’ house.

It was a single wide corridor with cubicles. Metal shaded lights hung at intervals from the ceiling. The paintwork was battered and kicked, but predominantly green. We walked past maybe twenty-five doors on either side till we reached the end. Our names were printed on metal strips above the door. Mine was the last room on the left. Inside was an iron bedstead, a table, hard chair and a small chest of drawers. A window gave on to a flat roof, which led over other pitched roofs to the main bell tower. The partition with the next cubicle was wooden, but my other wall, being the end of the building, was just unpainted brick.

‘Your fagmasters will come and see you and make sure you know the drill,’ said Mr Talbot. ‘Tea’s at six in Troughton’s. Any questions?’
‘Yes, sir,’ I said. ‘Do you know where my stuff is? My clothes and things?’
‘Didn’t your people bring you? No, of course, you don’t have a car, do you? If it came by train it’ll be sent up from the station to the lodge. You’d better go and fetch it. Don’t be late for tea.’
‘Wouldn’t the porter—’

I lugged my trunk over the front quad and up the stairs; the boys going up and down swore at me for being in the way. When I pulled it into Collingham, an older boy, perhaps a ‘prefect’, told me to lift it up and not drag it on the wooden floor.

‘It’s too heavy.’

‘Then you’ll have to unpack it here and carry the stuff to your room till it’s lighter, won’t you?’ He spoke as though explaining something obvious to an idiot.

As I carried down the corridor the armfuls of grey shirts, football socks and vests my mother had got from the school second-hand shop, some boys took them from my arms and threw them over the partitions into random cubicles.

My ‘fagmaster’ was a small, nervous boy called Ridgeway. ‘If you hear a prefect call “Fag”,’ he said, ‘run like hell. The last one there does the job. There’s a fag test in two weeks’ time. You need to know all the initials of all the masters, all the school offices, like who’s captain of fives, all the rules and all the school geography. Read these.’ He put the rule book, the annual calendar and ‘call list’ on my table.

‘Where’s Troughton’s?’ I asked.
‘Down Dock Walk, behind Greville.’
‘Anything else?’
‘Keep your head down. Don’t speak. Don’t be nervy.’

‘Nervy?’

‘Pushy. Don’t show off. Be invisible.’

‘Thank you, Ridgeway.’

I had spent a week in Bexhill once, but apart from that I had never slept outside my parents’ house, so I was interested to know how it would feel. I didn’t know where I was meant to go to clean my teeth or what time I was meant to turn my light out, so I brushed them in the room and spat out of the window. I turned the light off early, wondering if Batley had yet figured out what the metal switch inside the door was for.

I can’t remember much of the first few days. I think I expected that at some time someone would explain what it was all about, but gradually it became clear that not explaining was the Chatfield way. It was a sign of weakness to ask a question; ‘initiative’ was shown by not making a fuss. You were meant to know what to do. How? Instinct? Tarot? Sortilege? No, just by being a good crew member, by not making a fuss, by just knowing.

‘Keep your head down.’ It was Ridgeway’s hunted look more than his actual words that stayed with me.

Being the holder of the Romney Open meant that I was placed in classes with boys a year or two older. They responded to my impertinence by not talking to me – ever. Not in all the time I was at that school.

The lessons were given by masters who all looked alike. They wore black gowns over tweed jackets and baggy grey trousers; they had lace-up tan shoes with enormous welts, so they rolled along the cloisters as though on brown tyres. They all had flat grey hair and similar, one-word nicknames – ‘stalky’ Read, ‘Mug’ Benson, ‘Tubby’ Lyneham, ‘Bingo’ Maxwell; it was hard to tell them apart, to feel anything for them or about them, and this indifference was reciprocated.

Stalky Read did have a particular phrase of his own, now I come to think of it: ‘Take the first bus to the Prewett.’

What the hell did that mean? Park Prewett, it was eventually explained to me, was a famous loony bin, near Basingstoke. If you made an elementary mistake in geography, Stalky’s advice never varied: ‘First bus to the Prewett. Leaves at two.’

When I was returning to my cubicle after lessons on perhaps my third day at Chatfield, I found that two-thirds of the way down the corridor, barring my path, stood a large boy, about seventeen, with his hands stuck in his belt. He glared at me as I got close, his face set in a sneer. I couldn’t take cover in any of the rooms en route because I didn’t know any of the boys in them. When eventually I reached him, he sidestepped to prevent me passing. I tried the other side, but he moved across to block the way. I looked up at him to see what he wanted. He was about two feet taller than me and had the features I’d already noticed were common at Chatfield: a mask of erupting spots and damp-looking hair. He didn’t really seem to have hair, in fact, but something more like a pint of oil poured over his scalp and divided into shiny hanks; his complexion looked as though a carton of raspberry yoghurt had exploded in his face. Eventually he let me pass, kicking me in the coccyx as I went. His name, I was told, was Baynes, J.T.

He had two friends called Wingate and Hood. They told me they’d ‘noticed’ me. I was ‘nervy’, that was my trouble, wasn’t it?

When I got back that afternoon after football, my sheets were soaking wet and all my clothes had been strewn round the room. I slept on the mattress that night, but the next day it, too, was soaked in water, so I lay down on the springs.

In the main corridor of Collingham there was a table where bread and margarine was sent up twice a day in plastic dustbins. The margarine was wholesale grade, stamped on the wrapper ‘not for retail distribution’, and often got smeared over the wall and floor, where it mixed with Marmite and golden syrup. A paper bag full of crystals was sent up in the dustbin with it; the idea was that if you mixed them with water, they made some sort of fizzy drink, though I never saw anyone try it. One of my jobs was to clean this area, and for this I was given a cloth that had been used to soak up milk. It was difficult to do more than smear the slick into new positions, while trying not to gag from the smell of the cloth.

My efforts were watched by a tall, pale prefect called Marlow, who looked as though the tightness of his starched collar was preventing the blood from reaching his face. It was to be done again, then again – not for the sake of cleanliness, but for some other, vaguer, reason. And then, said Marlow, looking at the floor, I could do it again.

Eventually, I was told to go and see the head of house, an unsmiling young man called Keys, with the grey face of someone who had eaten a hundredweight of bread and margarine in his five years, but had come to understand Chatfield. He told me that my ‘attitude’ was wrong and that he was going to beat me with the cane. I wasn’t aware that I had an attitude, right or wrong. Alternatively, I could write out the whole school rules – about eight sides of single-spaced small print – three times by ten o’clock the next evening. Keys was short (he played scrum half ), but he looked strong, and unstable; there was a deadness in his eyes. I opted for the rules. This meant writing by torchlight beneath the bedclothes and beneath the desk throughout lessons all the following day. Part of the punishment was the risk of being caught by the teacher and beaten anyway. Keys didn’t seem gratified when I
handed him the encyclopaedia-thick stack of curling sheets; he looked disappointed, and sent me off with a warning that next time it would be beating without the option.

I was told to get up half an hour early and take a cup of tea in bed to the boy in charge of our run of cubicles, who, it turned out, was Baynes. I had to shake him vigorously by the shoulder to rouse him, and when he had cursed me for a time and drunk some tea, he came to inspect my cubicle, running his finger along the glazing bars of the window to look for dust.

My days had a sort of rhythm. Breakfast, silent lessons, back to check on havoc in my room; clear up; more silent lessons, rugby; chores; bed . . . I had a tiny transistor radio, about the size of half a paperback, with an earpiece. I could sometimes manage to escape beneath the bedclothes.

God, I don’t know.

The latrine block was some way from our house and no one had told me when we were allowed to go. One morning we were about ten minutes into Physics, when I put up my hand and said, ‘Please, sir, can I go to the toilet?’

The teacher said No, I couldn’t, I must wait. All the other boys started muttering ‘toilet’. I thought I’d picked the wrong time to go, but no one had told me any better. Gradually, I began to see that it wasn’t my choice of time but of word. Toilet was considered an outlaw word. I’d never heard the thing called by any other name at home, St B’s or the grammar school, so what was I meant to call it? It took me a long time to establish. The big block was called the Jackson Rears; the urinal halfway up the stairs, the one we shared with the house above, was called the Halfway House. The cubicle beneath the stairs was the Dump. There was no generic.

By the end of the day there was no one in Collingham who didn’t refer to me as ‘Toilet’. Toilet Engleby, that was my name. I had to suppress a flinch of recognition when someone called out ‘Toilet!’ in the corridor.

Baynes and Hood and Wingate weren’t going to let me get away with that. ‘Come here when I call you, Toilet. Don’t you know your own name?’ They took me to the Dump and held my head in the bowl, then flushed it.

‘What’s your name?’

‘Engleby.’

They went on and on until finally when I came spluttering up, I answered, ‘Toilet.’ I thought that would satisfy them, but they seemed disappointed when they let me go.

It was surprising how quickly I got used to this. Every day I woke up with a feeling of low panic in my gut. My defences were on full alert by the time I went down to the bathroom to clean my teeth at seven-fifteen.

The other boys in my term, Francis, McCain and Batley, talked quietly amongst themselves. None of the boys in the year above would chance talking to me, especially the ones I went to lessons with. There was one boy called ‘spaso’ Topley, who looked like a fish in specs – the house joke, beneath even bullying – who occasionally gave me a sort of girlish simper but didn’t risk speech.

I couldn’t blame them. Batley was in some class so elementary that it didn’t have even a year number attached to it, so I never saw him, except once, coming back from the rugby field, when he happened to walk past. He said, ‘Bad luck, Toilet.’ Batley was probably all right in a way.

I had surprisingly been picked for the second team rugby in my year. I played hooker, where the main job was, as Ridgeway might have put it, to ‘keep your head down’. Then the First XV hooker got mumps and I was promoted. I didn’t know any of the others, because although they were my age they were in different houses and a junior academic year. By some telepathy they’d picked up that it was dangerous to talk to me, though one or two did call me by my proper name, and one said ‘Well played.’ So I grew keen on rugby and stayed late practising – so much so that when the First XV hooker recovered he couldn’t get back into the side. I became a tackler as well as a scrumagger; I enjoyed driving my shoulder into someone’s solar plexus to hear him gasp. I liked to run behind a pimpled little shit who’d ‘toileted’ me and throw myself at his ankles, risking the mouthful of studs for the pleasure of hearing him hit the ground; and then he might accidentally get trampled at the bottom of the ruck that followed. I swapped boots with McCain, who hated rugby but had metal studs; sometimes there was blood on my laces.

Afterwards, most people went to the small food shop and bought chips or sweets to supplement the swill doled out from metal troughs at mealtimes. For some reason – being broke, probably – my mother hadn’t thought to give me any pocket money so I relied on the bread and margarine sent up to Collingham. One day, though, she sent a cake. When the post came, a young boy called out the name of anyone who had a letter. ‘Parcel for Toilet!’ called his unbroken voice, and a number of doors opened.

‘I think we’d better have a look and see what’s in there,’ said Baynes, grabbing the parcel. It didn’t take him long to tear off the brown paper. ‘A cake! Who said you could have a cake, Toilet?’

‘Look,’ said Hood, ‘it’s home-made by Mrs Toilet. Can’t she afford to go to a shop?’

‘It’s not a cake,’ said Wingate. ‘Feel how heavy it is. Catch.’
He threw it to Hood, who caught it and tore a bit off. He put it in his mouth. ‘Christ, it tastes of shit,’ he said. ‘It tastes of toilet shit.’

‘Is that what you eat at home?’ said Baynes. ‘Toilet shit?’

They began to throw the cake around, sometimes dropping it on purpose, all the time keeping up a commentary, things like, ‘What’s for lunch today, Mrs Toilet? Let’s have shit, shall we?’

I went to the table and picked up the wrapping from the floor and went back to my room, leaving them to do what they wanted with the cake. There was a note inside the brown paper saying, ‘Mike, Me and Julie baked this. Hope you like it! Love, Mum.’

It probably wasn’t up to much, because neither of them were very good cooks and Julie was only five anyway.

A couple of days later I was doing the evening prep in my room, when Wingate opened the door without knocking. He was a troubled-looking boy who hung around the showers a lot. He didn’t say anything, just walked round the cubicle, picking things up, looking at them closely, then putting them down again. He had fewer spots than Baynes, a blue, stubbly chin and dead-fish eyes.

I didn’t say anything, and neither did he. He stood by the bed and looked at me. ‘Get on with your work, Toilet,’ he said eventually.

I looked down to the passage of Livy I was preparing for class the next day. I didn’t dare to look at Wingate, but I became aware that he was doing something to himself as he stood over my bed. The Latin sentences swelled and dissolved. I couldn’t make much of them. Wingate let out a small grunt. ‘Better wash those blankets, Toilet,’ he said, buttoning up his trousers.

Chatfield was in a straggling village that clung to the perimeter of the school grounds. Upper and Lower Rookley were bisected by the enormous college and its playing fields, its cross-country runs, its rifle ranges, its evergreen woods and assault courses. On top of the hill in Upper Rookley was Longdale, a hospital for the criminally insane. The college and the hospital had been founded in the same year, 1855; the committee of the bin wanted the high ground for the views, the school governors wanted the flat playing fields below, so everyone was happy, if that’s the word we’re looking for.

Every Monday at nine-fifty, during our double Chemistry period, Longdale had an emergency escape practice, which meant sounding its siren. ‘Sir, sir,’ said twenty boys at once, ‘Bograt’s escaped, sir.’ Bograt Duncan rolled his eyes and sighed. I tried joining in the communal joke once, but only once.

A patient did escape once, as a matter of fact, and the headmaster called an emergency assembly of the entire school. He warned us not to talk to any strangers in the grounds. I went for a walk in the woods that afternoon, half hoping I might bump into him.

What was odd about Chatfield was that it enjoyed a high reputation. It was expensive. It played rugby against other famous schools, like Harrow, and while a lot of its pupils went off to the navy, plenty went to universities, some even to the best ones.

I never thought of complaining to old Talbot about what was going on because it would have sounded feeble. ‘They won’t talk to me . . .’ Well, why should they? ‘They wreck my room . . .’ Don’t tell tales. ‘Wingate . . . He . . . You know – on my bed.’ Don’t be disgusting.

Since the head of the house and the prefects were all in on the deal, it was in any event semi-official. Why would Mr Talbot take the word of a new boy who said ‘toilet’ against that of the boys he had himself nurtured and promoted?

His report at half-term proved me right. ‘Michael seems to be uncomfortably aware of his own precocity and must be careful not to ruffle feathers in the house.’ My mother said, ‘What’s precocity?’

Sometimes I hid in the bathroom, where Sidney, the disreputable cleaner, took his tea break. Sidney threw a pile of tea leaves into the corridor each morning and swept up the dust with a moulting broom. He was about sixty, with muscular, tattooed forearms, a former corporal in some supply regiment, though evasive about how much ‘action’ he’d seen.

The problem was that by being there one became a captive audience for his foul stories. One day I found myself in an audience of two (Batley was the other, though I don’t know why) sitting on the duckboards at his feet.

‘This bird,’ Sidney began, ‘when I was on leave and we was gettin’ on pretty well, and I rolls on top of’er, see, and she says to me, “Ooh, Sid, you mustn’t do that,” and I says to’er, “I’ll just put the end in, all right?” and she says, “All right, Sid,” so I gives’er a thorough good seein’ -to and when I’m done, she says to me, “Ooh, Sid, you said you’d only put the end in,” and I says, “Yeah, I know, but I didn’t say which end.”’

He laughed until he made himself cough for a minute or so before resuming. ‘Another thing. I’ll tell you what. The average length of a woman’s twat is nine’n’ a half inches. The average length of a man’s prick is seven.’
‘Really, Sid?’
‘Yeah. That means that in Britain alone there’s almost a hundred and fifty miles of spare layin’ around, so—’
‘Gosh, Sidney, that’s an awful lot of spare t—’
‘So make sure you gets your fair share.’

Batley and I were arranged like the figures in *The Boyhood of Raleigh*, but I don’t suppose that this was quite what Millais’s old salt was telling his boys. Though on second thoughts, I suppose with old sailors you never know.

In the holidays, I forgot about Chatfield. From the moment I got back into the house in Trafalgar Terrace, I put it from my mind. I’ve always been able to do that, to make as though things aren’t really happening. When you look back at what you’ve been doing for the last half an hour, for how much of the time have you really been aware of it? When you drive a car, for instance, you’re not aware of the functions that your brain and hand and eye are performing at eighty miles an hour, skilled movements that save you and others from death. You’re thinking about something else altogether. The music on the radio. What you’re doing next Tuesday. You’re having an imaginary conversation with someone. We’re not really conscious of what we’re doing most of the time.

As we entered the final week of the holidays, though, a dry taste came into my mouth. I couldn’t sleep.

When I went back to Collingham, I wrote a lot of letters to my mother and some to Julie. My mother wasn’t much of a correspondent. She was busy at the hotel and it became clear that writing to me was just one more chore in her busy day.

So, ‘Dear Julie,’ I might write instead, ‘How’s things? I’ve been doing Latin, which is the story of what the Romans did. They were early Italians who conquered other countries. Know the waiter in the Oasis Café near the cinema? He’s a Roman. I’m having fun here. I have this game in my room with some socks rolled up in a ball. I try to kick them against a spot on the brick wall of my room. I have different teams, like the Animals against the Birds. You get points for how close you get. I write down the scores on a piece of paper. Starling is very good but Zebra is no good at all. Write to me, Jules. Tell me anything. Tell me about your friends at school and what you’ve been doing. Love, Mike.’

It was strange to see my name written down like that. It was weeks since I’d heard it. ‘Mike.’

After about eight letters of mine, I got three pencil lines. ‘dear mike, me and jane plad with her cosens. We had wimpey for tee, love juliexox.’ I didn’t even know she could write.

And at least I read it before it was intercepted. I gave the letter fag two shillings not to call out my name, so Baynes wouldn’t be alerted. I stole the two shillings from a jacket in the changing room, but I didn’t know whose it was so I didn’t feel bad about it.

I began to steal quite a bit after that. It was useful, and it had a good effect on my morale. I was extremely careful and never took notes, just coins that would be hard to trace, and only small sums, never more than five bob at a time. Once, when I was on changing room sweeping-up duty, I saw Baynes’s brown tweed jacket unattended on its hook. I was the last one there and I knew Baynes was doing extra rugby practice until it was dark. There was a pound note in the inside pocket. It was very, very tempting, but I put it back. The one thing I had over Baynes was that I was cleverer than he was. That was an advantage I couldn’t afford to blow. For all I knew, it was a plant and he’d noted the serial number.

Of course, it might have given him a dilemma if I’d been caught because I would have been expelled and that would have been a disappointment to him and Hood and Wingate, having no one to torment. But I guessed he would have found a way of not reporting it and of making my punishment more ‘informal’.

One of Baynes’s favourite tricks was to send me to do a rubbing from a brass engraving in a church a couple of miles away. You were given 25 minutes to change into sports clothes and get there and back, which was impossible, but meant that he could send you again. He only sent me in the first place if it was raining, so the piece of paper was always wet and spoiled and he could question whether I’d even got there.

I used to peer into the raspberry yoghurt, watching to see if any light of kindness might emerge. But there was only ever anger in Baynes’s boiling red face – in his narrow, watery little eyes and pussy cheeks, which made him look like a crimson gargoyle.

‘Do it again, Toilet. Go. Now.’

Sometimes at night, as I lay in the sopping sheets, I dreamed of killing him. I would show no compassion. Or I would show the same degree of compassion that he had shown to me. It would come to the same thing. Good night, Baynes, I’d say, looking hard into his watery, hating eyes. Good night, Baynes, you, you . . . I knew all the bad words, but none of them was strong enough for my hatred of Baynes. The f-word, the c-word, a lot of b-words . . . The c-word is probably the one I’d have picked. It had a good sound, but it referred to something else, which wasn’t relevant; it was feeble, really: for power, it wasn’t even close.

I never for a moment considered killing myself, because it wouldn’t have achieved anything. Sometimes I had a fantasy of my body being found in the morning and the shock it would cause – how Baynes and Wingate and Hood
would be chastened and remorseful; how it would be the making of them as men. They would become fine and philanthropic in their lives; they would spread so much happiness among men that the loss of unmourned Toilet Engleby long ago would in fact be a price worth paying.

But I knew it wouldn’t really be like that. What would actually happen would be that Mr Talbot would ask if anyone knew what the matter was. Keys, the head of house, would officially say I’d been ‘nervy’, but since he’d dosed me with the rules I’d appeared to be ‘settling down’. Ridgeway, my little fag teacher, had got me through the exam and that was all he had to do, so he’d be in the clear. McCain and Francis would say, ‘He seemed fine, sir.’ Batley would scarcely understand the question. Hood and Wingate and Baynes would feel uneasy, but no more. ‘Toilet couldn’t handle it, then,’ one of them would say, later, when Talbot had gone. ‘Yeah, must’ve been trouble at home or something.’ ‘He seemed all right in the house.’ The thing about those three was that they believed – or at least had convinced themselves – that what they were doing to me was part of the traditional experience that Collingham offered; on behalf of the school, themselves and even me, they were performing some semi-official service.

Mr Talbot himself wouldn’t want to prolong the inquiry. Perhaps he’d ask the doctor if I’d been to see him.

The doctor was a nasty little man called Benbow, who specialised in looking at your groin. The first week at school, he had squeezed our genitals in the ‘new boys’ inspection’. At the start of each subsequent term he required us all to strip except for a dressing gown whose flaps we parted when we reached the chair where he sat, shining a torch to see if we had a fungal growth called TC, a sort of athlete’s foot of the crotch. If so, the area was painted purple.

He’d be the last person I’d think of going to see.

Then Mr Talbot might ask the chaplain if I’d consulted him. The answer there would also be No. ‘spunky’ Rollason was not consulted about anything, even by the under-chaplain.

My mother wouldn’t make a fuss. She didn’t understand how the world, let alone such an institution, worked. The headmaster would probably keep it from the newspapers. Within a few days it would be forgotten.

In the end, Baynes, Hood and Wingate would feel nothing, because in the end that’s how everything that happens to you feels: it feels like nothing at all, really.

But I don’t want to think any more about Chatfield now or about Baynes, J.T. It’s long over.

It’s now 6.30 on Monday 19 November, 1973 and I’m sitting in my room in Clock Court at my ancient university.

I like these details of time. 6.31 on Monday 19 November 1973 is the front edge of time. I live on the forward atoms of the wave of time. It’s now 6.32. This is the present, yet it’s turning to the past as I sit here. What was future when I started (6.31) is now already past. What is this present, then? It’s an illusion; it’s not reality if it can’t be held. What therefore is there to fear in it? (I’m starting to sound like T.S. Eliot.)

Don’t patronise me if you read this thirty years on, will you? Don’t think of me as old-fashioned, wearing silly clothes or some nonsense like that. Don’t talk crap about ‘the seventies’, will you, as we now do about ‘the forties’. I breathe air like you. I feel food in my bowel and a lingering taste of tea in my mouth. I’m alive, as you are. I’m as modern as you are, in my way – I couldn’t be more modern. My reality is as complex as yours; the atoms making me and this world in their random movement are as terrible and strange and beautiful as those that make your world. Yours are in fact my atoms, reused. And you too, on your front edge of breaking time, Mr 2003, will be the object of condescending curiosity to the future – to Ms 2033. So don’t patronise me. (Unless of course you have completely overturned and improved my world, bringing peace and plenty, and a cure for cancer and schizophrenia, and a unified scientific explanation of the universe comprehensible to all, and a satisfactory answer to the philosophical and religious questions of our time. In which case you would be permitted to patronise primitive little 1973. Well, have you done those things? Got a cure for the common cold yet? Have you? Thought not. How’s your 2003 world, then? A few wars? Some genocide? Some terrorism? Drugs? Abuse of children? High crime rate? Materialistic obsessions? More cars? Blah-blah pop music? Vulgar newspapers? Porn? Still wearing jeans? Thought so. Yet you’ve had an extra thirty years to sort it out!)

The important thing is that this is now: 6.38, 19 November, 1973. It’s dark on Clock Court with its low box hedges and cobbled triangles. The lights are on in the dining hall where dinner will shortly be served.

Nothing in the future has yet happened. I find that a good thought.

As well as the Quicksilver Messenger Service poster, there is one for Procol Harum live at the Rainbow, Finsbury Park. I have on my cork board a picture of Princess Anne and Mark Phillips, taken from a magazine; one of David Bowie with Lou Reed and Iggy Pop, a rare monochrome poster showing them with their arms round one another’s shoulders in some New York disco; one of Marc Bolan, because he reminds me of Julie; and one of Julie in her school straw hat with her sticking-out teeth.

I took a train to London from Reading to see Procol Harum when they premiered their new album, Grand Hotel,
with an orchestra and choir. It was good, but I wasn’t sure Mick Grabham was up to it as Robin Trower’s replacement on guitar, particularly on ‘Whaling Stories’, a song of which I need only to hear the opening note to find my stomach tense and my saliva fill with the re-experienced taste of Glynn Powers’s A-grade hashish. There’s something essential in Trower’s tone that Grabham didn’t catch.

This being the case, I bought Trower’s solo album whose first track, ‘I Can’t Wait Much Longer’, bears a weight of melancholy that is unendurable – in my ears anyway. (Though I still quite like it. In the doom there’s passion and booze and things to do with living. For a distillation of despair with no redeeming qualities, for a tincture of suicide in A minor, try ‘Facelift’ or ‘slightly All the Time’ from Soft Machine’s Third.)

I go to the corner cupboard and take out the white vermouth. It’s that time of day: time for the small blue ten-milligram pill and Sainsbury’s Chambéry with ice. I feel all right, within my limits. I’ve known much worse. Down the hatch.

I often think good music is too much to take. Think of Sibelius Five, when the earth’s weight seems to shift on its axis in the closing moments. It’s well made, as it recapitulates the main theme and finally lets it out; but it describes a place I don’t want to look at, let alone inhabit.

I listened to Beethoven’s late quartets yesterday. They’re quite wintry, aren’t they? But they have the feeling of a man thinking about death. And he can’t keep out a slight sense of pleasure – of smugness. I’m old; I’ve won the right to fear no more the heat of the sun. Feel sorry for me and admire me. Indulge me. I’ve deserved it.

‘Late work’. It’s just another way of saying feeble work. I hate it. Monet’s messy last water lilies, for instance – though I suppose his eyesight was shot. *The Tempest* only has about twelve good lines in it. Think about it. *The Mystery of Edwin Drood*, *Great Expectations*, is it? Or Matisse’s paper cut-outs, like something from the craft room at St B’s. Donne’s *sermons*. Picasso’s *ceramics*. Give me strength.

There’s a lot of political activity at the moment to do with ‘co-residence’, which means boys and girls living in the same college, or not. At the moment there’s only one, King’s, which has both, and on Wednesday there’s a torchlight march on (not to) St Cat’s, whose Master is thought to be responsible for not letting girls, or women as we call them in this context, into men’s colleges. I see I’m down for something called a ‘co-residency lunch’ in Trinity Parlour next week, too. I’ll go because I think Jennifer’s going to be there. She’s not very political, Jen, though I think she’d like to be; she hasn’t really got enough time, what with all those concerts and films and theatres and parties in those tiny cold terraces and writing for *Broadsheet*, the student mag, and studying for a first-class degree, and Jen Soc (which is a bit political admittedly) and cleaning the house for the others and dutifully writing home and volleyball – and sex.

But she’s keen on co-res, I think, on the grounds that girls should have what boys have – viz., the best colleges, and not have to risk getting Girton calves bicycling out to their remote and defended buildings of no architectural interest.

I’ll be there then for the warm quiche and oniony salad on paper plates and a glass of Hirondelle or maybe just white coffee. Something about milky coffee with food turns my stomach. The old Jews were on to something.

What do I think about co-res? I think the seven Puritan divines who founded my college would be appalled at the thought of Goody Arkland and other witches in the rooms of New Court. Build your own colleges, you denimed jezebels, they’d be thinking. And it’s true you can’t bend with each fashionable wind – you can’t be like the Church of England, constantly updating its eternal verities. Either Christ was God, in which case He knew what He was doing when He chose male apostles only; or, he was a hapless Galilean sexist now ripe for a rethink. Not both. That’s what I think about co-res: a truth is either good for all time or it isn’t true at all. (On the other hand, it would mean better bathrooms.)

Baths remind me of Chatfield. Now I’ll tell you what happened next.

Yes. I can manage it. I’m not reliving it, I’m only describing it. I can deal with all my past experiences, I think. Here we go:

What I found trying was that Baynes, Hood and Wingate never seemed to take a day off. I felt that one day a week they might have games or work or something more important to do, but nothing, it seemed, took precedence over Engleby, T. (Even I thought of myself with this initial now.)

Hood sometimes paused when he saw me, as though for an hour or so his mind had been on something else; but the sight of me was enough to bring him back to earth. I studied their timetables and tried to make sure they never saw me. In the break between lessons, I didn’t go back into Collingham. I stored my books in some open shelves at the foot of the staircase leading to another house. I wandered round the quads, reading the notices, but I grew very hungry and sometimes had to make a grab-and-run raid on the bread and margarine table.

Anyway, I was always visible at mealtimes and then, at six-thirty, there was a roll call, after which you had to go to your room to do prep – and from then on I was a tethered prey.
There was a break between preps of half an hour in which you could make cocoa or eat the bread and marge before prayers. Usually, Mr Talbot came up for this and read something improving by Albert Schweitzer or C.S. Lewis. Other times it was left to the head of house, dead-eyed Keys, to send us off to bed uplifted.

Second prep led into lights out and was strictly private. I was doing maths at this time one night, almost ready to call it a day, when Wingate came into my room. I was in pyjamas and dressing gown; he was in day clothes. He had hollow cheeks, floppy brown hair and never showed emotion. Unlike Baynes with his simmering violence and his explosive pustules, Wingate was neutral, as though everything was happening in a calm deep pool. His pointed Adam’s apple dragged in his tight throat as he spoke.

‘Time for a bath, Toilet.’

‘No, my bath nights are Tuesday and Friday.’

‘You heard me.’

He held the door open and I followed him slowly out into the Collingham corridor. He led me down to the bathroom, on the floor below the Halfway House. There were two baths, a shower, a row of basins and some benches made of duckboards. On these were sitting Baynes, Hood and others – Marlow, I think, ‘Plank’ Robinson (said to be the dimmest boy at Chatfield, a title not easily won), ‘Leper’ Curran, Bograt Duncan and one or two more.

‘Get in,’ said Hood.

‘Take your clothes off,’ said Wingate.

I did what they said and climbed into the bath, which was cold.

‘Get your head under,’ said Baynes. And he held it under. He had huge hands. He was as strong as a man, stronger than my father had been. Eventually I got out from under his grasp.

He was laughing. Usually when they beat me up, I didn’t resist enough for it to be fun for them – like when I undressed, I suppose I should have refused or struggled. But this time I fought back because you couldn’t just let someone drown you.

I started to get out, but Wingate pushed me in again. It was very very cold.

‘You get out when I say so,’ said Baynes, snarling so much the words seemed to come out not through his mouth but through the pus of his cheeks.

I was shivering, in paroxysms, but managed to stay in. It was better to stay in than try to get out and have to fight, so they would have an ‘excuse’ to touch me.

I plunged my head under the water voluntarily. There were two reasons. One, I hoped it would give them sport or entertainment, so they’d let me go – they’d be satisfied.

Two, the physical shock took away the pain of being.

Still, I had that tiny radio beneath the bedclothes with its earphone like a deafie’s. Radio Luxembourg, 208 metres in the medium wave. Terrible reception, but that dodgy signal was my connection to a better place. The Horace Batchelor Infradraw Method . . . Keynsham, K.E.Y.N.S.H.A.M, Bristol . . . But there was laughter, and, boy, I liked those songs. God. ‘Penny Lane’. It wasn’t a song, it was a book, it was a world. The Yardbirds, Sandie Shaw – and Dusty Springfield with that crack in her mid-range that sent a shiver up my back as I lay curled beneath the grey woollen blankets. Amen Corner. This was something to hang on to. Simon Dupree and the Big Sound, the Beach Boys, ‘Wouldn’t It Be Nice’. Oh yes, it certainly would. I’d read an article in a magazine about California and about the canyons above Los Angeles with their wooden A-frame houses (whatever they were), pet cats, dirt roads, girls with long hair and guitars, soft drugs and kindness and open house and everyone sleeping with everyone else in this heavenly soft climate and dreaming of it all on such a winter’s d-a-a-ay . . .

‘Toilet.’

I was so lost in ‘California Dreamin’’ that I almost had a heart attack when I heard Wingate’s voice and felt a thump in the small of my back that had the hallmark of Baynes’s superfluous violence. I pulled out the earphone and stuffed the radio down between my legs as I sat up in the iron bed.

‘What is it?’

‘Get out of bed.’

Wingate turned the light on.

‘What’s this?’

‘It’s a radio, Wingate.’

‘Are you in Remove year?’

‘No.’

‘So why have you got a radio?’

‘And why are you listening to it after lights out?’
‘Let’s have a look at it, Simon.’
‘Whoops, John, you’ve dropped it.’
‘Oh dear, I think it may be broken. Careful, Simon. Oh no, you’ve stepped on Toilet’s radio. It’s all broken now.’
‘Maybe I could – oh dear, I’ve dropped it again.’
‘Never mind, it wasn’t much of a radio, was it? I expect Mrs Toilet got it from a cracker.’
‘I expect she can get another one when Toilet gets into the Remove.’

The cold bath became a regular event. My genitals shrivelled when I heard the late-night footfall outside my door.

It maybe doesn’t sound so bad, but a cold bath on a winter night . . . Ever tried it? I don’t know where Chatfield got its cold water from, but it felt as though they had a pipeline to the Baltic.

Sometimes it would just be Wingate on his own. But usually there’d be others. Bograt Duncan was keen.

They just stared. They lounged on the duckboard bench and stared. I wondered if they wanted to touch. Wingate liked to hold me under. Baynes liked a struggle, so I didn’t offer one.

Hood merely gazed on, impassive. He smiled a bit. Hood was the only half-human one of the three; he was not grotesque to look at, but with his blue eyes and open smile, quite normal. He alone retained some pretence that this was all fair game, that it was part of normal life. For instance, it was Hood who told me that pouring a bucket of water over my bedclothes was an old Chatfield custom called ‘splicing the mainbrace’. Was there a scintilla of comfort in thinking that we were all part of a great tradition?

Wingate and Baynes were in a different place. There was no pretence there. They had sold out, crossed over.

Hood’s occasional smile wasn’t reassuring, though. If, as it suggested, this was all just part of the way things were done, then it couldn’t be resisted – or stopped.

I thought his smile showed it was costing him a bit, though. I think it was partly to square it with himself. He hadn’t cut free like Wingate and Baynes. There was a twitch of stress or conscience there.

The strangest thing was that it never did seem to satisfy them. They always looked disappointed when they let me go. I wished I could have pleased them, so that then they might have relented.

There was a sweetshop in Lower Rookley that was run by an old woman. I asked her for a bag of sherbet lemons or some nonsense that meant she had to stand on some steps and reach up to a big glass jar. While her back was turned, I was able to take my pick of the chocolate bars spread out on the counter. There was no hurry, as her arthritic joints let her move only in slow motion. I pocketed a petrol lighter from a stand next to the cash till while I was at it.

I paid her for the sherbet lemons with a shilling I’d nicked from Plank Robinson’s trousers.

‘Thank you, dear.’
‘No, thank you.’

In Upper Rookley, there was a similar shop, though the owner was a man, and quite a bit younger. He also sold cigarettes, but annoyingly he kept these behind the counter, out of my reach. One Saturday, I went round the back of his shop, which shared a delivery yard with the dry cleaners next door. I sat down beside the high wire fence and watched. At about five, there was a delivery from a large van, and this was what I had been waiting for. If I couldn’t get them retail, I’d go wholesale.

The security was hopeless. The delivery man left the back of the van open while he was inside the shop and he was never away for less than five minutes at a time. Tea, biscuit, chat, mustn’t grumble.

The problem was that the back of the van was filled with large unopened cardboard boxes and I was only looking for a couple of cartons. It was not until the end of his visit, when the shop was fully restocked, that he’d return with some opened boxes. And he didn’t hang around then, but banged up the tailgate and drove off.

On the third Saturday, I was lucky. I had moved a little closer and was crouched down behind a car. The driver went through the back corridor to get the retailer’s signature on the docket, but in the meantime the shop phone had rung, so he had to wait. But I didn’t. I moved swiftly and dipped my hand into an open cardboard box. Two cartons of . . . I was hoping for Benson & Hedges or Rothman’s, but they turned out to be Embassy. Typical cheapskate Rookley. I was out of that gate and down the backstreet in two seconds with the cigarettes tucked into the duffel bag I lugged my books round in.

Back in Collingham, I Sellotaped them to the underside of my iron bedstead until I could think of a better place. The next thing I had to do was find a way of getting them into the market. I knew who the likely takers were, but none of them spoke to me. Then I got lucky.

One day I was coming out of the Jackson Rears in the mid-morning break when I saw Spaso Topley leaning against a pillar by the quad. As I walked past, he muttered, ‘Engleby?’

For a moment, I couldn’t think who he was talking to. Then I stopped and turned and warily said, ‘Yes?’
Spaso moved towards me. He had splayed feet and horn-rimmed glasses; although he had a deep voice there was something girlish about him. He said, in a rush, ‘Would you like to go to the cinema on Sunday if you do we can get a chit from Talbot and I know where I can borrow you a bike.’

He was looking flustered and nervous. He kept glancing up and down the pillared colonnade.

‘Well?’

I swallowed. ‘OK.’

‘See you by the bike racks at two but you’ve got to see Talbot first and bring your chit.’

He waddled off on his large feet before I could say anything.

Mr Talbot could be visited in his study after lunch, and when I told him what I wanted, he looked displeased.

‘Topley? Isn’t there someone in your own year you could go with?’

‘It’s just that Topley asked me, sir.’

He pulled a pad towards him, wrote on it and pulled off a small sheet. ‘Bike Leave’. He handed it to me. ‘Next time, Engleby, go with someone in your own year.’

Next time, Talbot, do your job and find out what’s going on in your house. ‘Yes, sir.’

When Sunday came, I got down to the bike racks at five to two.

I stood behind a hut, to stay out of sight, and kept looking at my watch. Eventually, Topley rounded the corner.

He came up and handed me a key to a padlock.

He said, ‘I’ve got Leper Curran’s bike for you. He owes me a favour for saving him Tubby Lyneham’s wrath. Electromagnetic fields. A Topley speciality. We toilers in the Collingham vineyard must stick together.’

He really was a prize ass.

We bicycled off together and found a cinema in the local town, about twenty minutes’ ride away. It was showing quite a good film with Steve McQueen in it, though I can’t remember the name.

Afterwards, we went to a café where I bought us poached eggs and beans on toast with tea and chocolate cake, courtesy of a ten-shilling note I’d taken from Marlow’s rugby shorts. I’d broken my no-notes rule because I knew I’d be spending it off-radar.

‘Do you smoke, Topley?’

‘Good heavens no.’

‘You must know people who do. In your year.’

‘That would be telling.’

‘I know. That’s why I’m asking you. Tell me. I am buying the tea after all.’

It was hard work, but eventually I persuaded him to act as go-between. He devised some rococo plan involving ‘safe drops’ in the Jackson Rears, which, since it was under a permanent fog of cigarette smoke, was one of the least safe places in Chatfield. But that was his problem. I left the goods, a packet at time, behind the cistern in the Dump; Spaso shipped them onwards. I never knew who the end-buyers were. It was a brilliant chain, with two natural cut-outs guaranteeing anonymity. We charged two-thirds shop retail price and split it down the middle. It was very good money. I think Topley spent his first pay packet on a second-hand rheostat.

What happened then? Oh God, I don’t know.

Days. Days are what we live in.

Days came. Days went.

I reached puberty. No one threw raspberry yoghurt in my face; I didn’t exude sebum through my follicles and pores; I didn’t smell of feet or pits; my voice didn’t do comic octave-jumps; my trousers didn’t flap at mid-calf. All that happened was that my back grew about a foot in width one night; my feet looked suddenly remote (I bought new trousers – cash, no chit, to the manager’s amazement – at the school shop); and one morning I awoke with evidence that I was capable of perpetuating the Engleby line. That was all.

I built the cigarette business and dabbled in marijuana, though it was risky and hard to come by. There were not that many takers at Chatfield either. I found an off-licence on the London road with a delivery arrangement as lax as the tobacconist’s and was able to run bottles of vodka and whisky back in the saddlebag of a bicycle I’d stolen from outside the local girls’ school. There was always a good market in drink, and I shipped it on through a Ghanaian boy in Greville whom I’d met in the Combined Cadet Force. Since he could hardly speak English he hadn’t twigged that no one was meant to talk to me.

Hood and Wingate eventually left.

Baynes stayed another term (incredibly, he was not bad at work and was sitting the Oxford entrance exam in December). He had an accident, I was pleased to learn, coming back from late rugby practice in October. He was concussed, with a large contusion on the back of the head, and his leg was broken in three places; he appeared to have lost his footing going over the ditch at the edge of the wood by the practice ground, where he had been taking
kicks at goal on his own in the twilight. He cracked his head on the concrete edge of the footbridge. He said he had no recollection of falling, but Dr Benbow put this down to the concussion (presumably after inspecting his groin by torchlight first).

Spaso Topley was discovered to have 400 Sobranie Virginia cigarettes in his tuck box and was expelled in the year of his A levels. I really don’t know where they came from. Not from me. I think he’d become greedy and started operating on his own. It wasn’t a clever place to keep them. I kept mine in a former ammunition box, with a lock, in the Armoury shed. As a midshipman I had been entrusted by Chief Petty Officer Dunstable with a number of keys during a CCF night operation, and a short delay in returning them had enabled me to have them copied at the shoe-repair shop in Upper Rookley. But keeping them in your tuck box in your room . . . Dear oh dear. I think with no A levels Spaso became a lab technician or something.

And what happened to me? Without Hood, Wingate and Baynes, my life became easier. The habit of not talking to me was hard to break. My classmates kept up their silence till the day they left. In the house, Francis and McCain occasionally asked for the salt or the tea, but I didn’t bother to answer. I didn’t need their belated acknowledgement. ‘Pukey’ Weldon in the year above asked me if I’d like to go see a football match and I told him where to put his ticket. He looked surprised. That was about it, until I turned my attention to the years that had succeeded us.

There was a boy called Stevens in the first year, who was outgoing and enthusiastic. He was in a school play and in a rugby team. People in his year seemed to like him. He was a small, fair child with smooth skin and laughing eyes. He was good at work, too, from what I gathered.

I saw his parents deliver him back at the beginning of his second term. The average Chatfield family group comprised a sexless crone of a mother with uncut greying hair in an embarrassing slide, like a small girl’s; a repressed, bald father with a pipe; a bow-legged Labrador you could smell at twenty yards; and a dilapidated shooting brake of a discontinued kind.

Stevens’s father drove a new car, shiny, dogless; he looked alert and friendly. (Plus, he was alive.) The mother had glossy fair hair, newly set, and appeared to be about twenty-five. She had a figure. Both looked unashamedly fond of the smiling son, whom they saw off with embraces and jokes.

I noticed Stevens.

Significant things happen so slowly that it’s seldom you can say: it was then – or then. It’s only after the change is fully formed that you can see what’s happened. We were doing World War Two in History at this time. To the occupied French in 1940, co-operating with the Germans was not only a practical but even a noble course of action, according to old ‘sapper’ Hill – one that was enshrined in article two of the armistice and boasted of by the French government. Was there one fatal moment when co-operation went too far, so that they found they were doing the Occupier’s dirty work for him? Was there a day – an hour – when in deporting Jews they stopped following the Nazis and began to lead them? Was it when they offered to fill the trains with Jews of French as well as other nationalities? Was it when they said the Jews could be taken from the Free as well as the Occupied zone? Was it when they offered the Jewish children – to fulfil the ‘quotas’?

Yes, no, both, all. There was a day, there was a moment when something reasonable changed into something that would haunt them for ever. But it wasn’t visible at the time, because at the time everything is only a tiny addition to what’s already there.

Stevens had the room that I’d once had, the last one on the left. As you got older, you moved term by term gradually towards the middle of the corridor. I was coming out of my room one morning when Stevens brushed against me as he was running to a lesson. First-years were always rushed; they had no ‘study’ periods, no time off and hadn’t yet been able to drop any subjects.

I called him back and told him to look where he was going. He smiled and apologised and shifted from foot to foot in a hurry to get going again.

It wasn’t really good enough, was it?

A week or so later, during second prep, I found I was bored. I’d done all the work I needed to do. I’d written to Julie, not that she’d reply, and I was fed up with reading Mickey Spillane and Dryden.

I had no clear plan in mind as I left my room quietly and walked down to the end of the corridor. Stevens, T.J., said the strip above the door.

I was thinking of something completely different when I opened the door and found him bent over a book at his desk, in pyjamas and dressing gown.

My mind was elsewhere when I noticed the look of terror on his face.

‘Time for a bath, Stevens,’ I said.
The co-residency lunch in Trinity Parlour was what Chris from Selwyn called a ‘real gas’. There were many more people than had been expected, so the quiche and Hirondelle ran out quickly. Jennifer said she’d go out and get some more food from a supermarket and I said I’d go with her. There was a whip-round of fifty-pence pieces and off we went to . . . God, I suppose it must have been Marks & Spencer. The shop opposite Boots at any rate. Quite a walk from Trinity. By the time we got back we discovered that someone had been to the college buttery and got bread and cheese as well.

Jen seemed a bit cross about missing the discussion, though her friend Molly assured her not much had happened. All the boys from places like Churchill and Fitz were understandably keen on the idea of having girls on their staircases, but even the ones from the older colleges like Christ’s and Corpus were enthusiastic.

The girls were a bit more guarded. They wanted equality in all things and that meant equal numbers, but they felt attached to their bluestocking institutions. They didn’t want them to go co-res. It wasn’t what those fierce women founders had envisaged, was it, to have people like Chris from Selwyn in the corridors of female scholarship, in football clothes and leering.

Some boy from Trinity itself said shouldn’t they suggest to the university a gradual change, so that the girls retained four colleges, boys had four and the others moved slowly towards co-res as their statutes permitted, aiming to have gone the whole way in about ten years’ time. This went down badly. He was called a ‘Fabian’ and worse.

Someone from Caius said there they needed a two-thirds majority of all Fellows past and present and that some footnote in the statutes implied that the wishes of the dead must also be consulted, or presumed. The debate was fierce and long, but produced an odd atmosphere, something like a party. People came to know one another quickly and seemed to enjoy it. At three o’clock a porter came to close the room and demand the key. Most were in any case due at sport or experiments or lectures (I’d missed the Australopithecine at two).

Chris from Selwyn said we should carry on the discussion later, but his rooms weren’t big enough. Simon from Pembroke said he knew a very switched-on Fellow of Sidney Sussex, a Classics don with a charming modern Greek wife, who should be asked along.

The grumpy porter kept asking for the key until Molly said in desperation, ‘We can all meet back at my house. Seven o’clock. Everyone bring a bottle. And a supporter.’ Jennifer gave her an amazed look – ‘My house?!’ – as Molly slowly repeated the address a dozen times.

I dropped in on Stellings in his room that afternoon, but he was listening to the LP of High Society on his expensive headphones and didn’t want to talk. I walked over Jesus’s Bones or Christ’s Pieces or Corpus Domini – some area of municipal green – and found myself in King Street. In my second year I did something called the King Street Run, a drinking challenge. You had to drink a pint of bitter in each of the street’s eight pubs in less than two hours without going to the toilet for any reason. If you did, or if you vomited, you had to start that pint again. You had to be accompanied by a ‘jockey’ who’d done it before; mine was a friend of Stellings’s called McCaffrey who, aptly, spent his life at Newmarket. He told me to eat a lot in the dining hall, to cover the food with salt and drink no water. Then we walked to the first pub. The boy next to me drank his pint so quickly he threw up straight away, was penalised with another and never made it out of that bar. I completed the course in an hour and a half, in the first group of finishers. It wasn’t that hard. I had a slight sense of anticlimax when I got back to the college bar, where I had a couple of barley wines and a gin and tonic.

That afternoon, after the co-res lunch, since Stellings didn’t want to see me, I went to the Footballers and helped myself to a pint of Adnams, leaving the money on the till, because the landlord was asleep in his usual place, on the floor behind the bar. I sat by the fire and had a few more, always being careful to leave what I owed.

At seven I set off for Jennifer’s house and smoked a joint on the way. I rang the bell. The party had hardly started, but I felt surprisingly relaxed. Jen was in the kitchen, cooking a large rice dish, so I sat and talked to Anne for a bit while other people began to arrive.

By about nine there must have been seventy people or more in that tiny freezing house. It was almost impossible to get through to the kitchen, where the wine was. The corridor and the doorway were blocked by students, whose army greatcoats and sheepskin jerkins, beards and bushy hair took up all the space. I went to the off-licence on the next street and bought a bottle of wine for myself, which I kept in my coat pocket after I’d forced the cork in with the handle of a knife.

Music was playing – the Velvet Underground, the Eagles, Can and Roxy Music, I think. There were lots of people
I knew there – Nick and Hannah and various others from Tipperary and people I’d met at the co-residency lunch. The rooms were what they call ‘heaving’, which is the right word when people are shoulder to shoulder and some are trying to dance, some to escape and some to manoeuvre a paper cup, a paper plate and a plastic fork in rice and chopped green pepper with occasional tiny flakes of tuna fish.

I went upstairs with my bottle to escape the crush and opened a door into a bedroom.

It was dark in there and it was cold. There was an unlit gas fire on one side of the room. The bed had a few coats thrown across it, over a duvet with a pale blue, clean, just-ironed cover. This was the first duvet I’d seen in England, and it looked exotic in a drab, Scandinavian way.

I shut the door behind me.

The desk had history textbooks in three or four divided piles. I sat down at the desk. There were notebooks with her handwriting. There was a tiny piece of foil with about ten bob’s worth of second-rate hash in it. (I licked some off my finger.) There was a photograph of a house with a man and a woman outside it, smiling. There was a birthday card with a boat on it and a half-used lipsalve.

Through the window in the darkness I could see the jumble of small slate roofs on the brick terraced cottages. I imagined a cat. I imagined a gas fire, ski socks (even though I wasn’t quite sure what they were) and morning tea. I imagined humorous living parents, with enough money and jokes about toothpaste and boyfriends and tights and Brian Martin’s endless speech.

I gently pulled open a desk drawer. Beneath some envelopes, a pad of paper and a new, unused blister-pack of contraceptive pills, I found a large diary, full of closely written entries.

I thought about my mother – for a second. Then I was able to put her out of my mind, along with much else.

There was a note in my pigeonhole this morning from Dr Woodrow, the fleshy one who interviewed me for the entrance award. ‘Dear Mr Engleby, I would be most obliged if you could drop into my room (G12) for a brief informal chat one day. Would Tuesday at noon be convenient? Peter Woodrow.’

I stood outside, where I had stood that winter morning. I wondered what had happened to the clever-looking boy, my competitor; I’d never seen him again.

‘Come in.’

Woodrow had glasses perched halfway down his thick nose; his grey hair needed cutting. He pointed me to the armchair where Gerald Stanley had sat to ask his asinine questions.

‘How are you enjoying Natural Sciences? An unusual move for an English scholar.’

‘I know. I didn’t do that well in Part One B, but I think it’s all right now.’

‘Yes, so I gather. Have you thought what you might do when you go down?’

Woodrow was sitting at the table where he had sat before, leafing through my papers.

‘No, I haven’t.’

‘I sometimes try to help out a bit. The university appointments board can place most people. But informally I sometimes . . . Would you like a glass of hock? Or sherry, perhaps?’

‘No, I don’t drink alcohol.’

‘I see. Would you describe yourself as a loner?’

‘No more than most. I have friends.’ Stellings. Jen.

‘Good, good, that’s important. But self-sufficient?’

‘I’ve learned to be.’

‘Good, good. Equally good.’

Woodrow sounded as though he was choosing between the cheese soufflé and the orange posset at a college feast. He lit a pipe. ‘Do you speak any languages? German? French? Russian?’

‘Not really. German and French O level.’

‘So you have the basic grammar.’

‘I suppose so.’

‘And you’re a quick learner.’

‘Averagely.’

‘More than averagely according to Dr Waynflete.’

‘Maybe.’

‘Have you ever thought of the Foreign Office?’

‘Not really. The idea of the Foreign Office scared me. I pictured it full of people from Oxford, or from schools like Eton and Winchester, Rugby and Wellington – bilingual, duplicitous. Debonair.

‘Often,’ I said.

‘I could perhaps put in a word for you if you were interested.’
'That would be very kind.'

I had no intention of serving in the visa section of the Belgrade embassy, but I was intrigued by the interest shown in me. It was so . . . Unprecedented. I wondered if there was some gay aspect to it.

Woodrow coughed a couple of times. ‘What are your politics? Are you much involved in that sort of thing?’

I thought of Jen Soc, Lib, Lab and Con Soc. I wanted people to be happy, but that wasn’t much of a position. I didn’t answer.

Woodrow looked at me. ‘Will you vote in the general election?’

I shook my head. ‘Who governs Britain?’ That was the question. Who governs Britain? Heath or the miners? Heath or Wilson? What was the other guy called? Not him obviously.

‘I understand you took part in the march on St Catharine’s.’

‘That wasn’t political. It was about whether the colleges should have both sexes.’

‘It acquired a political and ad hominem tone at one point, I understand.’

I didn’t know what he was talking about. ‘How did you know I was on that march?’

‘I believe there’s a march planned in protest against British troops in Northern Ireland. Will you be going on that?’

It depends if Jennifer Arkland’s going on it. ‘I haven’t decided yet. When is it?’

‘If you are interested in a career in the Foreign Office it would obviously be better not to be seen to be in open conflict with the government of the day. Obviously.’

Woodrow gave a small laugh. I nodded.

‘In private of course you are entitled to whatever views you wish. Private is the key word here.’

‘How would they ever know, anyway, if I’d been on some little student march?’

Woodrow breathed in noisily. ‘On matters of national security, such as Northern Ireland, the security services are as vigilant as possible. They want information before not after the event.’

I felt my jaw loosen. ‘You mean a photographer is—’

‘I haven’t the faintest idea how they proceed. I’m merely pointing out that if you are serious about the Foreign Office then you need to think carefully about such things.’

I left Woodrow’s rooms and returned to my own in Clock Court, where I listened to some Mozart and Rainbow in Curved Air by Terry Riley.

I can’t see the point of Mozart. Of Mozart I can’t see the point. The point of Mozart I can’t see. See I can’t of Mozart the point. Can’t I of Mozart point the see . . . I can’t see the point of Mozart.

That’s not a tune, that’s an algorithm. An algorithm in a powdered wig.

Stellings has this idea that ‘classical’ music will die before Tamla Motown, because it has no tunes by which it can be remembered. (For the sake of his argument, you have to exclude opera, particularly Puccini.)

It still isn’t true. Off the top of my head, I can think of at least ten great orchestral tunes. Elgar has three, Holst one, Schubert two, Brahms one, Tchaikovsky one, Handel two. Beethoven, er . . . Mozart, mmm . . . Hang on! Sibelius. The Intermezzo of the Karelia suite.

Not really a tune, according to Stellings, more of a brass-band march; or ‘sousa on a good day’ as he put it. His point is that My Fair Lady, South Pacific or Porgy and Bess – let’s say the work of Rodgers, Gershwin, Berlin – have more true melody, and of a better quality, than the whole ‘classical’ canon.

He jabs his finger in your face and barks out choices that you have to call at once. ‘The main theme of the Trout quintet or “This Nearly Was Mine”? Fingal’s Cave or “On the Street Where You Live”? Just pure melody, OK? Bach’s 23rd Goldberg Variation or “Stranger on the Shore” by Mr Acker Bilk? Piano Dirge for Wet Monday Afternoon in D Flat Minor by César Franck or “All I See is You” by Dusty Springfield?’

Stellings is mad, though I suppose I see what he means.

Terry Riley isn’t long on melody either, to be honest. You have to listen to it many, many times, and then you can begin to see how the patterns build up. He must have awfully quick hands on the keyboard.

The other thing you need to really appreciate T. Riley’s music is to have smoked about ten quid’s worth of premium marijuana. I’m pretty sure Riley had when he wrote the stuff.

That’s what I did after I’d seen Woodrow. Although I find dope gives me some memory loss, I don’t really mind about that. Quite apart from the effect of the chemical in the brain, the taste is so exquisite . . .

Perhaps it’s obvious to you what old Woodrow was driving at.

If so, I must have misremembered or misrepresented what he said because it certainly wasn’t obvious at the time.

All that seems a lifetime ago now. Why?

Because something truly terrible has happened. It’s very hard for me to believe or think about it in any cogent
way. I can’t even believe that I’m sitting at my desk in Clock Court and I’m writing these words down, but it appears to be the case.

Nobody told me about it, as I feel they should have done. It was barely even ‘news’ by the time I heard it, having been known for almost twenty-four hours. And the first I find out is that I’m staring at a faculty noticeboard on Sidgwick Site and the lecture schedule is dwarfed by this large poster with a picture of a girl all too familiar. It takes me some time to register the full bleakness of what is being said. Third-year history student Jennifer Arkland has disappeared.

Notoriety is such a very odd thing. From the moment her face appeared on that poster, Jennifer has stopped being herself.

Vanished girl. Gone. Something pious has attached itself to her. It’s no longer possible to think of her as the girl in the next seat at the lecture. It’s impossible to think of her at all without a whiff of sanctimony.

People compete to express how well they knew her and what a great person she was – is. ‘I refuse to speak of her in the past’ has become a self-righteous refrain in the tea room.

We all feel estranged from her. She’s not herself any more.

For some days it was presumed, or hoped, that she had gone on a research trip or a holiday without telling her housemates, or her parents or her friends. This was in fact unlikely, bordering on impossible. She was an organised sort of person and aware of the anxieties of others. She could project herself into people’s thoughts and imagine what they felt. It was a habit; she couldn’t not show consideration for those near to her.

Still, on the grounds that the banal or simple is the answer to most mysteries, people keep saying there must be a straightforward explanation and that Jen will turn up fine and well in Harrogate or Paris or Lymington tomorrow.

She hasn’t.

In the Kestrel and the Whim, among those who knew her less well or not at all, the consensus is similar, but for a different reason. These people back the anticlimactic resolution – she left a message with the porter and he forgot to pass it on; she left a note in her tutor’s pigeonhole and it got lost in the other mail – for a different reason. They back the banal because they want the exciting; they would like her to have been abducted, tortured and disembowelled by a savage because that would be much more interesting than the missing-message explanation. They don’t want to seem callous by speculating in the lurid, however; plus, it’s tempting providence. If you’re hoping for the premium-bond jackpot, you talk about the preponderance of £25 prizes.

What is clear, however, is that whatever the outcome, Jennifer has in fact been taken away from us. She could never be herself again, because even if she reappeared it would be difficult to think of her in the same way. That innocent girl who suggested the Soc trip to Paris, who cleared up the plates at the end of the meeting in her new jeans and grey sweater, pushing the hair back behind her ear . . . She isn’t coming back.

The newspapers were slow to pick up what was going on – or not going on. It was round the university and in the local press for several days before one of the national papers ran a sizeable story on page five.

I know the page number because I have the story on the desk in front of me in my room in Clock Court now, as I write.

‘Top girl student disappears’ says the headline. ‘Fears were growing last night over the safety of Jennifer Arklam, 20, a brilliant third-year geography undergraduate at . . .’

They did at least get the name of the university right.

‘Popular and lively Jenny, oldest of four sisters from Lynmouth in Hampshire, was last seen walking back to her house from a party in Malcolm Street, near Jesus College. Her boyfriend, Robin Wilson, a third-year student reading history in Claire College, said, “Jenny was very happy, she had no problems that I knew of. We are all very worried about where she is and I would beg her to get in touch if she reads this.”’

There’s then a lot of stuff about her family. ‘Richard Arklam, 52, an architect with local firm Boyd and Denning and housewife Lesley, 46, who hails originally from Newbury in Hampshire . . . Police found traces of the drug cannabis in Jenny’s room . . . “Brideshead” lifestyle . . . considering a re-enactment of her last walk . . . Police are anxious to talk to anyone who may have information about Jennifer’s whereabouts. See page 19: Students: the Hamlet years.’

Other newspapers began to follow. I think they like being able to print pictures of Jenny, and they have found a nice one of her laughing, taken on the lawn of the house in Tipperary last year.

One of the popular papers (one which mysteriously thinks itself above the others) sent a star columnist to interview Jen’s mother. ‘Welcomes me in . . . Friendly, typical middle-class mum . . . Bottle green midi-skirt and court shoes . . . Lovely, candid blue eyes . . . Slight ladder in her tights . . . “Jenny was always a star at school . . . so proud of her” . . . Childhood bedroom . . . soft toys and teddy bears . . . Quaver in her voice . . . Not giving up
As the days go by, the story becomes an obsession. ‘Jenny: Latest’ say the news-stands and everyone knows what they mean – though the latest is always that they still don’t know.

There is a character known as the ‘ginger-headed man in the blue anorak’ who has featured in the last 48 hours. A woman on her way home after doing some office cleaning saw this person in Jesus Lane at the right time, about one-fifteen. The sighting was confirmed by a college porter on his way home via Maid’s Causeway at about one-thirty. This ginger man was seen to be behaving ‘oddly’.

The rozzer in charge, Inspector Peck, has asked Robin Wilson to make a television broadcast on Saturday, after Grandstand and before The Generation Game. Nice to see her; to see her it would be nice. (I do like a good chiasmus with my tea on Saturday.)

In a separate development, as the news bulletins say, it’s intended to re-enact Jennifer’s walk home from the party to her house. I don’t know who’s going to play Jenny. There was a dumpy little WPC who clearly fancied the part, but she wouldn’t be any good.


Mr and Mrs Arkland are said to be ‘distraught’. Mrs Arkland is on ‘suicide watch’ according to the Daily Mirror. Today the Sun had a picture of Jen in a bikini. The Daily Express had an article headlined ‘secret sex life of missing brainbox’, in which two undergraduates – one from King’s, one from Downing ‘neither of whom wished to be named’ – were quoted as saying that they had (at different times) had sex with Jennifer and that she was a ‘warm and liberated lover’ (King’s) with a ‘fantastic body’ (Downing). There was a cross-reference to: ‘Page 22: The plague of student promiscuity by Jean Rook.’

She has become a different person.

Inspector Peck called a press conference this morning to say that his station had received an anonymous phone call which they were taking ‘very seriously indeed’. He says his caller was able to give information ‘that only someone who knew Jennifer well would be in a position to pass on. We are hopeful that he can help us further with our inquiries.’

Unfortunately he rang off before they could trace his call. He was said to have a strong Norfolk accent.

‘Is Ginger from Norwich?’ asks the placard for the evening paper outside Bradwell’s Court this afternoon.


I’ve been to see my doctor. I’m suffering severe headaches. I don’t feel well at all. I can’t do any work. It’s impossible to concentrate.

Dr Vaughan has a surgery on King’s Parade, near the Copper Kettle. In his waiting room there are college oars mounted on the wall. On them are the names of the colleges whose boats he rammed or sank or something.

 Vaughan is famous for the fact that the university’s most renowned philosopher died in his arms. I think this is a strange thing for a doctor to be famous for. Saving him, maybe, or reviving him . . . But not showing him the door.

I have to wait a long time. Eventually the receptionist says I can go in. I think Vaughan went to the same med school as Dr Benbow from Chatfield. They have no bedside manner. I doubt whether either has ever been to a
bedside, unless it was to issue a death certificate.

I once asked Vaughan for sleeping pills but he told me to take more exercise. That’s why I started going to Alan Greening in the Kestrel.

A boy called Rough at Chatfield went to see Benbow and told him he thought he must be gay because he couldn’t stop thinking about boys. Instead of passing him to a counsellor, Benbow sent him away and said that every time he had an impure thought he should go and play squash. It didn’t help. (Though I’m told he won a squash blue in his second year at Oxford.)

Vaughan told me to sit down, then looked at me angrily.
‘What sort of headaches? Whereabouts?’ He seemed to be implying that I was making it up.
‘Here . . . And here . . . And here. Intense.’
He shone a light in my eyes and ears and asked about my bowels.
‘Have you had your eyes tested lately? Do you masturbate? Do you drink alcohol?’
‘I think it may be that I’m worried about a friend of mine.’
‘Stand up. Do you have adequate light in your room?’
‘Could I have a prescription for some pills?’
‘Certainly not. You can buy some aspirin with your own money if you want to. Don’t drink beer. You can go now.’

But it’s bad. I feel a sort of lassitude. As well as the pain. I also feel everything’s my fault. It’s like how I used to feel about the old men in the poorhouse. All this stuff is my responsibility.

I’ve started driving out to those villages again, like I did before I knew Jen. I take the 1100 out from the Queen Elizabeth car park and just drive. Grantchester, the Wilbrahams. Over Wrought. Middle Class. Nether World. It doesn’t matter how much I drink or how much I smoke I just can’t stop the pain in my temples.

Whoosh goes the chestnut-amber tide up the side of the straight glass as I tear the cellophane from a silver packet of Sobranie Virginia.

I sit at the bar and drink and smoke alone and I often think about my father for some reason. I wonder what it’s like to be dead.

I didn’t feel much when he died. I didn’t cry, though Julie and my mother both cried a lot. I didn’t like him very much so it was hard to mourn him. Perhaps there’s something wrong with me that I didn’t cry.

What I felt was this: that his dying made a mockery of his life. The plans, the photographs, the ‘future’ – all the stuff they lived by. It was a delusion, wasn’t it? See them in that black and white photo there, young and looking forward. What on earth was all that about, when this banal brutality was what all along lay in wait? When I look back on his life and what he thought he was up to, I feel . . . Embarrassed. Embarrassed by the extent of his self-delusion.

There was an interval after the funeral before the headstone arrived and my mother wanted me to mark the grave. People might otherwise think it was just a bit of builder’s earth or a giant molehill or something. It might get washed away, like the grave of that girl in Hardy. In our small shed, I made a cross by breaking up a wooden apple crate. My father didn’t have the tools for me to do a good job, but I managed two rough strips and wrote his name in ballpoint on the crosspiece, which I then hammered with an old nail onto the upright. It’s pretty simple stuff, death. Say what you like about death, there’s nothing fancy about it. I took the apple-box cross off to the graveyard and stuck it in the open earth a few inches above where my father’s body was decomposing.

There was that poem by Catullus that we had to translate for the scholarship to Chatfield. *Soles occidere et redire possunt.* The sun can set and rise again. But for us, once the short light is snuffed out, there is just one long night to be slept through. Catullus’s response to this was to call for more sex while he was still alive to have it. That seems reasonable – and it sounds more profound in Latin. The other way of looking at it is that since the *lux*, the light, of our living is *so brevis*, short, compared to the *perpetua*, everlasting, *nox*, night, that is *dormienda*, to be slept through, then it’s pointless to worry ourselves about what we do in it. What is a moment in eternity? Of no account. Of no account at all.

Time makes us pointless. If time is as we envisage it, our lives are not worth living. Time is probably not as we envisage it – sequential. But since we are incapable of viewing it in any other way, it might as well be.

If the colour green is *truly* red but to every living creature it is experienced as green, then green it might as well be.

And if the natural selection of mutations made by random errors in cell division has given us a conscious mind that cannot understand – no, cannot *conceive* – one of the dimensions it inhabits, we might just as well be dead.

I hope for reincarnation when we and our conscious mind have evolved a little more, say ten million years from now.
I do believe in reincarnation for the simple reason that I’m certain that I personally have lived before – and within
the last century, which is worrying.

I don’t want to come back again that soon. Christ.

Of course I think of Jennifer a lot too. I’ve been reading her diary and it’s almost like having her back. You can hear
her voice, that sense of her trying not laugh out of politeness to the other person.

Oh yes . . . That diary. I only meant to borrow it then sneak it back, but of course now the house is crawling with
policemen I can’t do that and I’m stuck with it.

On Saturday I went down to the college television room to watch Robin Wilson’s appeal for information. He sat
behind a table, somewhere in London, I presume, with a bank of bright lights shining on him. He still had his Che
Guevara moustache, but I noticed he had had his hair cut from shoulder-length to just covering the ears. I thought
this was a pity, as though he was saying that long hair – other values, the counterculture – could be chucked out
when the world got tough, when it got real.

He put on a grown-up voice, but still used a lot of undergrad terms, like ‘notion’ instead of idea.

‘If by any chance you’re watching this, Jenny, do please get in touch,’ he said. ‘If you could just get it together to
make a phone call to your parents, that would be really amazing.’

At least he didn’t go on too much about their ‘relationship’.

He looked gravely intelligent, sensitive, compassionate in a manly way. The millions of people waiting to see
Bruce Forsyth could barely have guessed that he was lying through his teeth. He was no more her boyfriend than
Brucie was.

He concluded: ‘If anyone can remember anything that might help police with their inquiries, I beg you to come
forward. You can contact your local police station or ring the number on your screen in complete confidentiality.
Thank you for your help and your concern. And Jenny, if you’re watching, God bless you. Come back to us soon.’

He kept his still, unblinking gaze in the bullseye of the camera as the light faded.

What a silver-plated fraud. He’d even mastered all the professional stuff about ‘the number on your screen’, as
though he’d spent his life in a studio, like Dickie Davies or Cliff Michelmore.

I couldn’t help laughing as I got up from my leather armchair and prepared to leave the others to their Bruce
Forsyth. As I did so, a boy in front looked up at the noise of my laughter with a puzzled and slightly accusing look.
He appeared to have tears on his cheeks.

In the last few days there have been two developments. The first was a Daily Mail story headlined ‘Varsity Jen was
in blue film’, which insinuated that Jennifer was a more or less round-the-clock porn actress.

The second, more significant, is that Robin Wilson, Mr Telegenic Sincere, has become the principal suspect.
Newspapers are running on the borderlines of libel as they reprint fuzzy photographs taken from his broadcast and
ask questions about their ‘relationship’. They innocently remark that the police are ‘currently interviewing no other
suspects’.

But Wilson: PC Plod has had him in four times to Mill Road station, and four times, after ‘exhaustive’
questioning, he’s been released, though he can’t go back to where he was living. They’ve sealed his staircase in
Clare while they dismantle his room. They’ve chipped the plaster off the walls, they’ve raised the carpets and the
floorboards, they’ve brought down the ceiling, they’ve taken it back to the medieval dust inhaled by Lady Elizabeth
de Clare (Lady de Burgh) when she endowed the college shortly after its foundation in 1326. No dice.

Not yet. It’s only a matter of time, I imagine. Everyone steers clear of Wilson when he comes to lectures; the
women in particular look really scared. They have statistics by the yard. Eighty-five per cent of violent crimes
against women are committed by a family member or by those closest to them. Rob looks fine, they’re thinking, he
was exemplary on television – modern, sensitive, non-sexist in his language – but he is for all that still a man.
He can’t be trusted.

Tomorrow night is the re-enactment of Jennifer’s walk home, or ‘Jen’s Last Walk: Latest’ as it’s known to the
townspeople.

I have one question for the investigating team. Why was she not on her ‘trusty’ bike? Where, in fact, is that bike?
Shouldn’t Mr Plod be asking?

I suppose it was inevitable who would get the role of playing Jennifer. It’s Hannah, of course.

It’s a non-speaking role, it’s a non-acting role if you ask me, it’s a walking role – but Hannah has spent twelve
hours a day immersing herself in the part, like some new girl at the Actors’ Studio.

She’s watched Jen in the Irish film about a thousand times, trying to capture the particular movement of her hips
when she walked, the way she held herself and swung her arms. She’s been to Lymington to go through old
photograph albums, looking for a cock of the head, a dip of the shoulder, talking to the parents over soft Rich Tea – though they may have got in some fresh ones by now. (I noticed from a picture in the Guardian that they’d got rid of the tulips.)

Hannah sits in dancer’s leg warmers, her uncombed hair tied up in a ragged ribbon (this is no time for vanity), smoking like a REME corporal, biting the ends of her fingers as she views the Forres movie one more time. Then she rises silently and walks back and forth across the bare boards of the Film Soc viewing room, tilting her pelvis a half-inch this way, a half-inch that. She says it’s tougher than Strindberg, more draining than Brecht. She frequently weeps while a bemused WPC Kettle looks on. Say what you like, she’s giving it her all.

The Walk took place last night, two weeks to the day (important for it to be Friday, the same day of the week) after the Disappearance. We all wanted to go and watch, but weren’t allowed to go beyond a barrier at the end of Malcolm Street. The only people allowed further were Hannah, WPC Kettle, Inspector Peck, Jennifer’s parents, a camera crew from the BBC (camera, lights, sound, assistant, and same again in reserve, following recent ACCT union agreement with management, plus catering and transport, all on treble time apparently because it was after midnight), ditto from Outlook East Anglia.

In Jesus Lane, where it met Malcolm Street, there were about three dozen press photographers with hefty flashguns. They were held in a sort of extended low-level cage, such as you might find in a livestock market. They didn’t seem to mind.

Hannah was standing outside the party house, about halfway up Malcom Street on the right going north. She was smoking furiously, wrapped in blankets, still in green-room character.

Molly, Anne and Nick, Jen’s housemates, came briefly through the crowd to shake hands with Jen’s parents and to wish Hannah luck, and were then ushered back behind the barrier. Hannah herself went up into the house and closed the door.

Peck spoke into the radio on his lapel. Watches were checked. Eventually, Peck held up his arm and waved to a colleague on Jesus Lane. He called out: ‘Let’s go.’

The door of the party house was opened, and a girl – presumably Hannah in a blonde wig, slightly wavy – tripped down the stairs on to the pavement and turned right. She pushed the hair back behind her ears; I wondered if they’d pencilled in a couple of tiny moles.

She dropped her cigarette (Jen hardly smoked), straightened up and began to walk.

As she came into the sodium light of the street lamp, I recognised the navy blue coat, a replica of Jen’s own that had presumably vanished with her. She also wore a grey sweater, the polo neck that wasn’t quite, blue flared jeans and boots.

She walked down the grey pavement, going away from us; her step was light and confident, and you felt all that Jenniferish excitement about being alive and it was her in all but fact: it was her again, you could smell her hair, her skin, and sense how much she was looking forward to the bump of the lit gas fire and the ski socks, as she quickened slightly in the cold, thinking of the cat tumbling from the roof in the morning and the day ahead.

She walked, this girl, with that slow stride suppressing gaiety, her love of living, the slight sway of her narrow hips as she moved onwards, away from us, turned right at the end of the street and vanished in the Fenland mist.

Jesus, Jesus, it’s been tough.

At least I’ve started working again, which is a relief. The truth is that by going to so many of Jen’s history lectures I’d missed out on a lot of my own course. Waynflete says my work is now ‘back on track’, though I don’t know which track. Presumably the one that leads to a first-class degree, or a ‘youknowwhat’, as Jennifer called it. The problem with that is that it tilts you towards ‘academe’, which means no money, grant applications, no job, ‘research’ and studenthood extended into dotage; it means spending the rest of your life in digs in Lampeter.

However, the Foreign Office never sneered at a first, I imagine.

Increasingly, the FO’s what I feel I’m going to do. I didn’t search it out, it came to me. But I was impressed that Woodrow should think of me. And sometimes in life, I imagine, good things do happen. Most of the time, it’s the opposite, obviously. But I don’t think you should rule out the possibility that just occasionally chance might deal you a good card.

Then you should go with it. Go with the flow, as Stellings is fond of saying, often when he’s opening a bottle of beer.

Engleby of the FO. It would be worth it just to see the faces of Wingate and Hood and Baynes. No, not to see them; I never want to see them again. Just to picture them. (Incidentally, an old Chatfieldian weirdo in John’s told me Baynes had to pull out of Oxford because he was getting migraines and petit mals. Such is life.)

Meanwhile: His Excellency Sir Michael Engleby KCMG, our man in Paris, at home in rue du Faubourg Saint-
Honoré in the residence of the British embassy, a classic town house bought from Napoleon’s sister, I read somewhere. Yes, yes, they’d say, HE’s a natural scientist by training, would you believe? Always a high flier, Mike, but also a dogged individualist. For instance, he’s the first ambassador to maintain that the smallest room in Napoleon’s sister’s old house is called a toilet.

Spring is coming. There are croci beneath the trees in Fellows’ Pieces.

I had a note in my pigeonhole yesterday morning from Dr Townsend, the socialist geographer who is my ‘moral tutor’. I saw him in the first week of my first year for a glass of sherry but haven’t come across him since. I imagine that in the intervening two and a half years neither my morals nor my tutoring have given him cause for concern, or interest. His note asks me to come and see him at once in his rooms in the Queen Elizabeth building.

Knock, knock.

‘Come in, Mike. Sit down. Thank you for coming so soon.’

‘Mike’, eh? I wonder if he had to look that up.

While he’s talking to me, I’m also wondering how you get to be a socialist geographer. What articles and papers do you have to read? ‘Oxbow Lakes and the non-Egalitarian Aquifer’; ‘Andean Rainfall: the Case for Equal Precipitation’; ‘Tectonic Plate Shift and the Command Economy’; ‘Coastal Erosion: the Bias against Littoral Communities’; ‘soviet Flood Plains and the—’

‘Mike?’

‘What?’

‘Did you hear what I said?’

‘Yes, Inspector Peck wants to see me.’

‘It’s nothing to be worried about. They’re talking to everyone who knew her, even just acquaintances.’

‘That’s fine. I knew her very well in fact.’

‘Oh. Did you?’

‘Do they want me to go the station or do they come to me?’

‘They prefer to come to you. It’s nicer for you that way. There’s Peck, another detective and a student liaison officer. You can also have your moral tutor present if you like.’

I looked at Townsend’s anxious face. He had twisted his fingers round and round and jammed his hands between his knees. It struck me that it had probably been a long time since he had had to deal with people, or reality.

‘I don’t think that’ll be necessary.’

Townsend let out a whinny of relief and sprang to his feet.

The door was open and the spring breeze was gusting in from the Paddock.

‘Let me know how you get on,’ he may have called after me; but if so, I didn’t hear it.

I went to the Buttery and bought some fresh tea and milk for my visitors, who were due at five, and some Rich Tea biscuits, very fresh, although I dislike them. I tidied up the rooms a bit, since my bedmaker hadn’t been in for a couple of weeks. I put my hand up the flue of the fireplace in the bedroom and retrieved about eight ounces of hash in a polythene bag.

On the mantelpiece was my collection of pills, and although none were illegal as such, I had no prescriptions for them and Dr Vaughan was unlikely to come to my aid. I didn’t think a backdated, beer-stained receipt from Alan Greening would count for much, so I gathered the dozen or so bottles together and put them in my old duffel bag – the same dark green one in which I’d stuck my first cigarette haul from Upper Rookley all that time ago. Great things, duffel bags – egalitarian, brilliant design.

I had a couple of magazines I didn’t particularly want the plods to look at, so I stuffed those in too. Then I took the bag round to Stellings’s room and asked if he’d take care of it.

‘You can look in it if you like,’ I said. ‘But I don’t recommend it.’

‘Christ, Groucho, the last thing I want to do is know your filthy secrets. Do you want some Saint-Émilion, while you’re here? La Dominique. I’ve just discovered it. The poor man’s Pétrus.’

‘No thanks.’

‘Good luck with the cops. Can you lend me that Focus album one day? Moving Waves?’

‘I haven’t got it. I borrowed it.’

‘Would I like it?’

‘Bit riffy for you, Stellings. Quite a lot of yodelling.’

‘Yodelling. Christ.’

‘Yes. But two, maybe three, sublime moments.’

‘Could be worth hearing.’
‘I’ll get it for you as a present for looking after my stuff.’ (There was zero security in the old-fashioned HMV record shop in Sussex Street. I could nick a copy there.)

‘Thank you, Groucho.’

Stellings put on his headphones again, which was my signal to leave. I think he was listening to Gigi – or ‘the dry run for My Fair Lady’ as he invariably called it.

One thing I couldn’t risk with Stellings was Jen’s diary. I stuffed the photocopy of her letter home inside it and went to the toilet on the half-landing of my staircase. By standing on the seat, I could reach round behind the back of the raised cistern. It was a perfect fit, with shades of the Topley run.

My room in Clock Court is on the top floor of an uncarpeted staircase, so it wasn’t hard to hear the approach of three police officers.

I had candidly thrown back the outer door and had only to open the flimsy inner one when I heard the knock. I had bathed and shaved, trimmed my hair and put on my old Chatfield tweed jacket. I thought about a tie but didn’t want to go too far. With jeans and an open shirt beneath the jacket, I imagined I looked normal.

I was looking forward to this interview. It was about time they came to see me, instead of messing about with that Wilson bloke.

Peck I recognised from Jen’s Last Walk and from television. He was a genial type who smiled a lot. DC Cannon was about thirty-two with gingery sideburns, rather on edge. The ‘student liaison officer’ was a fat woman with a too-tight uniform and black lace-up shoes with rubber soles.

I got them arranged round the room and sat at the desk myself.

‘So,’ said Peck, ‘I understand you knew Jennifer Arkland a little. Perhaps you could begin by telling us how well.’

‘I knew her very well. I went to lectures with her most days. Although I’m doing Natural Sciences, I’m interested in history and I had spare time in my day, so I often went along.’

‘I see. And what was her attitude?’

‘What? To my being there?’

‘Yes.’

‘She was flattered, I think. Pleased. We were friends, so . . . It was, you know, fine.’

‘And what about the lectures? Were they happy to have someone from another subject?’

‘Oh, God, yes.’ I laughed. ‘In History they don’t get much of an audience. They’re delighted. More the merrier. It’s not like Medicine or something where you have to go to all the practicals and sign in. It’s not like school. In History, lectures are completely optional. Lots of people don’t go at all.’

‘I see.’ Peck sounded a bit surprised. ‘And it didn’t interfere with your own studies.’

‘Not at all. You can check with my supervisor, Dr Waynflete. He says I’m doing fine.’

‘Thank you. We will.’ That was said by Cannon. His first contribution.

Peck looked across at him. Cannon was sitting under the Procol Harum poster, with the photograph of Julie just behind his head. Their presence was quite intrusive really.

Cannon pulled a packet of Embassy out of his jacket pocket and lit one with a side-action Ronson Varaflame. I leaned over from the desk and pushed the ashtray across the low table towards him.

‘Mr Engleby,’ said Cannon, ‘I’d like you to tell us more about Jennifer. How did you first meet her?’

I told him about Jen Soc, the meetings, getting to know her there, helping out with the clearing up, the film in Ireland and—

‘Did she invite you to go on this trip to Ireland?’

‘I can’t remember.’

‘Were you a member of the Film Society at that time?’ said Peck.

‘It wasn’t a Film Soc project. It was a private thing. Nick had the camera. Nick, you know, her housemate as he became. Stewart Forres just borrowed some of the Film Soc facilities when he came back. For the edit and so on. The screening room.’

‘I see.’

‘Have you seen the film?’ I asked.

‘Yes. Several times.’

‘Was it helpful?’

‘Yes,’ said Peck, ‘it’s very unusual in a missing persons inquiry to have such a clear and recent picture of what they’re like.’

Cannon said, ‘And what did you do on this film?’

‘Some sound, some carpentry, some catering.’
‘There’s a rape scene, isn’t there?’ Cannon stubbed out his Embassy.
‘Yes.’ Something told me to keep the answers short at this point.
‘Were you involved?’
It occurred to me that since it was now over two weeks since Jennifer’s disappearance they must have talked to
Stewart, Nick and Hannah – at least – of the Tipperary people.
‘Yes, I did the sound that day.’
‘How was Jennifer?’
‘Fine.’
‘Go on.’
I shrugged.
Cannon said, ‘It’s not every day a twenty-year-old girl pretends to be raped. In front of a camera crew.’
‘No.’
‘Come on, Michael,’ said Peck in an avuncular way. ‘Barry just wants to know if she seemed all right.’
I turned to face Peck again. ‘Yes. She was an actress. It was a challenge.’ I was thinking of her tears and
wondering if anyone had mentioned them. ‘I expect it was difficult but she was determined to get it right – because
there was a political point to be made.’
‘And what was that?’ said Cannon.
‘A feminist point about rape.’
Peck looked at Cannon as though asking him not to speak.
I also looked at Cannon and wondered what on earth he knew about feminism, rape or sex. I could tell what sort
of family he came from. Slightly better than mine, but still working-class prudes. They don’t do sex, those guys –
the upper-lowers – except as a bargaining counter for marriage. I wondered how many girlfriends he’d had. Did they
send him on a course to learn about the promiscuous middle classes and their soft ideas? ‘Simone de Beauvoir for
Plods’. ‘Free love among the Posh: an introductory series of five lectures’. Don’t get excited, Cannon. Keep your
ginger hair on.
I found Peck was looking at me. ‘And what was your reaction, Michael?’
‘My reaction to what?’
‘The rape scene. Were you upset?’
I bit my lips a little and looked at the policewoman. She looked down at her rubber-soled shoes. I looked over at
Cannon, who was leaning forward in his chair, then back to Peck.
‘Not at all,’ I said. ‘I was just doing a job. Trying to get a clean soundtrack without aeroplane noise.’
‘And it didn’t upset you at all to see this girl you were . . . very good friends with, as you say, it didn’t upset you
to see her being raped?’
I laughed. ‘Not at all. It was fun. It was interesting. We were all acting. She didn’t really get raped.’
‘And when you saw the actor who played the rapist . . . Er . . .’
‘Alex Tanner,’ said Cannon.
‘Yes,’ said Peck, ‘when you saw Alex pretend to rape Jennifer . . . You were . . . That was all right, was it?’
‘I . . . Yes. That was all right. Stewart was very professional. Also, Hannah was there, the actress. You know, the
girl who did the Walk. So she was like a chaperone.’
It was funny hearing them talk about all these people in that formal way – Alex Tanner, for instance – as though
they were real grown-ups in a significant life. They were students, making things up as they went along. They didn’t
know what they were doing, right, wrong or neither. They had nothing to compare it with because it was all still
being done for the first time.
‘So you watched this young man,’ said Cannon, ‘who was naked, I think, and this girl, your close friend, also
naked . . . And how close did he actually go in his acting to raping her?’
‘I don’t know. I didn’t look.’
I felt a tightening of interest from all three.
‘Why not?’ said Cannon.
‘I was looking at her face to make sure she was all right. I told you. She was my friend.’
No one said anything for quite a long time. I could feel a headache starting, but didn’t say so.
Eventually, Peck began again on the nature of my friendship with her. Had I been to her house? Yes. How many
times? Not that often, we saw each other mostly at lectures. Did I know her parents? Certainly not! Most people
don’t admit to having parents . . .
I became quite bored with this after a while and offered to make tea. To my disappointment, they all said no.
‘Now, Michael,’ said Peck. ‘I’m going to have to ask you a more difficult question. I want you to tell me what
you were doing on the night of Jennifer’s disappearance.’
I inhaled and turned round to look down at my desk. I heard the clock strike half-past five. I located my Heffer’s ringbound desk diary.

‘Let me see . . . Yes. I remember very well, in fact. I went to the party that Jennifer was at. It was in a house in Malcolm Street.’

‘We know where it was,’ said Cannon.

‘And who did you talk to there?’ said Peck.

‘Jennifer, of course.’

‘How was she?’

‘Fine. Absolutely fine.’

‘You didn’t notice anything unusual. She didn’t seem agitated or upset?’

‘Not at all. She was always fine.’

‘Who else did you talk to?’

‘I can’t remember. No one much. I didn’t stay long. It wasn’t my kind of party.’

‘Can you remember the name of anyone at all that you spoke to?’

‘The music was very loud, it was hard to hear. A guy called Steve. In Corpus, I think. Or maybe Christ’s. Anne, maybe? Was she there?’

There was another silence. Then Peck said, ‘Is there anyone who could corroborate your whereabouts on that night?’

‘I called in at the Bradford hotel for a drink on the way.’

‘The Bradford? Are you a regular there?’

‘Fairly regular.’

‘What’s the barman’s name?’

‘I don’t know. He’s a transvestite.’

‘Have you ever spoken to him?’

‘Only to order a drink.’

‘You’re a regular but you’ve never spoken to the barman?’

‘No, I . . . No.’

‘Where were you between one and two a.m.?’

‘In bed.’

‘Can you prove that?’

‘There was no one with me, if that’s what you mean. I got back about twelve-fifteen. I rang the bell at the porters’ lodge. The porter might remember letting me in.’

‘So what time had you left the party then?’

‘About twelve, I suppose.’

‘So you did stay quite a long time at the party, then.’

‘No, I got there late. After the pub. I really didn’t hang around there.’

The pauses were now becoming more frequent and rather tense. There was a lot of body, a lot of clothes – a lot of cubic footage of police officer in my room.

Cannon fired his Ronson again. I noticed that although he was on his fourth cigarette, he still hadn’t offered me one. I would have said no anyway, in case it made me look nervous.

‘Do you have a girlfriend, Mr Engleby?’ It was Cannon.

‘Well, there was Jennifer.’

‘I thought Robin Wilson was her boyfriend.’

‘It depends what you mean by that word.’

Cannon began to speak, but Peck held up his hand. Another treacly silence.

Eventually, Peck said softly, ‘Michael, are you being quite honest with us? We’ve talked to a lot of other people, you know.’

I said nothing.

‘Do you have girlfriends at home?’ said Peck.

‘Some. No one special.’

‘You see, what people have been telling us is that you prefer boys.’

I laughed. It was such a relief of tension. I couldn’t stop laughing for about a minute, and I noticed them looking at one another and signalling.

‘All right,’ said Peck. ‘I just want you to remember, Michael, that we’re looking for a lovely girl, someone people were very fond of. If you remember anything – it doesn’t matter how small – anything that might help us, I want you to ring this number.’ He handed me a card.
‘If there’s anything you suddenly “remember”,’ said Cannon. ‘Anything you feel you’d like to share. Sometimes it’s hard to bottle things up . . .’

‘We’re all on the same side,’ said Peck. ‘We’re all trying to find Jennifer.’
‘Sure,’ I said.

I thought of saying ‘Now if you’ll excuse me’, which is what the person in my position says in every detective story ever written for page, stage or screen. It’s a law. They can’t not.

But when I looked round their faces, I had a feeling that they wouldn’t get the joke.

I just waited for them to gather up their stuff and thunder off downstairs.

Then I cleared up Cannon’s mucky ashtray and threw the dog-ends in the pantry bin, where, after, a moment’s thought, I threw the unopened Rich Tea as well.

I felt badly in need of a real smoke and thought of going to get my stuff back from Stellings. Then I thought I’d better leave it for a bit in case there was a sudden knock at the door and Peck stuck his head sound, saying, ‘sorry, just one more thing . . .’

But perhaps he hadn’t seen that film either, because after an hour or so it was still quiet. Then I went to the drinks cupboard and opened a bottle of Johnnie Walker Black Label I had duffel-bagged from the Arthur Cooper’s on Sidney Street while the manager popped out the back for a moment.

I did it properly in a clean glass with ice from the fridge on the half-landing and a couple of inches of cold Malvern water. I lit a Dunhill King Size, drew the curtains and put on the first side of Goodbye Yellow Brick Road by Elton John.

I sat back in the armchair and watched the smoke rise up to the paper lantern-shade round the central bulb that hung from the ceiling. The instrumental ‘Funeral for a Friend’ gave way to ‘Loves Lies Bleeding’.

I thought of Hannah/Jennifer walking off into the mist towards Maid’s Causeway.

At the end of side one, I refilled my glass, flipped the record over, turned out all the lights, lit another cigarette and crashed back into the chair.

That sway of the hips – modest, not exaggerated, just necessitated by her frame. Slim, straight back, clean, fair hair pushed back, just touching the shoulders of the coat. Her step: light, but unafraid.

That flair for living.

Then into the darkness, the singer’s voice: ‘When are you gonna come down? When are you going to land?’ Sensational tune.
I was walking up Sidney Street yesterday and this beggar came towards me. He was only about twenty-five.

‘All right,’ he said, ‘I’m talking to you and let’s get that straight from the start. Don’t let’s do that thing where you pretend you haven’t seen me, OK? Don’t look the other way and hurry on as though you didn’t hear. Is that clear?’

Dear God, a facetious beggar. A postgrad wino. I didn’t feel like giving him money. I felt like taking his money – like elbowing him in the teeth, clearing out his pockets and selling off his dog for dog meat.

There’s an alley down the side of Christ’s Pieces. It’s called Milton’s Walk, after the poet, who presumably used it on his way to and from his college. ‘The Lady of Christ’s’ is what the other boys in college called him at the time, though I don’t know why; it’s not as though they were even considering co-res in 1628. At the other end is King Street, which may have been more than a pub run in Milton’s day. Cemented along the top of the wall on the right of the alley as you go down are bits of broken bottle to stop you climbing into Christ’s garden (Gethsemane?). Below are graffiti. But they don’t say ‘Rovers For Ever’, ‘THFC Skins’ or ‘I love Tracy’; they say things like ‘Life is not a Rehearsal’ or ‘All Things Must Pass’. Sometimes it’s wearing to live amid such banality.

I’m worried about my mother. She’s had a hysterectomy and hasn’t been able to go back to work at the Waverley hotel. Julie says she hasn’t got out of bed for a week. I’m not sure what I’d do if she didn’t have any income, as my father’s pension from the paper mill barely keeps her in tea bags. I’m going to have to stop this life and get out to work.

We’re nearly at the end of term, and that means I’ve got only one term left. Most people are anxious about their final exams, but I’m not. Waynflete has more or less told me I need only turn up to get a first and Woodrow has fixed me some sort of interview in the last week of April.

The situation with Jennifer Arkland has become clearer. Officially, the ‘missing person’ case remains open. The police files are still growing as, day by day, further interviews are made with people who knew her less well – with casual acquaintances, boys who met her once at tea, girls who twice played volleyball against her on a Tuesday afternoon. So the ripples spread further from the point of impact, until, presumably, they’ll vanish.

Robin Wilson is under psychiatric supervision at the hospital in Fulbourn, formerly the county pauper lunatic asylum. The fifth time that Peck and Cannon did him over was apparently too much for him to take, and now he spends more time in group therapy than in lectures.

Although the organisers tried to keep the valedictory note out of it, there were two talks on Jennifer that inevitably sounded like eulogies. Anne talked about Jennifer the Student, and a girl from Lymington called Susan Something spoke about Jennifer the Schoolgirl.

This Susan person had what I took to be a New Forest accent. She was funny about Jen’s sporting expertise at school. She was apparently quite good at hockey and lacrosse but didn’t like the divided skirt, or the gymslips, or whatever. (Girls are always bitter about the frumpy games clothes they were made to wear at school, though it’s not as if any boys were watching.) She was good at swimming, but hated being cold. So she ended up playing tennis because when she was eleven she admired Maria Bueno and liked her clothes. I’d always understood Miss Bueno was a lesbian, but this didn’t seem to spoil people’s appreciation of the joke, and I suppose there was something funny about the idea of this girl turning her back on the games she was good at so she could zoom about the tennis court in a white dress. Susan was also funny about Jennifer’s attempts to sing in tune and her refusal to be excluded from the school choir. ‘Singing was perhaps the only activity where her sense of humour failed her.’

Was. Though I think Susan would have defended her use of the word on the grounds that the school days were in the past.

Anne’s picture of Jennifer was more austere. No gym skirts, no tennis. ‘A clear-thinking and idealistic woman’ was Anne’s phrase. ‘No doubt, she is destined for a serious career. She will do something where she can make a difference.’

No ‘was’ for Anne. She squarely inhabited the present tense. Anne’s talk was also well delivered until she came towards the end and tried to address Jennifer personally. Then her voice wavered. Then it broke. She clung to the edge of the pulpit, sobbing, while the candles were reflected in the green Pugin tiles behind her.

The college chaplain, a birdlike man whose hands came out beneath his white surplice like claws, climbed up and
half-guided, half-carried her back to earth.

I wondered how Anne had got to know Jen so well and care about her so much so quickly. I mean, they were just student pals, weren’t they?

As I went past the National Westminster in St Andrew’s Street this afternoon I remembered it was Friday. I looked at my watch: twenty past three. I’d forgotten to withdraw money and this meant I would be broke until the bank reopened on Monday at ten. This happens surprisingly often. Cashless weekends mean a blizzard of small debts (I owe Stellings 50p) unless you can persuade a barman to cash a cheque for you. I’m not on speaking, let alone money-lending, terms with the tranny in the Bradford. Since Stellings has anyway gone to London, I’ll have to go into the jungle atmosphere of the cellar bar in Caius and help myself from a wallet in the heap of coats. I used to find cash flow easier to manage in the communal living of Chatfield with its open doors and empty changing rooms. I suppose I could just duffel some gin from Arthur Cooper’s and use chits to eat in hall, but I still need cash for cigarettes. Also, Robin Trower’s playing at the Tech on Saturday and I’ll have to buy a ticket.

I’ve stopped going to History lectures. I’ve found that since Jen’s disappearance I’m not that interested in the past.

And Waynflete was getting edgy about my low attendance rate at some obligatory experiments. I’m specialising in genetics for Part Two, but there are still some lab boxes to be ticked. Thank God I’m through with the ‘Maths for Biologists’ course, which was harder than it sounds and heavy on homework.

My final exams are going to be on 20–21 May and I’ll have four weeks’ vacation, starting 15 March, in which to revise. I suppose I’ll have to go back to Reading because they’ve started using undergrad rooms for conferences when we’re not here, so K. Jones, West Midlands Division (Sales) will be sleeping in my bed. I used to have a deal with the senior tutor that I could stay over the vac pretty much free, but they won’t do that any more.

What am I going to do tonight? I’ve got to get out. I can feel a headache starting. I’ll take the car and drive somewhere. Maybe that place the Tickell Arms with the crazy landlord and the Wagner tapes. He hates women so much he makes them pay for the paper at the bar before they use the toilet.

First, I’m going down to the half-landing for a read from my favourite book.

SATURDAY 12 JAN
Train drivers’ strike meant had to come back by car. Term starts Tue, but Dad only free at weekend, so three days early. Love being early, can enjoy place with no work to do and time to sort things out, e.g. stock up on food and get boiler working. Had to be Sat as Sunday is Dad’s tennis – over-forties doubles semi-finals day. Journey took ages as we could not exceed 50 mph speed limit (new E. Heath law to save petrol). But as usual Dad was v nice about it in the end. As we got nearer and nearer he became more and more solicitous. ‘Now, Jen-Jen, have you got all you need? Do you want to stop at Boots?’ Pretty sure ‘Boots’ is euphemism for Pill. ‘Don’t worry, Dad, everything’s fine.’ I don’t know if he thinks am virg. int. Can’t bear even to imagine how upset he would be. So do not think about it at all. (Almost.)

But did good stock-up at Sainsbury’s, rice, spag, tea, tins, stock cubes, long-term stuff and dear Dad paid all. All seemed much better between him and M, which is a great relief. Tilly tells me she pretty sure he has dumped bitch at work. (T very knowing for 16-yr-old.)

Gail Martin still clearly has hots for D but he treats her with distance bordering on disdain. Clearly excites G even further.

Xmas was great in the end. Robin came down afterwards. We all went skating at Southampton rink. R very polite to M and D, though noticed quiet scrutiny from D. Not sure he really approves, but nothing I can do. Still keen on R and all going well. Don’t know what will happen in June, but that still seems a long way off. Jill in Homerton apparently became engaged over Xmas! Will I ever feel that grown up?

Alone in house tonight. Slightly creepy atmosphere. For first time v much wish had TV. Went for drink alone in typical tiny pub with coal fire and jukebox. Had two halves beer and got kebab with mountain of raw onion later on Mill Road. Not v good start diet/healthwise, but bicycled vigorously home to compensate.

Had left gas fire on while out, so bedroom lovely and warm while rest of house arctic. V tempting to sleep late tmw, but lot to do so dutifully set alarm for 8. Hope Catty will drop in.

I am looking forwd to this term. Life v settled – viz. house, Robin, work (know what necessary), friends, projects – but also enough variables to keep gloss on it. Leaving aside June and End of Era, still so much unpredictable to be had from friends and their lives, and parties and meetings etc. Feel v lucky and not that cold.

Goodnight Dad. Thank you for everything. Sleep well back in Lym. x

MONDAY 14 JAN
Rang phone people to reconnect. First appointment not for three weeks . . . Anne says have to pretend to be pregnant – ergo needing emergency line – to get anyone to help.

Train strike, coal strike, power strike. V hard to get anything done.

Catty no show at first but looked in later and I gave him milk. He a bit stand-offish. Perhaps punishing me for absence.

As I was crossing St Andrew’s Street, saw Charlie from Emma. He invited me for tea. I like him, but he’s very nervous. Wonder if gay? What wrong with all these boys that only fancy each other? Mind you, not sure about C. Many heteros wear eyeliner – Roxy/Bowie fashion thing. Some look good, though not as good as B. Ferry or B. Eno.

Went to Sidgwick, got full lecture schedule and borrowed books from fac lib. Didn’t see anyone. Had cornish pasty and orange-and-lemonade at Mill for lunch. Mike (!) from Tipperary was at the bar. Never discovered what actual college he from, therefore known only as ‘Mike from Tip’ or ‘Irish Mike’ as though he not at uni at all but emerged from Emerald Isle. Robin unkindly calls him ‘Prufrock’. Managed to finish lunch and slip out without being seen. M looked as though in for long Guinness afternoon. Where does he get his money from? Dope, I suppose, of which he always has a hell of a lot.

Beautiful day. River sparkling in cold winter sun. Wheeled bike through Queens’ just for pleasure of looking at. Can’t wait for everyone to be back. Went and bought food for welcome dinner tonight for Anne, Moll and Nick (I think). Also litre of Sainsbury’s Moroccan red.

Had tea with Charlie in Emma Old Court overlooking paddock with ducks. He played some v heavy band on stereo. Offered to lend it to me. Declined. Nice rooms, though, large with two bedrooms. Myles came back from vac in Leeds. V funny about.

Something unstable and vulnerable about Charlie. Donnish joke about his room number involving Auden play title, The Ascent of F6. Sense he not happy at all, though smiles a lot.

What will happen to all these people? Previous generations did great things in politics, diplomacy, medicine, industry, ‘the arts’ – became great and good as though by natural progression, birthright.

All people I know resolute that they will do no such thing. No one will have ‘nine to five’ job. Can’t imagine anyone I know here appearing on television in 20 years’ time to offer expert view on – anything. Just not cut out for it.

I wonder why. Drugs? Partly, but we’re not all out of it all the time. A generation thing, I suppose. We are a lost gen. (Rather than lost Jen, ha, ha.) Before us, the hippies; after us, perhaps keen people in suit and tie who will go straight to work in Con Party research and American banks. Poor us, lost souls. Maybe from ashes, one or two prophets or meteors? S. Forres in films? Him apart, wipeout. Hannah maybe, cd be head of Oxfam or something. Doubt she will make it as an actress – between you and me, dear D . . .

Here are my resolutions for 1974, a little late:

1. Work six hours each day in organised way. Not drive self stupidly. Not be downcast if don’t get youknowwhat.
3. Close watch on Robin situation.
4. No other men, no slip-ups.
5. Not lose temp with Nick for non-payment of rent, noncontrib to kitty etc.
6. Go at least four soc mtngs per term, even tho no longer sec.
7. Telephone home at least once a week, if line mended.
8. Give up smoking cigs completely. Dope only on Sat eves.
9. Volleyball or similar at least 2x per week.
10. Go to Well Woman drop-in clinic asap.

What can it be like to live like that?

In Jen’s defence, I suppose you’d have to say that it was an unusually arid time of year and there was no one else about. The best diarists sound vacuous when nothing happens.

I put the diary back behind the cistern, safe from Mrs Lumbago’s short reach. I had a bath and listened to The Archers (still too much of that Ulster barmaid) and then got in the car.
I drove fast in the Ely direction and followed signposts anywhere, thinking about Jennifer’s father. My father never owned a car, but if he had I doubt whether he would have driven me back to university in it. He wasn’t interested in education, perhaps because it had done nothing for him.

My father was in the North Atlantic convoys in the War. He never talked to me about it, except once, when he’d had too much to drink at the social club that served the paper mill. He wasn’t much of a drinker, but his friend Ted Green had introduced him to a drink he liked called a ‘mother-in-law’ (stout and bitter) and he must have had half a dozen to judge by the state he was in. Six pints is a lot of beer if you’re not used to it, not much if you are. He wasn’t.

I was only about eight so I don’t remember much of what he said, but I was left with a sort of overall impression. The ships were grey and everything was hard. Even in the place where you slept there was this steel bulkhead full of rivets just above your face. Though the waters of the sea were cold, it could be stuffy and imprisoning in your windowless quarters with the smell of the other able seamen and their feet. You heard the sound of the great engines turning and smelled the oil. The food was regular and hot but lacking taste, repetitive as the weeks went on at sea. The watches were interminably long and cold. You looked eternity in the eye, where time stopped moving on the waves. There was trade in polo necks and leather waistcoats. Much of the convoy was lost to sight in the mists so you often couldn’t see the ships you were protecting. On the bridge they knew; by the ping of radar, the squawk of radio, they kept tabs on their charges – those vulnerable milch cows, the priceless laden females in the rolling herd. You longed for landfall, anywhere, somewhere there might be colour, something more than the grey of steel, the gunmetal grey of waves, the navy blue of uniform, the thin grey of mist.

A British merchantman was holed and sinking. My father’s ship, Peerless, changed course to give chase to a German frigate they had no chance of catching. They were fearful of U-boats. The big guns fired and the noise was unearthly in the boundless mist. When they got back alongside the merchantman they found that many of the crew were in a blazing oil slick on the water, dying of cold, dying by fire.

My father shook his head when he came to this part, I remember. He seemed galvanised. I’d never seen him more alive. He was outraged by what he recalled, thinking the Germans had deliberately set the sea on fire to burn their enemy.

He stood in front of the fireplace in the sitting room, swaying a little on his feet, jabbing his finger at me.

Although I knew it had been a bad experience, I felt envious of him for what he’d seen. Maybe he was a little proud of it too, though he couldn’t explain why. He couldn’t share or offload any of that stuff. He didn’t have the words for it, he just didn’t know them or couldn’t put them in the right order, and his failure seemed to make him angry.

It may have been that night that he first beat me. Just from a fury of frustration. I don’t think he was ‘damaged’ – merely inarticulate. He had to get this thing off his back, he had to show people, show himself, how bad it had been. So breaking some taboo – beating a nearby child – was a simple way of showing that he knew what life was like beyond limits.

At least, that would be the smart ‘psychological’ explanation. In ‘psychology’, there is cause and effect. Everything is made to connect, as though there were Newtonian laws not only of celestial motion, but also of human motivation. For instance, Law One: All actions attract other actions in inverse proportion to the square of the distance between them.

Personally, I think my father was just a) not a very nice man; and b) drunk.

Then he got a taste for it. Not because the ‘taste’ was the inverse shape, therefore the natural expression of, the ‘trauma’. No. But because he enjoyed it.

That’s life. Christ, what else can you expect? The human being is genetically 98 per cent identical to the chimpanzee. The human being is genetically 50 per cent identical to the banana. Of the genes that make us up, the vast majority – ‘junk’ genes – do nothing at all. They’re just hitching a ride.

Homo sapiens, according to current evolutionary theory, exists principally as a container for inactive bacteria which have been successful in the struggle for survival.

Laws of Newtonian elegance can’t apply to human behaviour. Bananas aren’t motivated by ‘cause and effect’. Ask one.

I got up early and readied the 1100 for a drive: oil, water, air, expensive petrol from the garage in Jesus Lane. I was in Reading by late morning and went to see my mother at the Waverley. She was able to offer me something called an ‘open sandwich’ – a halved slice of French bread with shiny ham, cottage cheese and pineapple – on the house. We had it in the lounge bar, where self-conscious businessmen ordered gin and tonic and food whose name was given in French, which neither they nor the waitress understood, while ersatz music fizzed from a wall-mounted speaker. My mother ate nothing herself, though she drank a tomato juice. She looked thin and tired. I gave her ten
pounds I’d taken from a coat in the corridor outside the toilets, and I could tell it made a difference.

I needed some music to listen to in the car, so I went to the shopping centre and slipped a cassette of Madman Across the Water by Elton John into my coat pocket, then conscientiously bought a disc-cleaning cloth at the till. I couldn’t face going back to Clock Court and all that, to a town without Jen, so I drove west on the M4, listening to ‘Tiny Dancer’, which Stellings had tipped me off about. He also rated ‘Come Down in Time’ from Tumbleweed Connection, but thought it spoiled by ‘silly vocal phrasing’. ‘silly’: not much of a critical term, is it? But it’s only pop music.

I drove on through ‘Levon’ and ‘Razor Face’. My direction? Anywhere. Because one is always nearer by not keeping still. At Newbury, I remembered Jen’s mother, left the motorway and skirted the town, wondering which bit she had, in the newspaper’s words, ‘hailed from’. Is that hail as in stones, I wonder, or as in fellow-well-met? The ring road took me to the south, over the Hampshire border (Newbury was, to be fair to the reporter, pretty close to Hampshire – just not in it), where I followed signs for Winchester. I kept driving. In Romsey I bought a map which told me, as I was fairly certain anyway, that I was almost in Jennifer country.

Soon it was dark and I was in the high street of a town called Lyndhurst with a vast timbered hotel, the Crown, to my right. I drove beneath the arch into a car park. The desk girl was reluctant, puzzled by my lack of luggage, but could scarcely claim that such a barracks was full. They wouldn’t bring dinner to the room, so I had to have the oxtail soup and some sort of meat pie with carrots at a solitary table in the dining room. The beer was keg fizz, so I got my reserve bottle of Johnnie Walker from the car and drank in my room till I fell asleep.

It was only a few miles to travel the next morning. In Brockenhurst I bought a toothbrush and paste and cleaned my teeth in the toilet of a café. The landscape became gorse-covered, the soil looked peaty and was dense with bracken. There was a hamlet called Goose Green. The wayside inns had facetious tourist come-ons. I went under a railway bridge and came into Lymington.

What did I expect? I hadn’t pictured it clearly, except for one thing: it would be the town version of herself. The buildings would be Arkland-shaped, the streets would be redolent of Jennifer. It would breathe her presence.

I parked on the severely sloping high street. People greeted one another, stopped and talked. No one knew me. No one came up to me and said, ‘This is Jentown. We’re all so happy to live here.’ I was invisible.

I saw it all through her eyes. The weathered red brick with the faded lettering of long-gone enterprises: ‘Rand and Son, General Drapers, Ladies and Children’s Outfitters’, and next to it another clothes shop with union flags on poles at 45 degrees, like something from Victoria’s jubilee. And halfway up the street a detached Queen Anne building, fortnightly home of the Rotary Club, a solicitors’ office. Doubtless her father had dealt many times with them as client or antagonist. On the railings in front was a poster for the Lymington Choral Society. Had what that girl Susan called her sense of humour limitation extended to Lym Chor Soc? Had she sung her off-contralto in the second row?

At the summit of the street was a bell tower with a clock, part of the church. I scanned the war memorial next to it. Almost one hundred Lymington men had died in 1914–18, mostly in the Hampshire Regiment, but no Arklands (the first name alphabetically was Backhurst, F. I remember such things easily).

I walked round the graveyard for a bit. The tombstones were lichen-covered and illegible. Many were tilting or fallen. ‘Remembered Always’ they claimed, but it wasn’t true. You can’t recall someone whose name has worn away. In the far corner was a pile of chipped and broken headstones ready to be carted off. Newer burials were marked with small tablets flat in the grass, though you had to walk over the old graves to reach them. There was no escaping the arithmetic of the dead and the fact that the cemetery with its horse chestnuts and holly trees was unable to keep up with them.

I couldn’t sense Jen in any of this. I walked on, down an alley beside the cricket pitch and the town football club. There were obscene graffiti on the fence.

What is a town then? How should I know? Where did she live, where did she walk? Little Jen, did you linger in the doorway of Fox & Sons estate agents, wondering, like me, how any grown-up ever found the money to buy even these poky bungalows? Did you hang around the Pick’n’Mix in Woolworths? Where was the action, where the clubs, the discos, pubs you went to with the girls from school? Where was your first kiss, grope and party?

Did you walk on Thomas Street and survey those Georgian brick buildings? What are they? Retirement homes, museums? Or were you like most kids indifferent to your surroundings – oblivious in your hurry to excitement?

I wandered on and on, expecting to see a schoolgirl in the derided games clothes or an undergraduate on holiday in corduroy skirt and boots. Then I was tired.

It was noon by this time and I was also hungry, having not been able to face a solo breakfast at the Crown. I found a tea shoppe on the high street and ordered a toasted cheese sandwich with bacon. The back of the menu said something about Lymington being the ‘New Forest’s most popular town’. Did I have to face the possibility that Jennifer’s home town was not the paradigm of English Eden that I’d pictured, but a tourist resort? And if so, what on
earth could people do here on their holidays? They couldn’t just eat cream teas and walk up and down the high street all day.

The sandwich was brought by a waitress in a ‘Victorian’ white paper cap with trailing streamers and a short black skirt. I thought Jen might have had her Saturday job here. I could picture local men ogling the skirt and the streamers – but then again they looked too old for that, the other customers. They talked loudly of their hospital appointments, their X-rays and their ‘tablets’. How could anyone seriously live in a place like this?

Something happened to this country, perhaps in the 1960s. We lost the past.

You’ve seen the pictures of the men queuing to enlist in 1915, their faces turned up in guileless hope beneath their hats. Those who came back found the same villages and towns, empty and with too many women, but still with a link that took them back through to the lives of their grandfathers and further – 200 years at least, to a life lived straight, sincere. Field, factory, office.

Even cars and buses didn’t really change it. When my father returned from the North Atlantic in 1946 it was to a country cold and poor and short of food – vindicated, glorious, foggy, broke and miserable. Still, for all he knew of bodies burning in the sea, bodies burning in the ovens of Treblinka, children in flames in wood-and-paper houses in Japan, for all the millions unburned, unburied on the Eastern Front, it was still Reading. It hadn’t changed (it had always been an unlovely town) and there was still a main line to the past.

How did we lose it? Now you walk those same streets and it seems as though it’s all a sham, a play or a quotation. When I looked through the window of the shoppe, I didn’t see people rooted in that town: I saw people floating through it, disconnected. Field, factory and office have gone. The fields are mostly set aside, not worked; the factories have closed and the offices are let to national out-of-town concerns. The residents think most about Bournemouth, London, the Algarve and Coronation Street. These are people in a dream, of whom only the very old have some embarrassing idea of ‘local history’, though even they can only speak of it apologetically, knowing that the thread is broken and that while the past is real enough – the only true reality – the present has insufficient depth to register it.

I left the tea shoppe and bought a local street guide in the newsagent – because I did, of course, know where I was really going. After all, I had the address.

I drove down to the small quay to look at the boats. There was all the usual boat stuff – chandlery, sail shops – but I couldn’t imagine Jennifer there. What would she do with her friends? There seemed nowhere for them to hang out.

No, there was nothing for me here. It was time to do what I had come for, though I felt for some reason reluctant. I drove slowly along the side of the quay, past a private dock, to a public area with a green and a bandstand. I stopped again for a minute and looked at it.

The bandstand filled me with pain. I was half-remembering something – a day trip as a child, I suppose. I had gone to a seaside town, I had walked on the pier, I had been happy. There was a brass band. I had been lost, I had been beaten. I had been unhappy. I had felt the impotence and agony of childhood. I remembered, I did not remember. And the strange thing was, that, in the end, it came to exactly the same thing.

I drove round the end of the quay. Stanley Road, Westfield Road, a house called ‘Mariner’s Rest’. I looked at the street guide.

The roads went nowhere on the headland, but linked back onto themselves and into town. I was nearly there.

Was R.P. Arkland MA a sailing man, then? Why else live in this part of town? Maybe it was just the view he liked.

I was now in roads not quite suburban – outskirts is what you’d call them, I think. Detached houses of widely varying styles and sizes. Cheap post-War pebbledash, mock-Tudor with leaded lights, whitewashed villa. All had got their nameplates from the same supplier, whether wrought iron hammered into the wall by the drive or stencilled black-on-white with a single flower decoration. ‘Woodpeckers’. ‘Fairview’. It was the sort of area grand people would recoil from but if you came from Trafalgar Terrace you were daunted by.

Vitre Gardens, Rookes Lane. I checked the map. This was Jen country all right, this was the heart of it. Her road was a fraction grander than I’d expected. It had big views to one side over fields, and although some of the houses weren’t up to much, they were all widely separated by gardens and gravel drives. I pulled over and walked the last hundred yards.

R.P.’s house bore the marks of his profession: picture windows, skylights, yellow frames, parts knocked through and tinkered with; a sort of lean-to folly on the garden side. But it still looked all right. Presumably the planners hadn’t let him bugger it up completely. It still looked like a house where four girls could arrive home from school at slightly different times, throw down their bikes on the gravel and run inside.

I sat down on the grass bank opposite and looked at it. It was the house in the picture on her desk.

For a time I stared at the bedroom windows and tried to guess which one had been hers. I wished I’d had McCaffrey’s binoculars. Without disturbing anyone, I could have looked through and seen her wardrobe, the
hanging clothes, the soft toys that the journalist woman had commented on. How come she’d been allowed to go in and look, when I, Jen’s real friend, had to sit on wet grass and imagine?

I sat with my head in my hands, looking. I thought of the passionate connections that a family like hers could make. I pictured family tea with four opinionated daughters. And old R.P. . . . no longer tired from sleepless nights when they were babies, but no longer young either. How he must have missed grown-up Jen when she went off to university; and now he must be wanting time to stand still before the others all deserted him as well. These hot ties of affection and circumstance that seem eternal to you when you’re young – he knew they weren’t. He knew that all such bonds dissolve with death or time and that in the end you are alone. No wife, no Jen, no parents, no other children. Quite alone.

There must have been a shop somewhere in this area, probably in a short parade on one of the new estates – ‘Oh, Jenny, just run and get some mint sauce, will you, before Dad gets home?’ ‘Why’s it always me?’ Because you’re the most reliable, the best.

The thought of all that happiness was hard to bear. What’s the point of happiness when all it does is throw the facts of dying into clear relief?

I went back to the car to get some Anadin, expecting to return and sit some more; but once I was inside the 1100, I couldn’t bear the thought of it, so I started the engine and drove away.

It was growing dark near Newbury and I suddenly thought I’d like to see Julie, so I took the motorway to Reading and parked in Trafalgar Terrace. I got a Chinese takeaway for the three of us and slept like a child in my old room.

It was late morning the next day when I strolled in through the main gate of my college and made my way towards Clock Court. I stopped by one of the cobbled triangles and looked over to the foot of my staircase, which was barred by blue and white tape. Two police officers stood either side of the door into the building.

‘What’s going on?’ I said.
‘You can’t go in. Police search. What’s your name?’
‘Engleby.’
‘Wait here.’

One of the men went upstairs. I waited.

‘What are they looking for?’ I asked the remaining plod. I was thinking of the high-level cistern in the toilet.
‘I’m not allowed to say. Just wait here.’

Eventually, the first officer came down again. ‘Come with me,’ he said.

I followed him to the top floor. Outside my room stood Inspector Peck and Dr Townsend.

‘Ah, Mike. You’ve met Inspector Peck, haven’t you?’
‘Yes.’ I nodded at Peck.

‘He came to see me this morning. He has a warrant to search your room. It’s in connection with Jennifer Arkland. I looked for you, but we couldn’t find you. Where have you been?’

Jennifer’s house.

No. ‘I went to see my mother at home, in Reading. She hasn’t been well. Can I look inside my room?’

Peck said, ‘All right. Watch your step. We’ve taken up the boards.’

Inside was a man with rubber gloves and overalls – a pathologist, presumably – Cannon and another plain-clothes officer who was busy with screwdriver and scraper.

The carpet had been rolled up and was stacked on one end in a corner, next to some upended floorboards. I could see my floor joists and the ceiling of Dave Carling’s room below. The striped voids were full of dust. They’d gone into the wall behind the ‘drinks’ cupboard, through plasterboard, back to brick. You could see part of a timber diagonal behind the Chambéry and the gin from Arthur Cooper.

What were they expecting to find? The ghost of Jen? Bones? A bra?

Cannon came through from the bedroom. ‘What are all these pills for?’

‘I have difficulty sleeping.’

He looked at Peck meaningfully as he dropped them in a polythene bag. I suppose they were thinking that if the tablets made me sleep they could knock out someone else as well.

Since their last visit I’d got some old pill bottles that I’d had from the doctor in Reading (antibiotics, antihistamine) and transferred the Alan Greening stuff into them, so at least my name was on the labels.

The young officer was starting to lever up the floorboards in the small pantry.

‘Do you have to do that?’ I said to Peck. ‘What are you expecting to find?’

Peck didn’t say anything. He gave me a hard look as though to say things were serious now. There was no longer anything avuncular in his manner.

There was dust in the air from where Cannon had cut open the side of my mattress.
It was absurd.
I looked at Townsend, smiled and rolled my eyes. These plods, I seemed to say.
Townsend didn’t smile back. He was twisting his hands so violently he must have been burning the skin off them.
‘Careful,’ I said to Cannon, who was pulling down the Procol Harum poster. ‘Let me do that for you.’
I put it carefully on the desk while Cannon unscrewed the corkboard and ran his hand over the flat plastered wall behind it. He knocked a few times, trying to look knowledgeable, like a Caius medic listening to his first chest.
I laid the corkboard also on top of the desk. Julie’s funny little face grinned up at me from beneath her straw boater. She looked older than that now. She was thirteen. She had breasts, went to parties, listened to Queen – though I was pretty sure T. Rex were still her favourites. ‘Metal Guru/I-is it true?’ Oh, Jules.
Cannon was shining a torch onto the the ceiling – as though my idea of body disposal would be to bring all the plaster down, go up a ladder and stuff the jointed remains piece by piece between the beams, replaster, repaint and apply the right amount of dust so the cut sections blended in with the rest. Hope for no dropping bloodstains.
It’s true that during their last visit I’d given them the impression that I was pretty handy on the film set, but there are limits to my ability with fretsaw and chisel.
The young one was going through my clothes, holding them up to the 60-watt overhead bulb, looking for stains, I imagined. He put some shirts and underclothes in a large bin liner. They included a Donny Osmond tee shirt Julie’d given me as a joke for Christmas.
I was thinking about the eight ounces of dope that I’d replaced up the chimney when I’d got it back from Stellings. You really had to know the chimney, and how to bend your hand round on itself to reach the inner ledge.
‘I hope you’re going to tidy up when you’ve finished,’ I said.
‘Don’t take the piss out of me, you little shit,’ said Peck, sticking his face suddenly into mine. This was about as unavuncular as you could get. ‘We’re going to get whoever did this. If not today, tomorrow. But don’t you worry. We’re going to solve this crime. Barry, look in the desk.’
Dr Townsend was twitching so much he had to go out of the room at this point, while Cannon went through my papers. The desk was fairly empty, in fact. I’d left most of my work in my locker outside the biology labs.
There weren’t even any letters from girlfriends or from my mother in the drawers – though doubtless you could find even that absence suspicious if you were so minded.
‘So you went to this, did you?’ said Cannon. He was holding up the order of service from Jen’s college chapel.
‘Yes, of course.’
‘Enjoy it, did you?’ said Peck.
‘It was a good service. But sad. Obviously.’
The other plain-clothes man was going through my books. I had wittily bought one called *The Grass Crop* from the ten pence second-hand shelf outside Galloway & Porter and cut a deep section from the middle pages to keep – well, grass obviously. I couldn’t remember if there was any in it, but I thought not because it only held a little and I didn’t deal in small quantities any more. It was the sort of title that might interest Townsend, I thought. *The Grass Crop: Uneven Distribution in Windborne Seeding*.
I had hoped that Townsend might intercede on my behalf, but he seemed hypnotised by the activity around us. When Peck addressed him, he was deferential.
‘Very well, Inspector. Certainly.’ Then he tried to establish his superiority with some donnish phrases: ‘Do by all means proceed. I’m quite sure the means are proportionate to the end.’
Peck looked at him as though he was mad.
Eventually, after we’d stood around for about two hours, Peck called off the search and the officers all gathered at the door.
‘Right,’ said Peck to Townsend. ‘This staircase is out of bounds until further notice. You’ll have to find rooms for the other students until we’ve finished.’
‘How long will that be?’
Peck looked at the pathologist. ‘Two days at least.’
‘I shall tell the Senior Tutor at once.’
We walked through Clock Court and on to the main gate.
‘Goodbye, Inspector. Good luck with the investigation,’ said Townsend, risking a light irony now that all seemed safe.
‘We’ll be back at seven in the morning,’ said Peck, not returning the winsome smile. ‘Tell the porter.’
When they’d gone, we went to the domestic bursar’s office and sorted out which college guest room I could live in till they’d finished with mine. Then we went back to the porters’ lodge to sign a book and get the key.
Outside, looking over Front Court, I said to Townsend, ‘I feel a bit anxious about all this. Could I ask you to—’
‘I’m sure it’ll be fine,’ said Townsend tightly. He looked at his watch. ‘Oh dear. Supervision.’
He ran away over the lawn in the middle of Front Court (only Fellows were allowed on the grass, but I’d never seen one run before); he cantered pretty quickly, as it happened, with a high-stepping action, till he vanished in the shadows of the Hawksmoor cloister.

That night I went to the Kestrel, but my headache was so bad I couldn’t enjoy it, and I had to go back to my guest room, where I listened to the radio. I tried to do some work, but it was hard to concentrate. I looked in on the TV room, where I’d seen Robin Wilson’s performance, but there was nothing worth watching. I ended up in the college bar, not a place I normally go outside Folk Club. I once worked a shift on the bar with Dave Carling when Brian, the professional, went home at nine. After we’d shut up at eleven, Dave and I stayed behind and drank a shot of every drink on sale. By midnight the only ones we hadn’t got through were gin and Newcastle Brown. So we did them together in a half-pint mug, and that’s not a mixture that I’d recommend.

The bar was full of amateur drinkers with halves of gassy keg bitter, playing table football and smoking No. 6. It wasn’t fun.

When I got back to my guest room, on the ground floor of Dr Woodrow’s staircase, oddly enough, I felt detached from what was going on. I began to inspect the surfaces of the room closely, though I felt alienated by their texture. Wood, cloth, Formica, carpet, enamel.

It was a little like that time in Izmir. I felt I was beginning to unravel. It was as though all the molecules that made the entity known as ‘Mike Engleby’ had been kept in place by some weird centripetal force – which had unaccountably failed. Now those particles were flying outward into chaos.

I suppose all human ‘personalities’ are at some level makeshift or provisional, but it’s unusual to feel oneself come apart in such a molecular way.

The next forty-eight hours were bad. I was taking four of those blue ten-milligram pills a day as well as some Tuinal I’d found in my sponge bag. Yet I’d still hardly slept.

Eventually, Peck and his men cleared out of my staircase. I didn’t immediately return but stayed an extra night in the guest room so Mrs Lumbago could get in and tidy up the mess they’d left. She was indignant about this extra work, even though she’d had three days off completely.

Peck came to see me one last time before he left the college and moved his inquiry on to . . . To somewhere else. Hopeful Hall. Lucky Dip Alley. The lounge bar of the Bow at a Venture. Or even to Oxford, for all I know, home of lost maids’ causeways.

‘Did you find what you were looking for?’ I asked.

He was standing in front of the restored Procol Harum poster. ‘I’ve seen enough,’ he said. ‘This inquiry is not over, Mr Engleby. You never close a case like this.’

He was more disturbing now that he was being polite, oddly enough. When he shouted at me he had just reminded me of Chief Petty Officer Dunstable in a factitious rage on the Chatfield parade ground. This seemed sincere and powerful – and he was, after all, more than twice my age.

‘We never give up. Jennifer was a young woman who was much loved by her parents. One day you might understand that, if you ever have kids of your own.’ His voice suggested he thought this unlikely.

‘To lose a life at that stage,’ he went on, ‘when she had it all before her. It’s a very serious crime. The public and the police think the same way on this. It’s as bad as they come.’

He looked round my room as though one final glance might yield a clue that four officers over three days had failed to dig up.

‘One day,’ said Peck, doing up his coat, ‘we’ll discover what happened to Jennifer Arkland. I promise you that.’

‘So you do think she’s dead.’

‘Yes, I do. I’m sure of it.’

He looked so sad then that I had to look away.

When I turned my eyes back to his face, he was staring at me.

I met his gaze, and for five or ten seconds we looked one another in the eye without speaking.

‘If it’s not me,’ he said eventually, ‘it’ll be my successor. The files, the paperwork, the notes will all be left meticulous. Marked up, indexed, cross-indexed. And you, Mr Engleby, are going in the file marked “Unhappy”.’

‘Tu quoque,’ I said.

‘What?’

‘You’re going in my unhappy file, too.’

He didn’t say anything else, he just brushed past me and went loudly down the wooden stairs.

I moved back completely into my room. They’d done a pretty good job of putting it all back together. The first thing
I did was put my hand up the chimney and double it round on to the ledge. The dope was still there.

Next, I clattered downstairs to the bathroom on the half-landing and climbed on to the toilet seat. I was confident the diary was safe, because otherwise I would have heard about it. I dropped my hand over the top of the ironwork and down into the dusty crack. I felt the crinkled polythene and the book inside.

I ought really, I thought, to find a better hiding place, though in some ways where better than the obvious? Wasn’t there some corny story about someone hiding a brooch by wearing it? Also, where better to hide it than a place that had just been done over for three days by the cops?

What I ought really to do, I thought, was return it to Jen’s parents. But I didn’t want to do that till the heat had died down a bit.

There was also a slight ethical problem. The book was private. It was bad enough that I’d given way to temptation, but it was clear she particularly didn’t want her parents to read it. ‘Can’t bear even to imagine how upset he would be’ she’d written at the thought of her father knowing about her private life.

So behind the cistern was the best place for the time being; then maybe I’d take it back to Reading in the vacation.

Over the next few days I began to feel a lot better. Although I knew Peck was free to come back any time (there was obviously no double-jeopardy rule in interviewing) there was something in his tone that made me think he’d got no questions left to ask.

Had he checked my movements? Did they find Steve in Christ’s or Corpus – Steve I was supposed to have talked to at the party? ‘And how did Mike Engleby seem that night?’ Did they ask the porter what time I got in? Not that he’d have the slightest idea; he didn’t keep a log or anything. I didn’t care; it didn’t matter. I was going to be left alone.

All the clothes the police had taken were returned, minus a couple of things, but I didn’t chase them up. It was no worse than the average return from a service wash in the launderette.

Term ended, and during the vacation I saw a lot of Julie, whose work was ‘showing promise’ at school. My mother was only working three days a week at the Waverley; she’d got some sort of infection in the wound after the hysterectomy and it had taken a lot out of her. Jules said they thought at one time she had septicaemia and that she was going to die.

She looked old and worn down. I did a week’s work in the paper mill and gave her most of the money. She found it hard to grasp what I was saying when I said I was going into the Foreign Office. ‘Is that abroad then?’ she asked. I think maybe she thought I’d still be working for the paper mill, but in its foreign office.

I did a fair bit of Nat Sci work. There wasn’t much else to do in Trafalgar Terrace. Stellings, who lived in London, said he might be in Reading one day and if so he’d look me up, but mercifully he didn’t.

I’m back in Clock Court and it’s warm. The trees are in leaf. It’s that time of year when you find you don’t have the right clothes on so you’re always peeling off, and then you’re suddenly cold again.

People have forgotten about Jennifer Arkland. At the Sidgwick Site and all over town they’ve taken down the Missing posters.

It’s worse than when they were up. At least her face was there before. She was, if not alive, present. Now you look at the plate glass of the gown shop on the corner of St Mary’s Passage and King’s Parade and where her eyes used to be it offers just a blank view on to college scarves and ties in different colours. Through the window of Fitzbillies cake shop you can now see sponges and éclairs. In my old Greek restaurant you can make out the potted palm and the greasy fan uninterrupted by a picture of that laughing girl in Tipperary.

The sight of ties and cakes and palms is bought at a price. Their presence is her absence, and it’s ubiquitous.

The air on King’s Parade is lighter. People are laughing at the outdoor tables by the river at the Anchor. She’s gone.

In the warm spell, they’ve started punting on the river. Finals are coming, and she won’t sit them. She’ll never get her youknowwhat.

She’s gone. Doesn’t matter how many times you say it, because it never fully registers.

She’s gone . . .

I went for my interview in London yesterday, in Carlton House Terrace, a big Nash building, scruffy and echoing inside. A secretary with fat legs and glasses made me wait. There were three others. We were told not to introduce ourselves; but to me they were Francis, Batley and McCain: nervous, dim, their own group. It was as though I was caught in a loop of time. Woodrow had told me to wear a suit and I’d bought one from the Oxfam shop near the University Arms.

I was interviewed in a room overlooking the Mall. It was completely bare except for a desk, two chairs and a man in a chalk-stripe suit. It seemed formulaic, barely more than checking my identity. You get used to this sort of thing
as a student. You haven’t yet done anything, so you just present and re-present your initials and your home address and your exam results and hope they please.

The man, who never told me his name, then gave me ten pounds for travel expenses. ‘You can blow it all on taxis or go by bus and keep the change.’ He gave me an address in Knightsbridge, where he said a doctor was waiting for me. I had a fair amount of cash on me from a Glynn Powers subcontract, so I took a cab in Pall Mall.

The doctor was not from the Benbow-Vaughan school. He had a gold watch chain, silver-blond hair and a smooth manner. He didn’t examine my crotch by torchlight, squeeze my scrotum or tell me to stop drinking; he merely listened to my chest, looked in my eyes, ears and mouth and took a history. Diabetes? No. Tick. Heart disease? No. (I didn’t want to drag my father into this.) Tick. He wrote on a pad with a shiny fountain pen. I couldn’t think what his bill would be but felt sure it would be in guineas.

When I left, he handed me a piece of paper with another address on it, this time near Hyde Park. I hadn’t done anything like this since Julie’s tenth birthday treasure hunt.

This time there were four or five men at a table, again in an otherwise empty room. They looked like a convention of private school geography teachers. They asked me hypothetical questions.

‘If you’re on a train, do you always notice who’s in the compartment with you?’
Depends if I’m sober. ‘Yes,’ I said.

‘If you find yourself alone in a foreign city, what do you do?’
‘I buy a map, walk around to orientate myself and go to a museum or a bar and try to make friends with some local people.’

Alternatively, I might score some high-grade hashish in the market square, find a hotel room, take back a litre of duty-free and watch television. When had I last been in a foreign city on my own anyway? Istanbul? And more on the way home. Split, Ljubljana, Venice, Geneva, Paris. I couldn’t remember what I’d done in any of them. I do have these blanks.

An old-fashioned telephone on the table started to ring. The bald man answered it in a language I didn’t recognise, then passed the receiver to me.

Someone was speaking to me in French. No one had done that since Mug Benson in the dry run for the O-level oral. (The board examiner himself, in our one-to-one, had been happy to chat in English.) Had Woodrow overcooked my ability as a linguist? I said ‘très bien’ quite a bit and gave a short speech about who I was and where I came from that I still remembered, word-perfect, from Mug’s revision group. Then, while I was still on the front foot, I put the receiver down and pushed the telephone back to the bald man.

They asked me for the names of two referees so that I could be ‘positively vetted’. I offered Waynflete, my Nat Sci don, and, after some thought, the manager of the paper mill, John Symonds, who always seemed a bit shifty about my father’s early death.

After a few more questions they seemed to lose interest and I was allowed to go. It wasn’t the glorious opening to my ambassadorial career that I’d expected, but once I’ve sat the Foreign Office exams, which I do in early June, three weeks after finals, I presume the process will become less seedy. By the New Year I suppose I’ll be a Washington insider, lunching in Foggy Bottom, dining in Georgetown.

It’s 11 May, nine days before finals blast-off, and a strange tension hangs over the town. McCaffrey, my one-time King Street Run jockey, has returned from Newmarket and has been seen in the college library. (He’s doing a four year vet’s course.) Stewart Forres has come back early from the film festival at Cannes. Yesterday Stellings walked down to the Sidgwick Site but was appalled to discover how far away it was and, before his revision lecture began, accepted my offer of a lift back to college in the Morris 1100. The only way he can get himself to look at his law notes is by spreading them on the floor, standing on the desk and reading them through McCaffrey’s binoculars.

I finally lent him Moving Waves by Focus with a note telling him where the sublime moments were. ‘Track Five (“Focus II”) at 0.39 and at 1.35. Track Six (“Eruption”) at 5.08, 6.14 and 9.17 – when he bends the note. Skip the rest.’

He read it. ‘Christ, Groucho,’ he said, ‘you’re even more bonkers than I am.’

Anne and Molly, compelled to cook since Jen’s disappearance, have made two-gallon vats of brown rice and vegetarian stew to last them through the long barricaded days. They know they’ve left it too late to do all the work they should have done; they need more time – yet they also want the exams to come soon, to end the waiting.

I think we’re all wondering in different ways how Jennifer would have managed the countdown crisis. Would her instinctive balance have deserted her? Would her moderation have failed her at the last? Would she have thrown up her hands a week early, shouted Qué sera, sera and dashed off to the Mitre to get drunk? Or would she have toile all night on methedrine and jumbled up her head with unassimilated bilge?

I think not. I think she would have found that middle way, turning up the pressure on herself a little (early nights
and longer days) but retaining her perspective, the intuitive sense that never failed her: that always knowing the right thing to do. What a gift that is. Where does it come from? I don’t think you can learn it. I sometimes think that she and I were polar opposites. My life has been marked by an instinct for the wrong thing to do: yes, in any given situation you can trust old Toilet to take the duff option.

Folk Club was a rather muted one. Even the second-years have Part One exams, so the crowd was mostly first-years – or ‘schoolboys with a summer holiday’ as Dr Gerald Stanley once described his freshmen, putting them at their ease as only Dr Gerald Stanley can.

I’m not going to miss all this, am I?

I think about that as I lean against the sweating pillar in the college bar, listening to the music with a glass of red vermouth in my hand.

What I’ll miss least is the winsomeness, the use of citric humour as defence; the Maoist geographers, the smilers with the knives.

And yet I did warm to it. This town, it street names, its immanent past: the river mist in the beautiful courts of Queens’. What I liked about it was a version lived by others.

For instance, by Jennifer. I enjoyed her time here. I don’t think her view was blinkered or deluded; she was in most ways unillusioned, almost as much as I am. No, I think that to see it as she saw it and play it as she played it was reasonable. It’s a pity that it wasn’t a way open to me.

I left Folk Club early, in the middle of Split Infinitive (back by ‘popular request’), and took my car out into the evening. Within twenty minutes I was in high hedgerows, in the warm darkness. I stopped at a Wheatsheaf and took a drink into the garden.

Then I walked into the lane. It was entirely silent and I tried to breathe its peace.

I’ve tried this in the past. You need the air to be warm, not hot, but balmy with a smell of grass or hawthorn. You need the black outline of branches against a sky that, while dark, still has a blue shade to it. What you’re trying to do is get plugged into the depth of history going down through these villages, these houses, these lawns panting with their garden scent at evening.

And in that history you’re trying to connect to something that once was yours – to something purer, better, something that you lost. Or something, maybe, that you never knew but that you feel you knew.

Inhale and hold the evening in your lungs. It needn’t have been a ‘perfect’ afternoon (by which people usually just mean very hot); it doesn’t have to be Midsummer’s Day. Better if it’s slightly early, slightly late, if the village has an ugly pylon, roadworks or a ruined telephone exchange. Sometimes you can get more easily to the universal through something that isn’t typical. Something that’s too representative can blind you with its own detail – like a painting by Canaletto – and stop you seeing through it.

I breathed and breathed and did feel some calmness enter in, though it was, as always, shot with a sense of loss. Loss and fear.

I found I’d wandered some way from the pub and was standing by a high brick wall, from the other side of which music was playing. A little further along was a wooden gate with an iron latch; the bottom of it scraped on the ground as I pushed it, but opened easily enough.

I was in a large garden with a well-lit marquee. With my pub glass still in hand I walked slowly towards the party that was spilling off the wooden flooring of the tent, over the stone terrace and into the house through two open doors. Most of the people seemed to be about my age and I imagined it was probably someone’s twenty-first. Inside the marquee, people were dancing to a discotheque, pretty standard stuff, ‘Maggie May’, ‘satisfaction’. Over to one side was a table with a man in a white tuxedo who was in charge of drinks. I held out my glass to a silver punchbowl and he ladled me out some reddish liquid with fruit in it. I lit a cigarette and stood to one side by a thin pillar wound about with paper streamers. The boys had dinner jackets, but most of them had taken them off to dance and were in white shirts with bow ties dangling. In the dim light I didn’t particularly stand out.

The boys were boisterous as boys are on summer evenings, drunk. It was indeed someone’s party and he made a speech, interrupted by his ribald friends to whom he brayed back happily, then thanking his parents with a sudden change of voice into a solemn key that must have made them gulp.

I had a few more drinks and danced a little, not something I enjoy, but there was a sort of melee and I would have stood out too much if I hadn’t jigged around a little. One of the girls, a dark-haired one in a strapless scarlet dress, smiled at me as she shook herself, like a dog emerging from water.

The boy whose birthday it was went past me, glass in hand, and said, ‘Are you enjoying yourself?’

‘Yes,’ I said.

‘Good.’ He patted me lightly on the back. ‘You’re quite welcome here.’

I went back to the pub car park soon afterwards, disturbed. I don’t like being rumbled, I like to be invisible.
Six

Stellings has got a small first-floor flat in Arundel Gardens, Notting Hill, sandwiched between a bongo player and a junior anaesthetist. So if one makes too much noise at night he can apply to the other for relief, I pointed out. And so he does. The anaesthetist, who lives above, is a party man with an uncarpeted floor; the bongo player below, who bongoes only for an hour each day at noon, has an Alan Greening-like pharmacopoeia. If all else fails, Stellings puts on headphones and listens to Abba, by whom he has become obsessed. He goes on about ‘Phil Spector wall-of-sound production’ and ‘lesbian Beach Boy harmonies’.

The street’s a bit run-down and Stellings’s flat’s only a few yards off the smoky throughway of Ladbroke Grove, but he tells me Notting Hill’s the coming place, next year’s Bohemia but with bigger houses – ‘the thinking man’s Chelsea’. I suspect his father bought the flat for him. In return, Stellings has to study at the College of Law.

Me, I’ve got this room in Paddington from which I watch the toms get picked up by the men in cars. The toms are mostly girls who’ve been moved on from King’s Cross, having arrived from some grimy Northern town where the mills have closed. They have swollen purple legs and dyed hair. Their skirts are too short and too tight because although they’re starving and they give most of their money to the pimp, they’re still fat. Sometimes, on my way home from the Tube, I give them cigarettes or drugs. I don’t want what they offer in return. Imagine. That broth of germs.

For dinner, I sometimes go to the Ganges on Praed Street – small, dark, hot. Or the Bizarro, with its pasta in red sauce and its chicken in red sauce and red-and-white check tablecloths. The Concordia, further down, has better food, but you really need to be with someone or you feel conspicuous. For drinking, there’s the Victoria in Sussex Place, but it has too many motor traders, so I go to the discreet White Hart at the end of a dark mews and drink Director’s bitter. The local Unwin’s is run by a lugubrious but watchful man from Stoke. I’m careful there.

I occasionally have dinner with Stellings at the Standard Indian Restaurant in Westbourne Grove. You can eat yourself to a standstill for £2.50, though it leaves you feeling rather stunned the next day.

It’s eighteen months since we left university.

I’m not in the Foreign Office. Dr Woodrow called me in and said that in view of the attention paid to me by the police I was no longer considered a good ‘security risk’. He gave me to understand that that was particularly important in the kind of work I’d been considered for. I asked him if that was with the Secret Intelligence Service and he didn’t deny it. I felt glad to be out of it. I wouldn’t have minded being a real diplomat, an ambassador, but I didn’t want to spend the next twenty years pretending to be a visa officer while sniffing out details of Bulgarians’ sex lives so I could entrap them and blackmail them over to ‘our’ side.

As a consolation, Woodrow referred me to the university appointments board, who referred me to Gabbitas Thring, an agency that finds teaching jobs for grads with no better ideas. They in turn sent me news of junior ‘posts’ at St Dunstan’s in Croydon, or at Sycamore Trees in Guildford – which I, in turn, referred to the bin.

People drifted away after exams, many not bothering to finish the term. I went to say goodbye to Dr Townsend, my moral tutor, but he was out. I loaded up the 1100, checked the chimney and behind the toilet cistern, made sure I’d got everything and drove off.

I didn’t get a youknowwhat in the end, and nor did anyone I knew; the very few they gave seemed to go to people no one had heard of, from colleges I’d never visited.

For the first year in London, I lived mostly by dealing (I used to meet Glynn Powers when he was in from Leicester). Then one night at the Standard, Stellings introduced someone he’d met at a party who worked for some studenty magazine – mostly just lists of what’s on in the cinema, but with some reviews, interviews and conspiracy theory ‘news’ stories.

As I spooned out some lime pickle, I had a sudden idea. I volunteered my services as science correspondent.

‘Groucho’s doubly qualified,’ said Stellings, when he’d stopped choking on his poppadom. ‘Literature and science. Two cultures are nothing to him. A man for both seasons.’

The journalist, a ferrety little bloke called Wyn Douglas, looked doubtful, and muttered about trade unions.

I thought he was wondering if I was left wing enough, so I talked soothingly for a bit about Chile and asbestos poisoning. Then I paid for his chicken korma and pulao rice and mushroom-peas and two pints of lager – and for Stellings as well, in case Douglas disapproved of bribery or payola or something. (I got the money from a coat on my way to the hideous downstairs toilet.)

He said he’d ask the editor. It was true they were light on science, but really they were looking to hire more
women.

I told him I’d write under a female name if that helped. To my surprise, I had a call about a week later. They wouldn’t put me on the staff, but I was permitted to offer articles ‘on spec’. I toyed with various noms de plume. Michèle Watt. Nellie Bohr. Betty Bunsen. They went with the first one, though they misprinted it with an ‘s’ at the end, and so I became Michèle Watts.

It pleased me that my byline – my journalistic identity – was a misprint. Mike, Toilet, Groucho, Irish Mike, Mike (!), Prufrock, Michèle . . . I sometimes saw it as that evolutionary drawing of the crouched ape who by stages turns into an upright human. (Completely fallacious, of course, that drawing, suggesting that Homo sapiens descended from an orang-utan. We are not descended from him any more than a gibbon is descended from us. All we did was share an ancestor, at some stage, before the human and ape paths diverged. For a metre or so in the hills of the Ardèche, the rainwaters of the Rhône and Garonne are one and the same trickle, as I learned on an interminable ‘field trip’ from Chatfield. Then you can see them split, on that pebble – there, that one – so one rivulet heads to Marseilles and the Med, the other to Bordeaux and the Atlantic. You put your hand in and lift out some water, rearrange it: no, it’s the Med, thence Africa for you drops, after all, and you lot are off to New York City. Life, incidentally, is not like a watershed.)

Then I settled down to do the work. They wanted articles, so I had to give them articles.

How? Initially, I bought science and medical magazines and rewrote brief news stories from them in a more contentuous way. If Nature reported developments in the chemistry of pollution and its consequences then it wasn’t hard to deduce which multinational companies were most affected. Then I’d ring their press office to see what they thought about the article. Some were snippy about my magazine, but some did call back with what they called a ‘quote’. If the British Medical Journal said that money had run short for research into cervical cancer, it was easy to find out that the government body responsible for the grant allocation hadn’t got a single woman on it, then ring some duffer and ask why not. I became familiar with that forlorn figure the ‘press officer’. Soon the wire cage beneath my letter flap began to clog with press releases. Sometimes I merely rewrote them and passed them on to the magazine. With others, I could find a fault line or a nub – something that could be prised open. Then I rang the press office and kept on at them until they, or someone they had passed me on to, said something unwise. In the right mouth even ‘no comment’ looked like admitting they’d killed or maimed a hundred children with their procedures.

Then I started looking at the book-review sections of these journals and telephoned a couple of the publishers to see if their authors would like to be interviewed by a magazine they’d never heard of. They were so surprised to be asked that they sometimes said yes. I concluded that the market in scientific interviews was slack.

I bought a reconditioned typewriter from Globe Stationers on Praed Street and a Teach Yourself to Type manual, which involved covering all the keys with bits of paper till I could touch-type. I was able to check some facts in reference books in the Porchester library, which was in walking distance, but I had to spend a good deal on magazines and telephone calls. The cheques that stuttered in weeks later were at the union minimum rate (and this was one union that clearly hadn’t flexed its muscles), but my work as Glynn Powers’s lieutenant made up the shortfall. Plus, since I had been at it for a decade now, I had developed the knack of helping myself if I liked the look of something. I read in the paper some lawyer offering mitigation for a klepto shoplifter on his fiftieth charge: ‘My client, your honour, is unable to postpone the pleasure of acquisition.’ Mine was more of a need than a pleasure, but I knew what he meant. I joined the National Union of Journalists, freelance branch, and they told me I could offset my subscription against tax. I didn’t pay tax.

I kept the Morris 1100, and the Westminster parking wardens weren’t officious, though eventually I did invest in a resident’s permit. I bought a second-hand television from the Portobello Road, but there was hardly anything I wanted to watch on it, so in the evenings I tended to do what I’d always done: drink.

In London the distances are much greater, so I couldn’t any longer stagger from the Kestrel to the Bradford to the Waterfall, from Bene’t Street to Free School Lane. I could still drink, but now I was obliged to drink and drive. I started with some obvious Young’s pubs in Hampstead and Chiswick and Mortlake and Battersea, and the Spread Eagle in Parkway. All Young’s pubs are similar. You get a certain dependable effect from four pints of Special: in the adenoids and the back of the cranium. Thunk. Then I winkled out dirtier places in Camden Town and Islington with wooden floors and men with odd tattoos. It was only a few months before I was in the Isle of Dogs – in pubs sleepy, small and underlit, so you felt as though you’d crashed into someone’s living room – and East Ham with its menacing camaraderie. The only area I avoided was the West End because all the pubs there were tourist-tormented and fake; also, even for an efficient smoker like me, it was like being in the beagle section of a Philip Morris research lab. Other districts? I wasn’t an inverted snob. Chelsea had some pleasant bars in small streets going down to the river: men in polo neck sweaters with pet dogs and free bits of cheese and salt biscuits set out on the
bar. Mayfair pubs are better than you’d think, and in Belgravia there are one or two – homely yet louche with tall, silent women – that I’d happily go back to.

Sometimes I went to the Hammersmith Odeon. I saw Ted Nugent there (Sunday 12 September, 1976; sorry, but I kept the ticket stub) and my ears rang for a week. I stood next to a tall girl in pink dungarees with long black curly hair; she was so beautiful I had to move away. Joan Armatrading. Thin Lizzy. Graham Parker & the Rumour. Or Dingwall’s, Camden Lock, though there was something smug about that place. And the Stranglers. They seemed to be on everywhere, the Rock Garden, the Odeon. I could never get Stellings to go to these places (‘Punk, Groucho? Got the wrong labial at the front of the word if you ask me’), so I went alone.

Overnight, everyone’s stopped wearing flares after all these years and is suddenly back into drainpipes: jeans, needlecords, doesn’t matter so long as they’re straight. If you wear flares it’s like saying you’re into Barclay James Harvest or the Moody Blues.

There was a girl I noticed at a Graham Parker gig. She, too, stood alone, glass in hand. She didn’t jump up and down, she didn’t even tap her foot – she swung it, back and forth, so it grazed the ground, in time with the music, just. She had dark hair, cut to the shoulder, was about twenty-seven, with large brown eyes and an expression of resigned amusement. I tried to guess what she was on: detached but not spaced out, controlled but relaxed. Her clothes looked different from the other women’s. She wore black woollen trousers and a quite long black jacket over a low cut white tee shirt with rows of silver necklaces.

I got another drink and moved into a position where I could watch her more carefully.

The gig ended with Parker singing ‘Hold Back the Night’. This thin, rodent-like man with sleeveless tee shirt and bare arms – his snarling manner still seemed defiant even when admitting to emotion: ‘Hold back the night/Turn on the light/Don’t wanna dream about you, baby,’ he sang, but almost spat. According to New Musical Express, he used to be a petrol-pump attendant in Camberley, which is not that far from Reading. If only I’d had the 1100 in those days, GP could have filled her up.

The woman I was watching made her way slowly out of the building and walked towards Fulham Palace Road. I had nothing else to do, so I followed, at a distance. What talent the Secret Intelligence Service had passed up, I thought, as I hung back momentarily in the doorway of the Kentucky Fried Chicken shop.

She turned down Lilie Road, then eventually went round the back of Nye Bevan House on the Clement Attlee Estate. I wonder what it’s like to be remembered as a block with broken windows and urine lifts. Hugh Dalton the Man, I read once, was a pompous arse who went to Eton and Cambridge then got up the noses of his fellow leftist MPs; but Hugh Dalton the House . . . No games fields run down to the Thames at Windsor; no sound of college bells sends brainy boys hurrying to class. (Do you think clever boys like being all together, or does it sap their belief in their individual ability? Tell you one thing: I bet they have better jokes. I bet they aren’t called ‘spaso’ this and ‘Toilet’ that.)

But I wouldn’t want to be remembered as a council block. ‘The lift in Engleby’s out of order again’; ‘The council have refused to grant more money to clean up the graffiti on Engleby House.’ No, no. ‘The Engleby Choral Scholarship’, that’s more my line; ‘The Engleby Foundation Award for International Peace’ – though ‘peace’ marches and ‘peace’ committees have for so long been fronts for old Communists that perhaps I’ll give that word a miss for another couple of decades.

In Tournay Road, my woman went into a house and banged the door behind her. I noted the number and lit a cigarette as I watched from across the street. Sure enough, a light went on in a first-floor window and I saw her come and spread her arms wide to pull the curtains. It was a fine gesture, maternal and inclusive.

Reluctantly, I began to make my way back to where I’d left the car. On Fulham Palace Road there was a small fags-and-paper shop still open. I went in to buy some B&H, and, while I was there, looked through the top-shelf magazines. Some specialise in short, dark-haired girls, some tend to have taller, leggier ones with fairer hair. (They don’t advertise this, but you get to know them.) There’s been a development in all of them lately, and it’s not a subtle one. There used to be veiling, draping, covering – even baldness. Not any more. Now there is disclosure. The girls look a little surprised and some of it – pores, pimples, follicles – has been fogged, you can see, airbrushed and tidied up. But what on earth do they think they’re doing, those girls, smiling as they display their clefts and folds? I suppose they’re all toms and are paid a hundred pounds for it. Perhaps it’s safer than getting in a car behind King’s Cross. I feel for them, when I see their defiant smiles clinging to the centre of the lens, though it’s not their eyes you stare back at. One or two look nice and I’d like to meet them; I’d like to push their knees together, throw them a rug, sit down and talk to them.

You can’t browse for too long; you can’t stand there, thumbing through a wide selection; there’s an art in not embarrassing Mrs Patel at the till. Confidence is the key. There’s no point in pretending that at midnight the magazines are incidental – an afterthought – and that your main reason for venturing into the shop was to buy this morning’s Daily Express.
I placed two magazines frankly on the counter, then asked for cigarettes. I paid with a ten-pound note and Mrs P dropped the change from a safe height into my open palm.

She looked pale and sad, with her red shawl wrapped round her head and shoulders. She must have hated this country and her job, selling pictures of English girls with their legs apart. There were little patches of brown pigment round her tired brown eyes.

She also looked cold. In her mind, I suppose, she was hearing the warm winds of Uttar Pradesh.

Why are there so many Indians and Pakistanis in London? It doesn’t seem to suit them at all. On Star Street, round the corner from my room, there’s a grocer whose family got kicked out of Uganda by that tubby cannibal Amin. He’s educated, this grocer man, went to university, but now has to sell raw ginger, woolly apples, chillies, UHT milk and canned lager for night workers who pay over the odds. He had no choice, I suppose, but to come here; and he’s going to push his children hard in school. He goes to bed at one a.m. and gets up again at four to go to the markets; there aren’t enough hours in the day for him. His family will be shopkeepers for one generation only, that’s his vow. He also knows a hell of a lot about football and remembers every detail of England going out to Poland in the World Cup qualifier (‘then Kevin Hector came on as sub’) though he can’t have been here long at the time. I’m pretty friendly with him; we’ve had a few chats.

I understand why these people came to England – because they had to. Also, it was good for us to have new blood, different customs, new music, revitalising cultures. (I’m trying to make it all not boil down to curry restaurants, though that’s clearly been a potent aspect of it.)

A certain number would have been fine. But all those hundreds of thousands of Pakistanis who came just because they could – because their mother’s cousin knew someone in Camberwell who had a spare room where they could sleep six more. Did you hear that, Saeed? There’s a vacancy. So, forget the Khyber Pass; goodbye, Peshawar, farewell Karachi – come to Peckham.

I feel guilty about how disappointed they must be. There’s nowhere near enough one-room shops in Tulse Hill for all these people to own. There’s only so many raw chillies, Quavers and cans of Strongbow cider that Lewisham can stomach. Even for top-shelf mags and John Player Specials the appetite sometimes sleeps. You need a break. I think in Leicester and Nottingham these people work in factories; they’ve become the manufacturing labour force. But not in London, because there are hardly any factories here. And they don’t do much on the buses or the Tubes or in the hospitals, either, because those jobs are mostly taken by West Indians.

And how miserable are those guys? What are they doing here? They look completely out of place. They’d been coming in small numbers since the War, but they say it was a Midlander with a thin moustache, a man called Powell, who urged them to come en masse and clean the hospitals when he was Minister for Health. But it was so cold when they got off the ships. It wasn’t a change of town, it was a different world. Imagine arriving in Halesowen or Sutton Coldfield, shivering, looking like that – like someone whose forbears for millions of years had lived in the tropics – then having to cover your sensitive shivering skin with woollen hats and gloves. And sallow natives staring at you with their pink eyes. The only jobs on offer are shovelling human waste in dirty hospitals or driving trains in underground tunnels so tight they’re like barrels round a bullet. So, from islands with big skies and the effects of sun you’re imprisoned under windless locked grey cloud.

They don’t like it, those people, they don’t like it here and their children don’t like it either. The kids don’t play the game, though. They don’t work or drive buses; they take drugs, play music and think of bright islands they’ve been ripped up from, but never seen. They’re angry. Who can blame them?

The ferret on my magazine, Wyn Douglas, had a party in the Windsor Castle on Mayall Road in Brixton. He lives there. It’s black council tenants and squatting white marginalis: Trots, rad fems, primal screamers. The council’s trying to pull the area down but they keep running out of money, so every other building’s a dope centre or a speakeasy or an anarchist bookshop. They don’t work, the West Indian boys, they hang out on the street with reggae music thumping all day. It hasn’t happened yet, but they look like they’re up for it, the black boys. The way they look at the police. The way the police look back. The cops seem oddly rural and old-fashioned – rather pale and bovine; they look well fed and scared. But the Rastas look fly. Even stoned, they look sharp.

The man who encouraged them, this Powell, soon disowned them and warned they’d kill us because they were breeding too many piccaninnies. Someone said you shouldn’t use that word, and he said, No, no, it’s an endearment, it’s what my mother used to call me when she bounced me on her knee. Can that be right? Would you say ‘Little dooduums is going to grow up and kill us all with his machete’? Or: ‘Darling possums is going to drown us in rivers of blood’? I don’t think so, Mr Powell. Yet people were always saying how clever he was! Treble youknowwhat in Greek, Brigadier at age 19 . . .

Then he didn’t say anything about West Indians at all any more. He seems instead – at the time of writing – to be devoting the rest of his life to a syntactical challenge: to speak on the radio for fifteen minutes twice a week without saying ‘um’ or ‘er’. Same Wolves whine, same delusional content, but grammatically accurate, even when, as he
gets bound up in his clauses, his self-imposed challenge involves adding convolution upon anfractuosity – ‘Pelion upon Ossa’, as I’ve heard him put it – to bring the sentence to a ‘correct’ conclusion. Weird. More than weird. Demented. Poor West Indians – poor, poor people, to have been answerable to that bloke.

They’d be much happier going home, don’t you think? They’re trying to have a street culture in the pouring rain. It’s tragic. If we paid for them to come, why can’t we pay for them to go back – those who want to? Expatriation, repatriation, why take offence at a prefix? Why worry, if you end up where you want to be and someone else has paid for the trip? Then we’d know that those who stayed preferred it here and we could stop feeling guilty about it – and they’d stop feeling sorry for themselves.

That’s not considered an acceptable point of view, by the way. To whom is it not acceptable? To the politicians, oddly enough.

I was having all these thoughts as I walked back to the 1100, talking to myself. Then I drove home.

I pulled over just off Praed Street to listen to the end of Graham Parker singing ‘stick to Me’ at max volume on the car stereo. I almost jumped through the roof when a hopeful tom rapped on my window and stuck her fat face against the glass. I had to drive round the block a couple of times till I reached the end of the tape.

There’s been a development at work. The magazine, which is doing quite well considering half its contributors can’t spell, has offered to take me onto the staff. This involves a salary – my first. They say they’ll pay me £5,000 a year. This is £2,000 more than I grossed last year. That’s an increase of 66 per cent, which even in Mr Callaghan’s banana republic is somewhat above the rate of inflation.

Unfortunately, going on the payroll would mean paying tax at source, and although I haven’t done the sums exactly, I think I’d only end up with roughly £3,500, so my raise in real terms would be only £500, from which I’d have to pay my fares to work in Covent Garden. I’d also have to spend time in the office talking to semiliterate Stalinists.

I don’t know how I became a journalist. It’s not something I ever set out to do, though now I’ve done it I can see that it suits me temperamentally quite well. The other thing about journalism is that although at the top end (not at my mag, obviously) it seems to attract well educated, even intelligent, people, it’s basically quite unbelievably easy. You ask a question and write down the answer. You repeat the process a few times. Then you see what all the answers add up to, put them in sequential order with a simple linking narrative and go to the pub.

Even Batley could manage it, I should think. Even Plank Robinson could have done it. (Actually, maybe not Plank.)

Anyway, I went into the office, which is an old print works, suitably enough, off Endell Street and had a talk with the news editor, a woman called Jan Something. I suggested going out to lunch, but she recoiled as though I’d propositioned her. Luckily I’d stopped en route for two pints and a blue pill downstairs in the cellar bar of the Oporto, on the corner of Shaftesbury Avenue, where a table of what I took to be military publishers were discussing print runs (small).

The mag office was completely open-plan with long trestle tables, piles of paper, typewriters and posters for rock concerts stuck to the bare brick walls. Unwashed mugs clustered on the top of filing cabinets. I could imagine everyone being too feminist or on their dignity to wash up. There were clouds of fag smoke from young men who were stuck to curly-wired phones. No sooner were they off one call than they dialled another. Flickwhizzgrind went the office pen as it turned in the number hole; urrgrrwrhr went the dial as it countered back to zero. There was one office separated by a glass partition – perhaps the editor’s den, though there was no one in it. The wooden floorboards were stacked high with newspapers, rival magazines, Rolling Stone, Time Out, Boulevard; the work tables themselves were buried under typing paper, carbons, cuttings snipped from other publications, stacks of London phone books – the slim buff A–D, the fat pink E–K and so on. An air of agreeable studenty endeavour hung over the whole place.

I did a deal with the Jan person that I didn’t have to go into the office more than twice a week: once on Thursday for ‘conference’, when we discussed what would be in the next issue and once on a Monday to deliver my ‘copy’ – i.e. articles – and catch up on anything that had come in. The rhythm of the week was good because it meant that I did all my writing at the weekend, which could otherwise be so difficult to fill. The phone calls and ‘research’ I did on Thursday and Friday. Tuesday and Wednesday I generally took off.

Jan also mentioned ‘expenses’. This turned out not to mean a corner table at the White Tower, but reasonable reimbursement, on production of receipts, for directly work-related costs such as bus fares or photocopying. We haggled over the home phone bill and I won.

‘Cheers,’ she said as I left, ‘and don’t forget you’re seeing Matt and I on Monday.’

I thought for a moment she’d said ‘matineye’, an East End pronunciation of ‘matinee’. Was I meant to review it? Then I remembered Matt was the production editor.
‘Me won’t forget,’ me muttered as me went downstairs.

Wednesday afternoon is cinema time. It’s usually the one at the top of Queensway, near the Porchester library, sometimes the Gate in Notting Hill, or occasionally I take the 1100 down to Fulham, have eggs florentine and a litre of house red in Picasso’s on the King’s Road then go to the Fulham Road ABC. I usually take a hip flask in to numb my critical faculty. (I’d drained it within the first half hour of Julia.)

I still like the cinema, however bad they say, and often the story turns on a side-of-the-mouth remark, indecipherable, that the stand-in was a fake or that the plant was working for the others. And the trouble with almost all ‘thrillers’ is that they don’t thrill; who but a child, who in their right mind, would care whether in the end they get the bullion out through Helsinki before the timer detonates the bomb in Berlin?

I engage with the story in my own way. I inhabit the sets. And I wear their clothes; I like the feel of them. I move house to the apartment in Santa Monica where Steve McQueen’s girlfriend lives. I make out with her room-mate. I wear Steve’s shoulder holster and drink with his buddy. I note the way he changes gear in the Ford Mustang GT-390 and feel the nub of the shift in my palm, long after I’ve ceased to follow or care which villain dumped which in the concrete overcoat and which one I’m waiting for at the airport, which one’s going to feel my hand on his shoulder when he comes barrelling through off the Miami flight.

American cop thrillers are bad because you can’t hear what they say, and often the story turns on a side-of-the-mouth remark, indecipherable, that the stand-in was a fake or that the plant was working for the others. And the trouble with almost all ‘thrillers’ is that they don’t thrill; who but a child, who in their right mind, would care whether in the end they get the bullion out through Helsinki before the timer detonates the bomb in Berlin?

I still watch, though.

I feel good when I leave the darkness of the cinema. It makes me feel my life is important. For a few minutes I stroll along the dark streets, thinking of myself as someone in a film – a man with a character, a destiny. I become aware of my clothes and my physical mass; of my quiddity, my value.

Gradually the feeling wears off, and I feel swamped again by the inexplicable pettiness of being alive.

I feel my sense of who I am drowned out by static. On the street, in the world, there’s too much extraneous filth and air and words.

I don’t find life unbearably grave. I find it almost intolerably frivolous.

A lot of time has passed.

Is that good? I never know. I haven’t stopped to reflect and write, and that suggests that I’ve been busy.

Busy is good, isn’t it? Busy means we’re hard at it, achieving our ends or ‘goals’. Haven’t had time to stop, or look around or think. That’s considered the sign of a life well lived. Although people complain of it – another year gone, where did that one go? – tacitly, they’re proud. Otherwise they wouldn’t do it: you put your time where your priority is.

Suppose, though, you’re not sure that what you’re doing is at all worthwhile. Suppose you blundered into it over a spoonful of lime pickle. It’s easy, it pays quite well. But really it’s a distraction. It stops you thinking about what you ought to be doing.

Because what you really ought to be doing is weighing up the facts. If the history of Homo sapiens so far were represented as a single day, an average human lifespan would represent a little over half a second. That’s your lot, that’s all you have of living, then you return to the unconscious eternity that came before and will close back over you – over your half-second. If the whole history of the earth (not just the brief Homo sap era) were represented as one day then your existence would be too small to measure. No sufficiently imaginative chronometer exists.

So what you must do – being an intelligent, thinking creature – is make a very careful, well-informed judgement about how best you can spend your one and only half-second. You analyse yourself and your abilities; you match
them to the world, its ways and possibilities, and you make a solemn decision to do what would most contribute to the well-being of the world and of yourself.

Except you’ve got a deadline, Friday at noon. And your lover coming round on Tuesday. And there’s football on.

This ‘busy’ thing isn’t a commitment, it’s an evasion.

And what are we avoiding? Facing the problem of the one half-second. Because if that’s really how it is, if that’s time, then nothing is worthwhile and nothing makes sense.

If time is not really like that, then all might yet work out. And in fact – good news – we do believe time is not linear. The trouble is – bad news – that our brains can only think of it as linear, therefore we’re doomed to see our lives as pointless.

It’s funny, really. The most intelligent creature that’s evolved so far (we think) has a design flaw at the heart of its superior intelligence. It can’t grasp one of the dimensions it inhabits.

It’s as though we had longitude, but no latitude. How then would we navigate or reckon our position on the earth?

We’re deaf men working as musicians; we play the music but we can’t hear it.

I see that a woman called Marguerite Walls has been found murdered in Leeds. It’s almost a year since the death of the last of these women in Yorkshire and the feeling, or hope, was that the killer had packed it in. It’s been a feature of life since I’ve lived in London: every three months or so another prostitute has been found dead in a red-light back alley in the merged badlands of Leeds and Bradford. Over the years, our magazine had done at least three long features on it.

This victim was found in a garden, half-hidden under grass cuttings and leaves. She’d been strangled, though, where the previous ones had been stabbed; she was in Farsley, not in itself a dodgy district; and, most important of all, she was not a prostitute. Ms Walls was a 47-year-old civil servant at the Department of Education and Science.

The police are therefore saying that this killing is unrelated to the long, squalid sequence that goes back to 1975. The modus operandi (as the, presumably Latin-speaking, West Yorkshire plods insist on calling it) is different; the area is one the killer hasn’t been in before and the victim wasn’t a pro. They are therefore looking for ‘someone other’ than the serial killer – and since they don’t know who he is yet, this new one’s very ‘other’ indeed.

I wouldn’t be so sure if I were them. This killer isn’t as perfect as the papers make out. It’s possible that as many as eight of his 20 intended victims so far have survived. That’s not the work of someone who’s exactly on top of things, is it? That’s an assault-to-death conversion rate of only 60 per cent. Plus, Farsley, as any map will tell you, is very close to his centre of gravity. Suppose he was on his way to Chapeltown to find a prostitute to kill. Then maybe he saw this poor woman walking home – and he couldn’t wait. If you’re mad enough to have killed a dozen people you’re mad enough to be a fraction impatient. Surely?

But the police ‘psychologists’ now have pride and money riding on their theories. They’re so attached to their patterns that they’ve forgotten rule one of human behaviour: there are no patterns. People just do things. There’s no such thing as a coherent and fully integrated human personality, let alone consistent motivation.

They know from footprints at several crime scenes that the guy’s got a size seven shoe with severe uneven wear on the ball of the right foot, suggesting that he drives long-haul for a living. Every survivor says he has a dark beard. He left a new five-pound note, serial number AW51 121565, at the site of the murder of Jean Jordan, a prostitute whose head he had tried to cut off, in 1977. The new note went into payrolls in the heart of his area of operations on the day before the murder. The only way they think it can have crossed the Pennines within 24 hours, to Manchester, where Jean Jordan was killed, is if the man who had it in his pay packet took it with him.

The bank supplied the note in a payroll, though – surprisingly – it can’t say which one. It might have gone to one of 30 companies in the area, and thence to one of 8,000 men.

But how many of those 30 firms are haulage companies, employing drivers? Maybe three? How many drivers in that total? Maybe a hundred? How many of those drivers are of medium height with black beards? Eight? Five? How many of those don’t have bulletproof alibis for every night in question? Two? One?

Circumstantial evidence, eyewitness evidence, footprints, serial numbers . . . How much more do they want? How difficult is this?

Sometimes I don’t do pubs in the evening, sometimes I go to wine bars. There are certain ones that have a reputation for being places you can pick up girls. For instance there’s one called the Loose Box, which Stellings told me about. I’m not sure he’s ever been there, I think he just liked the name. It’s in Knightsbridge. I made the mistake of going there on a Thursday lunchtime. It had women all right, but they didn’t want to sleep with you. They were people who’d come up for the day from Gloucestershire to go shopping; they’d come to look at curtain fabrics in Harrods, to go to drapery and get the little men in shiny suits with shiny hair to haul down the heavy bolts of chintz. I listened to them as I stood at the bar. They had a ‘light’ lunch, but they talked one another into white wine, and it’s cheaper
by the bottle.

In the evening, it was different. No one sat down and no one ate. There wasn’t room for tables because the floor space was jammed with groups of young women shouting and smoking round a bottle of searingly dry white wine. Men in ones and twos worked through them, occasionally managing to detach a single woman from her group. Some men carried bottles at the ready. They persevered, though few had much to offer at first sight: many were grey, had thick sideburns or wore ties with the designer’s name printed on the front.

I was standing near two women in their thirties. One wore leopardskin-print trousers, the other a miniskirt. They appraised the men, while trying to seem absorbed by one another; occasionally they pointed or conferred.

You sensed a man’s anxiety when he had to return to the bar and shove and wave folded banknotes at the keeper of the lacerating Muscadet; by the time he’d got wine and forced his way back to the woman he’d prised away, her group had recombined, made new unstable combinations and his girl was blocked: a man with a camel coat over his shoulders was dangling Jaguar keys and making her simper.

After an hour of standing next to the same two women, I knew that no one had yet spoken to them. I suppose I’d drunk a bottle and a half of the house red by then, and I said something to the one in the leopardskin trousers. She gave a single-word answer. I offered her and her friend a drink from my bottle and they backed off as though appalled – as though I’d suggested that they’d come to this seething, deafening room on Friday night to be – what was that expression – to be . . . picked up! They turned their backs on me. I left the remainder of the bottle on the corner of the bar and went back to the 1100. I thought of pulling over in Star Street, rolling down the window to a waiting tom and asking her to get inside. It might have been worth it just to see her face; it might have been worth it just to see if she’d say, ‘What do you take me for?’

Last weekend Julie came up to stay for a couple of days. She’s nineteen years old now and works in the brewery offices. The ‘signs of promise’ at school didn’t come to much and my mother needed more money to help with the house. I met her at the station and walked her over to my room.

‘It’s nice, Mike,’ she said, turning round in the small space, looking for somewhere to put her bag down.

‘I’m getting somewhere bigger soon,’ I said. ‘With my big new salary.’

I made some tea while she sat on the bed.

‘Where’s the toilet?’

‘At the end of the landing. Here. Take this.’ I threw her a roll of paper. At least I didn’t, like the landlord of the Tickell Arms, make her pay for it.

She wanted to watch *Jim’ll Fix It* on television, and I made some tea while a whey-faced lad from Bolton got to spend the day as a steward on a cruise ship going to the Norwegian fjords.

‘Can I meet your friends, Mike?’

‘I’m not sure if anyone’s around this weekend,’ I said. ‘How’s Mum?’

‘Oh, you know. Up and down.’

Jules seemed a bit nervous. She was sipping tea from a Beecham’s mug I’d been given at a press conference.

‘When did you last come to London?’ I said.

‘I’ve only been the once. You know that, Mike. That time we all came up. When Dad was still alive. When we went to Madame Whatsits.’

‘I remember.’

‘And you bought me that model of a bus.’

‘Did I?’

‘Yes. You were always generous.’

I wondered where I’d got the money. ‘You gave me nice presents, too.’

‘Remember the Donny Osmond tee shirt? Mum was a bit shocked!’

She was wearing a cheap skirt that was tight across her knees as she perched on the edge of the bed.

I felt terribly sorry for her – with her funny little face and the wavy hair that she’d had cut like the dark one in Abba – too long and with too many layers. She had a velvet choker and a tight sweater and clumpy shoes.

‘Have you got a boyfriend, Jules?’

‘I’m not telling you, Mr Nosey!’

She blushed at her own daring and I looked away, feeling I shouldn’t have asked. What was her life like? All the junior execs and accountants at the brewery probably ogled her, made half-hearted passes. She wasn’t anyone’s dream girl, but at the Christmas party, after a few drinks, she’d probably do. Was she still what Jennifer would have called ‘virg int’? I hoped she’d put the right value on it, so she could marry a notch or two above herself.

‘And have you got a girlfriend, Mike?’

‘Not at the moment.’
‘I’ve never met any of your girlfriends.’
‘I know.’
‘There’s a girl works at the brewery with me. I think you’d like her. She’s clever – you know, like you. Uses long words, knows lots of things.’
‘Useless information?’
‘No, no! She’s ever so nice, Mike, really, you’d like her. She’s called Linda. She’s head of accounts. She went to university and everything.’
‘How old is she?’
‘Twenty-seven, I think. Same sort of age as you. She just split up with her boyfriend.’
‘So I could go in-off.’
‘What?’
‘Nothing. I’ll look her up in when I’m next in Reading.’
Might be fun. We could talk screw-cap economies in the old light-ale market.
I offered Jules a Benson & Hedges, which she accepted with an appreciative murmur. I couldn’t think what on earth to do with her. We couldn’t really drive round the pubs, though maybe . . .
‘Would you like to see King’s Road?’ I said.
It was a winter evening, dark already. One thing I like about London is that when you step out into the night, it just swallows you. It’s democratic, too. You can sweep past the palace, roar through the ‘royal’ parks, down the white pillared terraces of South Kensington, and no one stops you; no one stands in your way like Baynes and says, ‘Where do you think you’re going?’
We drove through the park, which I thought Jules would like, down to a pub I knew off Cheyne Walk. She drank gin and bitter lemon, thinking, I suppose, that that was what London girls drank. In fact, the London girls in Cheyne Walk drank cheap wine, vodka and tonic and draught Australian or American lager, made ‘under licence’ (as though there were a patent on water, flavouring and carbon dioxide) and transported in metal-barrelled mega-tankers that could barely squeeze down the narrow Chelsea streets, past Carlyle’s old house, maybe shaking the very fireplace where Mill’s maid had used the only manuscript copy of Carlyle’s History of the French Revolution to get a good blaze going. (Interestingly, it was Carlyle, I read, who later had to comfort the distraught Mill.)
Jules swivelled her eyes round the pub as she kept the glass stuck to her top lip. I didn’t think much of the place, but I suppose if your movement is limited to Trafalgar Terrace, work, and back again, then anything else can look seductive. The yellowish light in the bar was good; some of the people were residents, they weren’t all tourists or strangers, like me; you could feel, like Stellings with the title song of Saturday Night Fever, that there was something going on. Then we went to another place I knew, hidden in a square, but I sensed Julie was getting hazy with gin – or, given pub measures, more likely drunk on bitter lemon – and we went up to a bistro on King’s Road, Dominic’s perhaps, with a strong sense of people spending their week’s money.
Julie wanted avocado with prawns, so I ordered it too and she looked happy.
‘Do you remember Dad?’ she said.
‘Of course.’
‘Do you miss him?’
‘It’s been so long.’
‘I do,’ she said, pushing a piece of buttered brown bread between her lips. She wouldn’t have wine; I had to order a Coke for her. Coke with shellfish. God.
‘Do you remember him?’ I said. ‘You were only – what – four when he died.’
‘No, not really. Tell me about him, Mike.’
I poured some wine for myself. ‘Dad was . . . I don’t know, Jules, how do you ever know what it’s like to be another person?’
‘Oh, please, Mike. Do try.’
‘I think Dad was someone who lived like an animal.’
‘That’s not very nice.’
‘I mean, I don’t think he could ever lift his eyes from the ground. Like a badger. Do you think a badger knows there’s a sky? Do you think a mouse has seen the moon? Does a dog even know that it’s a dog?’
Jules laughed, a little nervously. ‘You are funny, Mike.’
‘We all operate on different levels of awareness. Half the time I don’t know what I’m doing.’
I could feel her looking at me.
‘I don’t think Dad ever reached a level much above a dog’s. He’d been beaten and he beat. He was beaten by his life as a slum child, as a young man in the navy, then a worker in a factory. He was caught and he could never look up. He could never lift his eyes. He had no freedom of action. He didn’t really miss anything because he never knew
it was there.'

‘What do you mean, “he beat”?’

‘Did he ever hit you?’

‘No.’

‘He beat me. Not that often, I suppose. The funny thing is, I can hardly remember it now. The first time was when he was angry. He hit me in the face with his hand open, like this. Then he hit me with a walking stick, like a schoolmaster.’

‘Why was he always angry with you?’

‘He wasn’t. It became a habit. But I can hardly remember what it felt like. It’s like everything that happens to you. It doesn’t feel real.’

Julie didn’t say anything for a long time as she worked through her steak, well done.

Then eventually she said, ‘I miss him, Mike. Now it’s too late. I remember how he used to ruffle my hair and that. That’s about all I remember really. And at the time I just thought . . . I just thought that’s what life’s like. Everyone has a dad. Then he wasn’t there any more, and I felt like all my life had been just a dream. Then I’d woken up. But maybe I’ll wake up again. Do you know what I mean, Mike? It’s like I could be in a dream now. Still.’

‘I know,’ I said. ‘I do know what you mean. It’s what I probably never woke up at all.’

I didn’t want to talk about him any more. I said, ‘Do you ever feel you’ve lived before?’

‘Like reincarnation?’

Julie liked to give ideas a name familiar to her, and get them into boxes small enough to handle easily.

I smiled at her.

‘Go on,’ she said.

‘It’s my greatest fear,’ I said.

‘Why?’

‘It’s too bleak,’ I said. ‘I’ll tell you another day. Have some sweet. Take another look at the menu.’

‘Go on, Mike, tell me.’

I looked at her. ‘Well . . . I see a child in the back of a car . . . A face behind glass . . . And it might be me again . . . All that I know now, I’d need to learn again . . . And I look at the child’s parents and wonder if they’re kind . . . I saw a mother slap her child in the supermarket, hit him round the head and scream at him . . . And that’s the only world he knows . . . He’s in a nest of boxes he can never, ever climb out of . . .’

I was rambling a bit. ‘And, Jules, I feel it’s my fault. When I used to see the old men in the institution and the lights come on in the grey corridor . . . I feel I’m trapped in some loop . . . Some loop of time . . . I can’t face coming back and being one of them next time. Or that child.’

I don’t think she understood what I was trying to say, and anyway it was difficult to put into words.

London’s burning. You can hear the thudding of the helicopters in the night sky. South of the river you can see an orange stain of fire in the sky. I blame Wyn Douglas.

The police went to help a black boy who’d been stabbed by another black boy. A group of youths thought that instead of helping him to hospital they were beating him up. They broke police car windscreen. It stopped there, but stayed tense. Police saturated the area. I happened to be in the mag office, Friday, in the afternoon, and Wyn came on the phone to Jan.

He was very excited, I could hear. He kept saying, ‘It’s going to go off, it’s going to go off.’

Jan said to me, ‘If it happens, get down there.’

It didn’t seem to me the right sort of story for Michèle Watts, who was currently doing a four-parter on tampon-related toxic shock syndrome, but Jan said she wanted all available staff to ‘get their arses to the Frontline’.

I parked the car near Clapham Common Tube and walked down Clapham Park Road. It was quite a hike, but I didn’t want the 1100 being overturned and torched. I’d seen police versus black activity before, during the Notting Hill carnival when I was sitting outside a pub in Talbot Road. A cop came and told us they were about to charge. He shepherded us all into the bar and slammed the door from outside. It’s the first time I’d been to a police-sponsored lock-in.

There were signs of trouble in Acre Lane, before I even got to Railton Road. There was a look of joy on the faces of the young men, mostly black, who were kicking in windows and carrying stuff out. I got to Mayall Road and saw police vans on their backs, afloat. By the railway bridge another was burning under an ad for Golden Virginia tobacco that said: ‘Get the economy rolling’. Good place to sell roll-up gear, Brixton.

I didn’t take out my notebook or anything. I guessed I was meant to ‘mingle’, but I didn’t look black enough. What I remember is a bit patchy . . .

There are bricks in the air and a white boy is hit. Black boys help him. I don’t know whose side I’m on. There’s
fighting with truncheons and fists. Head wounds and bloodstreams. Stunned people sitting in the gutter, holding themselves with blood running through their grasp. I run away into Coldharbour Lane where a Special Patrol Group Vehicle is on its roof with black smoke rising. I see a young man break the window of the jeweller’s shop. Then there are cheap earrings and necklaces all over the pavement. Next door is a ‘consumer advice centre’, whatever that is. My consumer advice to him is: help yourself.

Personally, I don’t want any of this stuff. A bathroom shop is gaping, but I don’t need any basins. A motor accessories shop is open house, but the 1100’s been running fine lately. It’s unbelievably loud, you can’t concentrate. All the shop alarms have gone off. The shops are screaming. The car alarms are panicking and shrieking and the police are hammering their shields as they regroup on Railton Road. They’re trying to seal off one end and make a charge, I think.

Black boys are shouting that someone’s killed a cop, but I think it’s just a rumour. A boy runs past me with a big stereo; the window’s being kicked in by an old lady. It could be his gran. There’s something in there she really wants, because she has to kick it several times before it gives. I can hear a police charge beginning in the next street. I can hear the thunder of the truncheons on their shields.

You get the feeling no one knows where this is going to end. We’re in uncharted country. For several hundred young men this is the most exciting thing that’s ever happened, ever will, ever could. It could be war, there could be a thousand dead.

I ought to go home, but I have this odd desire to do the story right, plus I really want to see what happens. But I might get killed. It’s dark, it’s smoky, choking rubber tyre, petrol and bitumen; it’s night-time and it’s going to hell. It’s unbelievably exciting.

So I think what would make me feel better is a drink, and I have this idea I’ll go to the Windsor Castle, where Wyn had that party, so I’m doubling back up Mervan Road to get to the Frontline. A policeman on a horse is chasing a black youth towards me and I step aside. I remember that the first British action in the Great War was on horseback, at Mons, with swords.

When I get to the Frontline there are three lines of cops with their shields up. It’s raining bricks. They really should have pulled these buildings down, not left the job half-finished. A Molotov cocktail is thrown onto the shields and fizzles out. The other side of the road is a barricade of burning vehicles, a literal no-go area. Down Mayall Road, I finally push my way to get a view of the pub, but it’s on fire. It’s like newsreel of the Blitz, Victorian brickwork flaming, the skeleton of the building showing through.

I told you they didn’t like it here.

Before my eyes the pub collapses, brought to its knees like a prehistoric animal too heavy to survive. It just falls. The fire from the ruins is the only light because along Mayall Road the electricity has failed. The houses are in darkness. There’s just the wah-wah howl of sirens and the beating sound of modern war.
I haven’t thought about Jennifer Arkland for years. I’ve been preoccupied, and the idea of her hasn’t been able to push itself into my mind – or at least not into the main auditorium there.

Your brain can only have one thought at any time. It’s odd, that, isn’t it? We accept it as normal because we’re so used to it. But when you consider how many million memories our brains can store, and with what ease, it’s rather surprising that we can only think one thing at any time. It’s like a Maserati whose windscreen washer works fine – but not if the engine’s running. What on earth are those gazillion unused synapses doing at any one time? Redecorating? Dozing? R and R?

That’s what people believe, anyway. Personally, I’m not so sure. I think I’m capable of having two or more thoughts simultaneously. I’m not talking about ‘beliefs’ here. You can believe many things about one subject; you can even, as George Orwell had fun pointing out in Ninety Eighty-Four, believe two mutually contradictory things at the same time. But beliefs are what you ‘hold’; they’re like memories; and you only become aware of them when you explain, revise or put them into words. Everyone does that.

What I can do – and I gather this is rarer – is have two or more conscious thoughts at the same time. It’s as though the auditorium of my conscious brain has a split screen. Generally, of course, there’s just one picture; but frequently there are two. Each has its own soundtrack; each runs happily at its own pace; they do not snipe at, quote or contradict each other.

Also, they don’t depend for their existence on the relative point of view of the observer or any of that stuff. They just exist and run autonomously and I am equally conscious of each. Occasionally, my screen redivides and I can manage to be thinking three or four things at the same time. More than that, however, is troublesome. It’s tiring, and there comes a moment when I ask myself what I’m doing. Then all the thoughts tumble, like the batons of a juggler who has become self-conscious.

Given that capability, it’s a bit surprising that I haven’t thought of Jen – especially when you consider all the nonsense – all the guff – I’ve given mental houseroom to.

What brought her back to mind was a small item I saw in the newspaper. ‘Missing Girl’s Father Dies’, said the headline over a single column story, only an inch or so long, on an inside page. (It’s what they call a ‘nib’, which stands for ‘news in brief’.)

It said: ‘Richard Arkland, father of Jennifer Arkland the university student who went missing in February 1974, has died at the age of 60. Despite a massive police hunt and a national television broadcast by her boyfriend, Jennifer was never found.

‘Mr Arkland did not return to his architectural practice in Lymington, Hants after the disappearance of his daughter. A neighbour said, “He died of a broken heart.” Widow Mrs Lesley Arkland, 54, asked for the family’s privacy to be respected. (See Page 24: Those Seventies: the Tasteless Decade.)’

My first response to this was that if his broken heart took eight years to conk out, then it must have been a doughtier muscle than my father’s. But I did feel sorry for Mrs A and I wondered what I could do to help.

Grief is a peculiar emotion. I used to think that widows grieved in proportion to the love they felt for the husband. They missed him – like a temporary parting, an angoisse desgares, but magnified. I also thought the shape of the grief was that of the dead person: they mourned the absence of particular characteristics.

But from what I’ve seen – in my mother and a woman who used to live downstairs – it’s not like that at all. The removal of the partner seems to precipitate a sort of top-to-bottom crisis in the way the survivor sees herself, her past and all her connections with the world. The long married life now appears to have been a species of delusion. She’s not sure it really even happened: for all the evidence of children and photographs, she doubts its reality. She reverts in some ways to life before it, to girlhood. She becomes a dowager-child. For some reason, even going shopping or making a telephone call seems to require a confidence that’s gone missing. She can no longer mediate with ‘the world’. So, grief, from what I’ve seen, doesn’t look like a deep feeling that symmetrically mourns the absent shape; it looks like a disintegration of the acquired personality. It looks like going mad.

In these circumstances, what comfort can you offer?

Well, I thought I should maybe send back Jen’s diary. That might be something.

I don’t keep it behind the toilet cistern any more – even though I’ve got one of my own now.

I’ve just moved from the bedsit into a real one-bedroom flat. The sum I had to borrow from the bank sounded like enough to buy two sides of Eaton Square. Not so. (The deposit was also hard work to lay my hands on.)

Anyway, I’m just down the road in what they call Bayswater, though close enough to the old place that I still use
most of the same shops. I have a living room, bedroom, bathroom, kitchen and a space known as ‘study/Bedroom 2’. I also have what the particulars called a ‘TV Ariel Socket’. I half expect Ariel to dance out from it; he’s always pretty much a t/v anyway, the way they play him capering round Prospero in a tunic. The main room also has a view of a ‘garden square’, in effect a grassless rectangle with a couple of horse chestnuts and some skeletal shrubs, where people track their dogs with polythene gloves, ready to swoop and grasp. Their failure rate is high enough to deter any non-dog-related traffic from entering the ‘garden’.

One thing occurs to me. If I return Jennifer’s diary, I won’t any longer be able to read it. I could photocopy it, but that won’t be necessary. I’ve memorised the whole thing.

Don’t believe me? Try me. Pick a date at random.
30 May, 1973?
OK. Easy.

Went with Anne this afternoon to look at a possible house for next year. A bit remote, the other side of the river, towards Cherry Hinton Road etc. and not very glamorous part of town. But therefore cheaper. Tiny house but can sleep four (one in ground floor back). I fell absurdly in love with it. Have already redecorated ‘my’ bedroom in my mind. I will sign the lease, if I can persuade Dad to stand surety, and will pay slightly more rent than the others in return for which Anne says I shd have first choice of room and who am I to argue with such a brilliant young woman, future leader etc.? V exciting prospect. Feel like putting on Crosby, Stills & Nash: ‘Our house is a very, very fine house . . .’ Freedom, no porters, no gate hours.

Back in the real world, meanwhile: early college brek with Sue Jubb and Liz Burdene. Poor Sue’s hair looks as though she has been electrocuted as in a Tom and Jerry cartoon. They just have tea and toast, but I get hungry later, so had to have the fried egg etc. The egg had been sitting for a long time so had to lever off hard little cap from the yolk. Underneath, it was fine. At least, nothing that salt and pepper and a bit of tinned tomato couldn’t disguise.

Check pigeonhole for possible letter from Simon (nothing: sob) and pedal furiously to Sidgwick. Arrive just in time for Dr Meadowes on the economic consequences of the Great War. I make notes dutifully, though do sometimes think it would be easier to read one of his numerous articles on the subject.

Fevered talk in the tea room about student politics. Find it hard to be that excited as all involved have identical ‘broad left’ views. Nice Jill Lewis likely to be elected to follow podgy garden gnome Charles Clarke as president. Jill v pretty. Stop Press has found brilliant non-sexist way of referring to this (and it would be bizarre not to) by referring to her always as ‘Personable Jill Lewis’. Offence-proof word, but we all know what it means. Now known as PJL for short. (Tho’ she not acidic like near-eponymous lemon juice. I like that word ‘eponymous’. Must have caught it from Charlie in Emma. Now can’t imagine how lived without . . .)

These men (i.e. not including PJL) do take themselves very seriously, even though the Broad Left is elected almost unopposed every time, like rotten borough Whigs and Tories. The national leader (called, unbelievably, Jack Straw, inew therefore known as Wat Tyler) clearly thinks he will automatically become (inherit!) PM or Foreign Sec one day. But why would anyone elect people with no exp. outside committee rooms? Though, come to think of it, T. Heath, H. Wilson . . .

Back to coll for ‘salad option’ lunch. Reminds me that when it first started, teething problems meant that one day it was just the old rissole and boiled carrots. Malini Coomaraswamy at her bespectacled sternest asked chief steward why no option available, pointing to single dish of sweaty dumpling and gravy. ‘Of course there’s an option, miss. You can either’ave it, or not’ave it.’ (Mal does brilliant E. Anglia accent. You had to be there . . .) Worked in my room till four, then to volleyball. Was wearing purple Hendrix tee shirt and nice shorts I’d borrowed from Emma Mitchell and conveniently forgotten to return. Good practice for Friday match v Newnham. Still don’t like way Ursula stands so close in shower. Anne convinced Ursula ‘not as other women’. Hid self modestly as far as possible, but she solicitous with soap and shampoo loan. Had to have shower as meeting Rob in Whim for late tea.

Starving after ‘healthy option’ lunch and v’ball so had banana cake as well as toast and lovely fresh Darjeeling tea – much to Rob’s delight. ‘Mmm, you tuck in, Jen . . . What about a poached egg on that?’ etc. He looking annoyingly gaunt and handsome as ever.

We went to see a friend of his, Tim, in Queens’ and sat by the river, talking about Donne’s poetry. I found this a bit awkward, as have barely read D, except the famous ones. R and T took very opposite views on D’s concept of romantic love, whether based on sex, fear of dying, and general early 17th C darkness (R), or something more spiritual and ‘corollary of the divine’ (T).

It was a beautiful evening and the talk moved on, via Newton’s obsession with alchemy and fear of God.
This fear, according to Tim, held Newton back from outlining an ungodly theory of relativity 200+ yrs before Einstein. Then on to Watergate – Haldeman and Ehrlichmann (?sp) resignation – then to who had or had not been invited to some big party in Trinity on Sat. Not me. (Incidentally, didn’t my O level German tell me Ehrlichmann means ‘honest man’?)

Rob persuaded me to go and see a film at the Arts about sex psychologist Wilhelm Reich, called W.R.: Mysteries of the Organism. Funny because so earnest and so dull. Came alive only when Nancy Someone made plaster cast of a young man’s membrand virile, as Miss Goff of the 5th Form might have called it. Prodigious size. R somewhat crestfallen afterwards. Told him man chosen for that reason only. After all, what other quals needed in castee? R somewhat reassured – don’t know if he has anything to worry about in that dept!

We had kebab in Rose Crescent then took him to the Baron of Beef for a drink to cheer him up. Worked wonders. Met Hannah (who had just done a performance of The Three Sisters), Amit, Nick and one or two others. I made an excuse to go and do some work, but they wouldn’t hear of it, and eleven o’clock found us in Amit’s room in King’s, listening to Neil Young After the Gold Rush, drinking wine and smoking mild grass.

Can do essay over the weekend as have nothing else on.

Got back OK through night gate just before lock-up at one. Felt a bit wobbly on the way, but bike steered itself, as Dad would say. Crept up to room. Teeth. Bed. Fell asleep at once.

Wonderful day.

I’ve always had what Jen might call a ‘prodigious’ memory, and it’s not that difficult to recall her diary because the story provides a continual prompt. I know what happened next, so it’s easy to be reminded. Also, she’s a rather mannerly narrator, alternating splurge about her feelings with description of outside events and other people. Thus after some stuff about lack of self-esteem, bad haircut: ‘In the forenoon, we did call upon Mrs Thrale . . .’

I suppose it would be easy to parody, but I try not to be too hard on her. Although diarists’ motives are unclear, I really don’t think she meant anyone else to read it.

I retrieved the book from its usual place, in the bottom drawer of my desk in study/bedroom two, actually a sort of alcove off the living room, though I suppose a double amputee might make a bed in it.

I held the diary in my hands for one last time. It was a Letts day-per-page, A4 size, broken-spined, bulging with glued-in ticket stubs and snapshots among the packed blue handwriting. The burgundy cover was mostly obscured by a collage of small pictures: from mags she had cut round the heads of Martin Luther King, Grace Kelly, James Taylor and Steve Howe of Yes; there were snipped art postcards of a Leonardo donna and a Vermeer milkmaid; and chopped photos of Mr and Mrs A, a boxer dog and a line of three passport snaps of Jen with Anne. There was also, bizarrely, a torn mag picture of a candlelit table with a Chianti bottle. What was that one about?

I wrapped it carefully in newspaper, then slid it into one of the padded book bags in which a scientific publisher had sent me a treatise on world food programmes that I had sold on to a book dealer in Fetter Lane. I thought of taking the parcel to the general post office on Praed Street, but something made me hesitate. I thought I’d wait till I was next out of town and post it there. I typed Mrs A’s address onto a label, stuck it to the package and put the whole thing back in the desk drawer.

I get out of town a fair bit these days because I’ve got a new job. My report of the Brixton riot appeared under a three-way joint byline, but they pulled out a description of some of the worst fighting and ran it under my name alone. The new editor, who is obsessed by what he calls ‘staff visibility’, entered it (without asking me) for some tacky press awards, along with the toxic-shock story and a background piece to the trial of Peter Sutcliffe at the Old Bailey in May last year. Our crime guy, Bob Nixon, did the trial itself, but I spent six days in Yorkshire, going over the territory. To cut a long (4,500 word) story short, I was commended in the mag features section and received a cheque for £100 at the award ceremony in a stuffy room in the Grosvenor House hotel where everyone was drunk.

This ended the career of Michèle Watts. She went up to collect the prize from David Owen, a big cheese in the new SDP, but it was Michael Watson who returned, cheque in hand, to the table. Since most of the staff is now female – from Jan (promoted to deputy ed), via Lyn Westmoreland, the ungrammatical fine-arts critic, to Shireen Nazawi, the EFL-speaking chief interviewer – Michèle had in any case outlived her usefulness.

A couple of weeks later I got a call from a Sunday newspaper, asking if I’d go to a meeting in the Howard hotel on the Thames. Here, the editor, a man in an expensive flannel suit with large blue-rimmed glasses, bought me gin and tonic and wondered if I would like to join the staff of his paper as a feature writer for a salary of £18,000 a year, plus traditional Fleet Street (i.e. bent) expenses.

The paper is ‘upper-middle market’. It does have book reviews and two pages called ‘scrutiny’ which purport to give the inside dope on the week’s big event; but it also has a lot of stories that begin with what is known as a ‘dropped intro’, like this: ‘When she clocked in to work on Friday at the Rusk-o-Slurry sausage works in Newark,
Lincs., little could Mrs Betty Wigwam, 56, have known what a remarkable day lay in store for her . . .’ Presumably not, unless she was psychic. The paper also carries pictures of domestic pets.

My first response was to tell him to go whistle. I liked my life as it was because I didn’t have to be in an office. Since Jan had been promoted, her replacement, a pathetic Trot called Keith Dale, wasn’t able to compel my presence at ‘conference’ and I used to ring in later to ask if he had any ideas for me.

Why would I want to swap my life of solitary fulfilment to sit around an office with a lot of hacks with only one paper a week to fill? I told him I was happy where I was, but he persuaded me to meet someone called Tony Ball, the news editor, for further drinks.

This Ball I met in an underground room in Whitefriars Street where he drank three pints of cloudy Friary Meux bitter. I had gin and tonic again. (I don’t drink vermouth so much these days.) I sensed he’d been told to clinch the deal, so I thought I’d see how far I could push him. I beat him up to £22,500, four days a week (Tue to Fri) and office attendance only on Tuesday (conference) and Friday (writing).

This left me no alternative but to take the job; and so Toilet Engleby became Michael Watson, newspaperman.

Newspapers tell you what happened yesterday. Sunday papers have one big problem: nothing happens on Saturday. Therefore you have to invent stuff to fill them up.

I soon found out that the most valued people in the office were those who could ‘come up with ideas’. Most of these came from other papers. If on Tuesday the Telegraph, say, did a short piece on something, then on Sunday we could do a longer one. My new colleagues spent the day with their noses in other publications, looking for things they could copy or expand. Others pored over the news agency wire services, whose bare reports could sometimes be fattened up with the addition of a few ‘quotes’ and passed off as one’s own.

The sports people were happy because they were the exception; for them Saturday was the big action day. They knew exactly what time everything would happen and could make up the pages in advance; all they had to do was fill in the details. It was like painting by numbers, and their only problem was how to occupy the time from Monday to Friday without developing cirrhosis. On the foreign side, our six correspondents could do a digest of what their daily colleagues had written over five days and throw in a shorter ‘funny’ piece they’d pinched from the local press, safe in the knowledge that none of our readers would have seen it in the Washington Post or Le Monde. Their task was also straightforward.

For the rest of us, life was demandingly, agonisingly, ‘creative’.

I had a desk with a phone in the newsroom, though I was seldom there. The sight of grown men, and some women, filling in expenses forms, going to the pub, reading newspapers and pretending they were working was absurd. The qualities needed to succeed at the job were patience, a flair for lateral thinking and the ability to write clearly – though none of these, slightly feminine, attributes was valued at all. What was admired in the newsroom was, in this order: belligerence, the knowing use of macho jargon and the ability to drink alcohol. The atmosphere that Tony Ball tried to create was that of a Royal Marines training school. And this, amazingly, was how it had always been.

Idle for four days out of five, the reporters hung out in the fiendish little pubs off Fleet Street, where they drank gassed-up Ind Coope or halitotic dry white and circulated rumours of imminent sackings and cutbacks. They spoke with envy of anyone who left for another paper, particularly the Mail, whose expenses arrangements were regarded with awe. The crime correspondent was better informed about the thinking of ‘management’ than on the briefings of Scotland Yard; twice a week, he drank with friends from the Mirror, keeping them warm for when the big chill would surely come our way.

They were vociferously loyal to Tony Ball when, periodically, word got round that management had finally rumbled him; yet they lived in fear. Their hands shook, not just from nicotine and alcohol, but from the ‘Bollockings’ they took on Saturdays and from anxiety that the ambitious mortgages they’d taken out would become unpayable. Disaster was approaching, but for some capricious reason they didn’t understand: a story wouldn’t ‘stand up’; it would get mangled by a casual Saturday sub-editor with previous convictions for butchery; it would get ‘spiked’ on the whim of a drunken night editor. Or maybe they’d been insufficiently pissed and collegiate at the Christmas party. Or they hadn’t ‘come up’ with enough ideas. It was so unfair, this never-ending strain imposed by a fat four-section paper that gobbled up every half-thought they had, leaving them permanently empty-headed and hungover.

I always went home by four on Tuesday afternoon and told Ball to ring if he had something for me. He sent me out of town a bit, which I didn’t mind, and once or twice asked me to interview people.

I didn’t think this was my strong point.

I interviewed someone called Jeffrey Archer, who wrote books. The point of interest was . . . A new job, a new book, I forget. He’d been an MP, and wealthy, then lost all his money in a window-cleaning company but recouped
it with adventure stories, childishly written but bought by adults. I was directed to a skyscraper on the south bank of the Thames, not far from Lambeth Bridge, and took the lift to the top.

As soon as I walked into Archer’s office, he started to bark at me, like Chief Petty Officer Dunstable on the parade ground at Chatfield. I suppose he thought it would unnerve me. He pretended to be angry, then stopped suddenly and gave a hard, brief smile.

He sat me down on a sofa and pointed out some pictures by Andy Warhol (cans of soup, old film stars – first-year stude decor) of which he seemed proud. By this time he was yapping like a terrier. In answer to my bland questions he told me things he must have known weren’t true and other things he must have known that I would know weren’t true. He challenged me to disbelieve him. If you question any of this stuff, his drilling gaze seemed to say, then you’ll really see my temper – not just glimpses, but the real thing.

Then, for no reason, he veered like a spring wind, sat down next to me, all smiles, and offered me champagne. He asked after my career, my family and where I’d been at school. He started to congratulate and flatter me.

Although he appears to be off his trolley, he’s apparently very highly regarded in the Conservative Party. They keep offering him important positions.

At this point a blonde woman of a certain age (Mandy, Sandy?) came into the room (or ‘penthouse’ as Archer had two or three times called it) bringing the champagne and some smoked salmon sandwiches.

‘Thank you, darling,’ he barked at her departing back, as her black nylon calves crackled.

Then he winked at me.

I mean, really . . . I’d looked him up in the cuttings before I came out and seen that there was a Mrs A (some sort of chemistry gnome) and everything. But I’m ashamed to say that I smiled back conspiratorially.

I stayed and chatted to my new pal for hours, and in the end he took my home address and phone number and said he’d send me an invitation to his annual party, where, he mentioned two or three times, though I didn’t understand why it was significant, we’d have cottage pie and champagne.

I must say I rather liked him.

This whole thing of meeting famous people was something I found intriguing. The news desk was always awash with invitations to launches, bashes, dos, promos, parties and functions; and since most of the reporters were too idle or too nervous to go, I sometimes taxied along to have a look. There was always free drink and it wasn’t as if I had to write anything afterwards.

One of the ones I liked was the Foyle’s Literary Lunch at the Dorchester. You could drink gin and tonic in the VIP room first, then as much wine as you liked with a perfectly nice lunch. This was usually smoked salmon messed up with cream cheese and stuff, then fillet steak with green beans and rather over-salted gravy – but it was fine. The white wine was some sort of hock, but the red was claret from a chateau you might even have heard of. (I was beginning to notice these things by now. Was I getting posh? Don’t know. I still said ‘toilet’ as a matter of principle; but did I now feather it with irony – with the ghost of an inverted comma?)

The only drawback to the lunch was that you had to listen to three or four authors stand up and talk about their new books. The thunder of false modesty was deafening.

‘People often ask me how I first came up with the character of Horatio Beckwith, my famous detective. I think it was just one of those lucky coincidences. I was on a train, going to stay with my dear old friend P.J. Cowdrey in Somerset, when we stopped at a little station near Swindon. Rather an Adlestrop moment, I suppose! Anyway, a man got out of the carriage and made his way down the platform. I noticed that even though it was midsummer and hadn’t rained for days, he carried a rolled umbrella with him. How very English, I thought! And, do you know, I think it was that umbrella that gave me the key – the way in, if you like, to the whole of Beckwith’s character. I always carry a little notebook with me to jot down such observations, and by the time we reached Taunton I’d covered quite five pages with notes about Beckwith – the school he went to, which is not, as many critics have suggested, based on Eton – and no, I’m not going to tell you which school it is based on! – his nanny, his dear mother, his regiment, his unhappy time in Ceylon. To say nothing, of course, of his dear “sidekick”, Captain Trudge. As for the Captain . . . Well, he just sprang to life more or less fully formed, like Aphrodite from the head of Zeus! I have learned from the great stylists to always try and keep my vocabulary simple. I think of myself only as a privileged guest in the reader’s life, and I try never to weary him – or her! – and never to outstay my welcome. Never use a three-syllable word where a two-syllable one will do.’

You’d think it was James Joyce up there. I mean, Christ, how many syllables are there in the words ‘it’, ‘butler’ and ‘did’?

As I was leaving one day, I bumped into Sir Ralph Richardson at the cloakroom. He was retrieving a motorcycle helmet.
‘Hello,’ he said. ‘Do you ride a motorcycle?’
‘Yes,’ I lied.
‘What make?’
‘Er . . . Yamaha. And you?’
‘I ride a BMW. They’re marvellous. I’m just going to look at a new one. Do you want to come?’
I looked at my watch. ‘All right.’
We went into the BMW showroom, a short way up Park Lane.
‘Don’t you have goggles or a visor?’ I said.
‘No, no, I just screw my eyes up like this.’
He climbed on top of a big bike in the window. He must have been nearly eighty. He lay flat down on the tank and twisted the accelerator in his right hand. ‘Brmm, brmm. Like that,’ he said.
A salesman stood by nervously. I think he’d recognised Richardson. I gave him a conniving smile. These actors . . .
Then Sir Ralph said, ‘Go on. You have a go.’
I swung my leg over and gripped the handlebars. I’d never ridden a bike before, but I copied Sir Ralph’s chest-to-the-tank riding position while he stood alongside going, ‘Brmm, brmm, that’s the stuff.’
When he had tried a couple more bikes, we wandered through the car section back to the front door. A car salesman with a severe limp opened the door for us.
As we went on to Park Lane, Sir Ralph said, ‘I think perhaps he used to work in the motorcycle department.’
Then he called out, ‘Goodbye’ and walked off into Mayfair.
That’s another nice thing about being a journalist. People are more or less compelled to talk to you, and this can be helpful if you don’t have that many close friends. A bit odd that the last two people I had proper conversations with were Jeffrey Archer and Sir Ralph Richardson; but that’s life.

Although I liked meeting these people, I didn’t think I was a good interviewer. I wasn’t good at summing people up. I said as much to Tony Ball (or ‘Bollock’ as he’s known behind his back. You can tell the calibre of an institution by the quality of the nicknames it uses: compare, for instance, the brutal ‘spaso’, ‘Toilet’, ‘Leper’ with the windy ‘Iguanodon’ and ‘Australopithecine’. The functional ‘Bollock’ tells you pretty much all you need to know about Fleet Street).

However, my Archer piece had gone down well and Ball was keen for me to do some more. He gave me a list of upcoming possibilities: Billy Graham, Ken Livingstone, Douglas Hurd, Naim Attallah . . . I barely knew who half these people were.

I think it’s time to be a bit careful. And a bit frank.

I feel that my life is finally starting to fall into place. I like being a journalist. It’s insanely easy and pretty well paid. There’s a sub-editor on the woman’s page called Margaret Hudson. She’s a bit older than I am and she’s not what you’d call glamorous, but she’s not at all bad-looking. She wears rather old-fashioned clothes: knee-length skirts, thick-looking brown stockings, pleasant beige jumpers. She’s no Jennifer Arkland, I admit; but she’s busty and has a sparkle in the eye. What’s more, she’s nice to me. She says hello when we pass in the corridor; she never forgets to say, ‘I liked your piece on Sunday’; she comments on the weather or says, ‘We never see you in the canteen’ – little things like that.

I ought to have lunch with her in that canteen one day, but the truth is I’d rather cut my tongue out than eat there. Imagine: queuing up with a tray, cutlery from a grey moulded bin, the glass of water, strip lights. It’d be like being back in Chatfield. The panic of the institution . . . God, what are pubs and restaurants and cafés and bars for? They exist – to my mind – for the purpose of not being part of an institution. They are places you can be undiminished, unscrutinised and free. But the canteen . . . At the very thought my palms are wet, my armpits crawl.

Never mind. I’ll find other ways of getting to know Margaret. The Features Christmas party, for instance – reputedly a day-long bacchanal, ending in a cellar under Fetter Lane.

My flat is working out well and I like the area. At night I lie in bed and hear the car tyres going over the wet streets towards Queensway and Westbourne Grove. I hardly ever have to take pills any more. Just the hiss of rubber on wet tarmac is enough to rock me off to sleep, with thoughts of others on their night-time journeys.

Careful, did I say? Yes. I want to be careful not to throw all this away. This happiness. I think this is what happiness is. I haven’t got it yet, but I can sense it out there. I feel I’m close to it. Some days, I’m so close I can almost smell it.

To wake up and feel enlivened; to be in a hurry to get out of bed and into the day. To have friends you want to speak to, compare experiences with and be on the phone to . . . Well, to be honest, I’m still some way from that. But
I do like the routine of my average day: the papers in bed while I listen to Timpson and Redhead on the radio with a pot of PG Tips; the coffee from the espresso bar near Chancery Lane Tube on Tuesday and Friday; the way the unshaved Sicilian whacks out the grounds on the wooden drawer and offers me a grunt of recognition.

And then there’s my Sunday walk to Marble Arch, my weekly exercise. (Steady, Toilet, don’t overdo it . . .) My lunch in the tratt off the foot of Edgware Road over the paper, where I see who got a piece in this week and who didn’t. A small glass of Prosecco before the tonno fagioli, cannelloni and a litre of dense Etruscan red; then, their speciality: zabaglione, whisked in a copper pot, served with amaretti and a glass of vin santo before a snooze through the film on the big screen next door. Simple stuff, I admit, but hard to beat. Ciao, Mr Watson. Everyone calls me Watson, by the way, now; I even have an Access card in that name. I sign myself with virile candour pressing through the carbons: M.K. Watson. (Christ knows what the K stands for.) Ciao, Bernardo. See you next week. Ciao, ciao.

That’s the careful bit, my advice to myself: Hang on. Don’t take it for granted. Steady as you go.

Now the frank bit. Deep breath. Here it is.

One day in my first year at university I woke up in a psychiatric hospital.

This was (after Chatfield, obviously) the most unpleasant experience of my life up to that point. And this is how it happened.

It was during the vacation, and I’d got quite a well-paid job working for a plastic-seating factory in Basingstoke. My previous experience in the paper mill and some improvements to my CV meant I was in a semi-supervisory role. I had to get up early to drive the Morris 1100 down from Reading, but I liked the sense of escape, and it was only half an hour from the front door of Trafalgar Terrace. I was listening a lot at that time on the car stereo to Time and a Word by Yes (there was a song I liked called ‘The Prophet’ – all gluey organ intro, then zithery strings before the arrival of the ill-matched rhythm section, where the drums feather fast but the bone-rattling bass guitar clonks away right up front of the mix) and The Low Spark of High-Heeled Boys by Traffic, which ends with the longest saxophone belch in record history. I used to time it so the tape ended with its burp as I pulled up in the works car park – Bleeeeeeaaaeeeeeeeerrrrrrrqqqqghhhhhhhhhhhhhh.

Wednesday afternoon was a half-day at the factory, and rather than go straight home I thought I’d do some shopping and look round a bit. The expanding town of Basingstoke seethed like Laocoön within its concentric ring roads. I followed the signs for the town centre, but, after I’d spent fifteen minutes negotiating roundabouts and obediently going where the signs told me, they had brought me back to where I’d begun. The end of all our exploring will be to arrive where we started and know the place for the first time. I didn’t know that T.S. Eliot had been on the Basingstoke Urban District Council Highways (Ring Roads and Street Furniture) Committee.

I found myself angry, and this is something to which I should perhaps also confess at this point. Anger. I’ve found, at moments in my life, that this emotion can cut free from the thing that provoked it and become an independent force.

Just as grief, as I explained, seems to have a life of its own, away from the loss or the memory that caused it, there can come a moment in anger when, even if the source of irritation were removed, it would be too late.

This is perhaps important, so maybe I should try to explain.

Are you familiar with catastrophe theory? Think of a graph with two axes, the relationship between whose quantities is charted by a steady diagonal. On the vertical: Engleby’s temperament; on the horizontal: the annoying thing; on the diagonal line you draw with your ruler and pencil: degree of anger. All goes steadily until a certain point: a camel-straw – or catastrophe. At this moment the relationship between the two axes stops being constant because a new element comes into being: rage.

To represent the relationship between the formerly two, but now three, quantities you need to make a three-dimensional graph, because rage, while related to Engleby’s temperament and annoying factors, is in fact a separate entity.

What’s frightening about this third dimension is that at some stage (and here we depart from the classic catastrophe theory model), the rage becomes not only separate, but independent and self-sufficient. Catastrophe indeed.

As I was circling in my car, I worked out that, just as the North Pole is always north, the town centre is always at a tangent from the ring roads and that it therefore didn’t matter which unsigned approach to it I took.

I was right – well, obviously – and ten minutes later parked the mildly overheating Morris 1100 in a new multi-storey car park and walked up the main shopping street. I was still angry, borderline enraged. What about? The factory work, the ring road, all that, yes, but other stuff as well. Stuff I couldn’t put a name to even if I wanted. Deep; and unidentifiable, because I couldn’t see it or name it. Fishy monsters at the mile-deep bottom of a loch, left over from some older evolution. Childhood or something; the dawn of awareness; the scramble to adapt – to mould what I was and what I felt into something the world could accept.
In the shops, which were virtually the same as the ones in Reading, I drifted round. I thought of buying a present for my mother or for Julie, but I didn’t have much idea what they liked in the way of clothes, or of sizes. Size ten, for instance. Is that large or small? It sounded vast, but the dress didn’t look that big.

Then I saw a record shop, on Church Street, and that looked a likely place to pass some time. For Jules I bought *Honky Château* by Elton John because I thought it might bridge the gap between the music I liked and the sort of crap she listened to.

The youth behind the counter (about my age, I suppose) said why didn’t I get *Pictures from an Exhibition*.

‘Because I want this,’ I said, holding up the beige gatefold sleeve of *Honky Château*, ‘and because I’m not paid till Friday so I can’t afford two records.’

‘Have you heard of *Pictures from an Exhibition*?’

‘Of course. Everyone’s heard of Mussorgsky.’

‘Eh?’

‘The composer. The man who wrote it.’

‘No. I mean Emerson, Lake and Palmer,’ said the youth, with a whiny of superiority. ‘Have you heard of them?’

‘Heard of them?’ I could feel the catastrophe looming. ‘I saw Keith Emerson and the Nice play the whole of *Ars Longa, Vita Brevis* at the Lyceum in ’69. I got *In the Court of the Crimson King* by King Crimson with Greg Lake on bass and vocals from Virgin by post before it even hit the shops. I played “Twenty-First Century Schizoid Man” and “Epitaph, including ‘March for No Reason’ and ‘Tomorrow and Tomorrow’” so often I wore out the stylus. I hitchhiked to Birmingham to see Atomic Rooster live, and, yes, they did have Carl Palmer on drums. Heard of them? I pretty much put them together. I first heard—’

‘Keep your hair on, mate. Do you want a bag?’

No, I want to take you out back and beat your fucking head on the floor.

‘Thank you,’ I said, and took the bag out onto the street.

I had some blue pills in my pocket and I took two. I knew the symptoms, but I’d never had them this bad before. Then I went to an off-licence and bought a half bottle of vodka. I drank it pretty much straight off, using the paper bag as cover.

The town centre was all coming down or going up. Earth movers and diggers and jackhammers were replacing parts of Hampshire with slabs of reinforced concrete, plate glass and shop names lettered in pink and turquoise corporate swirl. Their moving, digging and drilling was ploughing up the past and furrowing my brain.

I went into a large clothes shop. It might have been Debenhams or British Home Stores or Marks & Spencer, they all look the same to me. They all sell eight million nighties.

I walked slowly between the counters, and picked up many of the clothes in my hands. I felt nylon, wool, silk and cotton. I felt a lot of terylene and dacron. I let it run through my fingers because I wanted to reassure myself that it existed.

These molecules (polymers, I think) ran, slick and synthetic against the pores – the ever-so-organic, mammal pores of my skin, my dermis. The jackhammer in my temples, the enlarged molecules in my hand. It was like that time in Izmir when the centripetal force of Engleby had failed and I began to fly apart, into my atomic pieces.


I could no longer move. I clung rigid to the edge of the counter. I could see my knuckles white. My finger was bleeding where my thumb nail had gouged it.

‘Are you all right, sir?’

‘No. Get me a doctor.’

I forget what happened, except that when a man came, I wept.

They brought a chair. This man put his arm round my shoulders. That’s why I cried. That small kindness.

By the time an ambulance man came, the blue pills must have been flushed through me by the vodka. I drank a glass of water, which must in turn have released the loitering alcohol. I remember nothing more until I awoke in a cubicle.

I was lying on a bed in my clothes beneath a cellular blanket. I felt relaxed, though nagged at, worried by something. I felt I’d given vent to things I should have kept locked up. I’d let the cat out of the bottle, the genie out of the bag . . . I slept again. Some man asked me questions, offered me rest and I accepted.

Oh, the sweetness of giving in, of full surrender. It was dark, and two or three people were with me, speaking softly, with consideration.
I was obviously somewhere else now, but I didn’t remember the journey. My disintegrating particles had become a wave. I had reappeared without apparently having travelled the intervening distance. Human beings, as atomic matter, must conform to the laws of quantum mechanics – even their thoughts, which are but electrical functions of brain. Perhaps I had thus solved the mysteries of human behaviour and motivation. God, how should I know?

I was offered hot milk and two white tablets. No injections, nothing sinister. Then a comfortable bed.

I awoke and it was day. I was in a dorm. There were five other beds in it, but no one in them. My clothes were folded over a chair at the foot of ‘my’ bed.

The first thing you do in such a situation is try to get normal. Do your teeth, have a cup of tea, find out where you are. I dressed and stuck my head into the corridor and saw a woman in ordinary clothes, not obviously a nurse.

‘Excuse me, could you tell me where I am?’

‘You’re Michael, aren’t you? We let you sleep in a bit. How do you feel?’

‘Fine.’ It was true. I’d slept deeply. I had no hangover. Good clean spirit, vodka, and I had an eighteen-year-old’s resilience. ‘But where am I?’

‘You’re in a hospital. You came in here last night. My name’s Alison by the way.’

‘Which hospital?’

‘It’s called Park Prewett. It’s a psychiatric hospital. You were transferred from—’

‘I want to get out of here.’

It appeared that I had finally followed Stalky Read’s much-offered advice, albeit unconsciously: I’d taken if not the first bus, then some kind of ambulance to ‘the Prewett’.

‘Why don’t you come and have some breakfast?’

I followed Alison reluctantly along a corridor, then down some stone stairs.

‘I ought just to warn you,’ she said, ‘that we’ve got some visitors at the moment. One of the long-stay wards is having its kitchen renovated and their patients come to us for meals. Don’t be alarmed. They’re all nice people, just that some of them have got their funny ways.’

She led me into a stench of hospital food. I found my throat close tight. It was like the opposite of appetite; it made me feel that far from eating I could never eat again.

Maybe it wasn’t just the smell, maybe it was the sight as well. At two refectory tables were about fifty people, men and women of all ages but mostly much older than me. A man with a big shaved skull was banging a metal dish on the table and moaning. Women with funny, screwed-up faces were grabbing and gobbling.

Alison must have seen my expression. ‘Come and sit down here. I’ll find you a place. Come and sit next to Sandra here. Sandra, this is Michael.’

‘Pleased to meet you.’

Bits of food were being thrown around. Some people ate with their hands. There was little speech – and no one actually conversed with anyone else – but there was a lot of noise. Shouting out; moaning, wailing. The whole thing seemed barely under control.

I pushed my food away and tried to raise the cup of tea in front of me, but my hand shook. I got some into my mouth but couldn’t swallow it. It felt as though some mechanism was preventing me from letting anything from this crazed world enter me, over the membranes of mouth and throat. My body alarm was on; the doors were jammed. I let the tea dribble back into the cup.

I got up from the table and walked out of the bedlam, down the corridor. A nurse in uniform asked where I was going, not unkindly. I said I wanted to go outside and get some air.

‘The doors are closed for the time being, until after breakfast is cleared and the C-block patients have gone back. Then of course you can go for a little walk. Which doctor are you under?’

‘I don’t know. I don’t live here. I just want to go home.’

I suddenly thought of the 1100 in the town centre car park. It was going to cost me a packet.

The registrar, if that was what he was, found my admission note.

‘You were sent from the general hospital,’ he said. ‘A Dr Andrew Brown was on duty there. You’re now under the care of Dr Leftrook, but she’s not in today. You can see her tomorrow, and she can make an assessment.’

‘There must be other doctors. I need to get out today. I’ve got a job. I need to get back to it or I’ll lose it.’

After a lot of dim questions, he conceded that the Prewett had more than one shrink and I was given an appointment to see a Dr Greenhough that afternoon. The registrar wanted to know who my normal GP was, and
fortunately I could give him the name of Dr Ray, on whose list I’d been at the grammar school. Since I hadn’t consulted him for at least three years he’d give me a clean slate. (I wouldn’t have wanted him to get the opinion of old Vaughan in King’s Parade.)

Later, I saw an open door and went out into the grounds. My block was clearly low risk, which was reassuring. I walked about, being careful to steer clear of any mutterers in overcoats. The main building was gabled brick with creeper; there was a bell tower and a colonnade whose cloister was held up on steel pins rather than on plastered columns. In other respects, it was the twin of Chatfield, down to the distant games pavilion and the gravy smell.

Hello, Batley, hello, Francis. I knew we’d meet again.

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Through a hole in the fabric of time, through a gate in the wall, through the moment in the arbour where the rain beat.

I sat on a bench in the garden and bit back tears.

I remember little of the day. I kept apart from the others, especially at lunchtime, until my appointment was due. Dr Greenhough was reasonable. He wanted to know my age and medical history, about my parents and if there was someone to take care of me.

I lied about my mother’s capabilities as a parent.

He talked to me about the ‘incident’ in the shop and asked me to describe what I’d felt. I gave an edited version. He nodded.

‘Can I go now? I want to go home.’

He said the words I wanted to hear. ‘I’m not inclined to keep you here against your will. In fact, I’m not allowed to. I would prefer it if you stayed. I think it would be better for you. But unless two psychiatrists decide that you are a danger to yourself or others, then—’

‘Of course not. I’ve never hurt a fly. Still less myself.’

‘But you should seek help when you get home. The panic attack that you experienced is a warning that something’s wrong. I shall write a letter to your GP and I suggest that he refers you to your local hospital for treatment as an outpatient.’

‘What would that involve?’

‘Just talking to someone about your thoughts and feelings. Some minor medication if he sees fit. Nothing very dramatic.’

‘All right.’

‘And you should do the same when you return to college. You’re registered with a doctor there, I presume?’

‘Yes.’ I could just picture Vaughan as a psychotherapist. The return of the cold shower and the straitwaistcoat.

‘I’m going to prescribe some pills. Only take them if you feel a repeat attack coming on,’ said Greenhough.

I nodded. I was quite happy with the term ‘panic attack’. Panic had indeed attacked me. I was also glad that it was not the whole truth: it made no reference to the rage – which I had quelled. Panic had overcome me and led me to the loony bin, but there was a reason: I’d been too overstretched to deal with it because I’d been capping off the rage and that had taken all my strength. No wonder I’d been vulnerable.

‘How are you going to get home?’

‘I can take a bus, can’t I? Then I’ll pick up my car and drive.’

He nodded sadly. ‘Don’t take any pills before driving. Ever.’

‘He was manifestly reluctant to see me go, whereas I felt my spirits rising by the moment.

I decided not to be mad any more; I was never going back to a place like that again.

And that was it. I got a bus, eventually, got my car out of the multi-storey which, to my relief, was a flat-fee-on-exit rather than a by-the-hour one, and drove home. I don’t think my mother ever knew I’d not been back on Wednesday night. Julie was out at a friend’s.

I rang the factory to apologise for missing a day and said my mother had been ill. They said they’d overlook it this time.

‘Tra-la. On we went. No more the madhouse.

Back to work, then back to university and the 19th century novel (I was still doing English at this time) the entirety of which we were required to study in one week. I calculated that even if I read for 24 hours for seven days I still wouldn’t have got through Trollope.

‘And where does that leave Dickens?’ I asked Dr Gerald Stanley, who told me I should have done the reading in the vacation. Yeah, but I had to work. I gave the money to my mother for Christ’s sake. It wasn’t just dope and
booze money. It paid the electricity bill.

OK, back live in ’85, as they say on the radio. I’m off to interview Ken Livingstone and so I’m reading up on him. He seems very distrustful of the press, so I’ll try to surprise him. I’ve worked out this thing with journalism, a way to do it. The pop papers talk about Red Ken, Loony Left, Newt-Fancier. One-Legged Lesbians, blah, blah. The ‘serious’ papers talk about “the way he is “perceived”’ (I presume they mean mis-perceived); they talk about the ‘image’ – but then go over the same ground as the tabloids in the same terms. The only difference between broadsheet and tabloid papers is that broadsheets put inverted commas round the received ideas.

Suppose, though, you neither regurgitated the cliché nor let the truth or otherwise of the cliché be the master of your round the block. Suppose you didn’t mention it all. Suppose you asked Ken about what books he’s read, what football team he likes, which politicians from history he admires, if he believes in God, whether he likes sex or cookery or going to the cinema, bath or shower, tea or coffee, where he takes his holidays, who his best friends are and how he spends his day. That could conceivably be almost interesting, couldn’t it? Why has no one thought of this before? Is Michael Watson a newspaperman of Genius? See next week’s paper.

I posted the diary to Jennifer’s mum a few weeks ago, when I was on a story in Birmingham. I didn’t think she’d try to track the sender in such a big city. I didn’t put a note in it with it, so I’ve no way of knowing if it reached her safely, but I assume it did.

I miss the book itself. I miss the eruptive blue ballpointed handwriting squeezed in so tight between the red feint rules. I kept one of the photobooth snaps of her and Anne, though. I couldn’t resist. I have no other photographs of her, except some blurred ones from the newspaper articles which I keep in a box file. She doesn’t look so good in those. It’s hard to look your best amid columns of type describing your sudden disappearance and presumed death. They cast a shadow. But in the one I kept, while Anne has crossed her eyes beneath her bobble hat, Jen has been caught between silly poses and is staring naturally, with that slight smile, suppressing laughter, and looks quite beautiful.

As for the content, it’s all safely memorised. I don’t recite it to myself that often, just occasionally – as a way of paying my respects.

On Sunday night I was feeling nostalgic, and I decided to pick a day at random. With closed eyes I swirled a pencil round over a calendar of 1974 and stabbed. The date I landed on turned out to be one of the very last entries.

I paused, collected my thoughts, and pressed the recall button.

Interesting post. Molly had a conciliatory letter from Gary. Anne and I told her she better off out of it. I had a letter from Tilly saying she thought D’s office affair had started again because she had found M crying for no reason. Bit of an assumption. Shall tell Tilly. Maybe M had just read sad book or something. Or seen Tilly’s school report!

Lectures a bit uninspiring this morning, though Dr Bivani quite lively on Hapsburgs. Saw Rob for ‘serious talk’ in the Mill at lunch (had received note in pigeonhole by univ mail yesterday requesting ‘summit’). He unhappy about course of ‘our relationship’. I presumed this had something to do with sex, lack of, but unfortunately didn’t get to bottom of it, as first Irish Mike (!) came in and sat rather close, then Malini Coomaraswamy with two girlfriends. V bad luck. Mal doesn’t even drink and this probably her first pub lunch in three years!

R. exasperated by presence of Malini Coomaretcetera as he calls her. But we agreed to ‘reconvene’ at the Free Press tomorrow. Don’t know why all top-level negs have to take place in what Dad would call ‘licensed premises’. Rather dreading it.

Called in on Charlie in Emma on way back. Surprise! He seemed v pleased to see me but rather out of it. He has discovered Benylin. ‘You go to the college nurse, Jen, and say you have a cough. She gives you this mixture. You drink the whole bottle straight off and you’re zonked for hours. It’s really amazing.’ We listened to Focus III and drank tea by the gas fire. He told me some funny stories, then asked in a roundabout way whether he could sleep with me.

So I guess despite mascara he not gay after all! Just nervous maybe. Don’t know what else in addn to bottle of Benylin he had consumed to force self to this point. I explained that things complicated at moment etc. He very understanding: just a long shot, no hassle, if things change, always here . . .

Actually, would rather like to. He has beautiful skin and torso, all waxy and sculpted and firm – saw him shirtless in gardens once. Thin studenty tummy and long hair but large shoulders as though rower, tho’ he swears not. And gentle soul, too. Troubled, anxious, can be overpowering and a bit annoying and too self-deprecating, but you sense a true gentleness beneath. Trouble is, might be too nervous . . . Wouldn’t matter,
would be long-term thing, wd get better. But do I want long-term thing at this stage? Deep waters . . .

When I went out on to St Andrew’s Street, I found someone had nicked my bloody bike! Asked porter if he’d seen anything. No chance. It’s not insured. How am I meant to get to lectures in the morning? Miles away. Will have to ring home and ask for money to get new one. Hate to do. Will have to call it loan from Dad and work it off in vac. I’m so bloody annoyed abt this.

Normally when I’ve had a diary session, I feel immensely tranquil. I go and have a bath, lie back with the light off and feel myself re-inhabit those days a dozen years ago. It’s as close to time travel as you can get. I’m in the cold rooms of those tiny backstreet terraces; I can picture Catty tumbling off the roof, I can taste the Abbot ale.

This time when I’d finished, however, I felt as though I’d unwittingly jammed my finger into an electric socket.

I was in the armchair in my sitting room and I stood up, staring at the blank wall. I had had a memory.

Was it false or true?

I didn’t know.

All I wanted to do was force it out of my thoughts. I couldn’t rest, I could never sleep again, I couldn’t think until I’d got rid of this vile picture.

I paced up and down the room, I poured a huge drink of Johnnie Walker and swilled it down. Then another. But I couldn’t shift it.

This is what the ‘memory’, true or false, consisted of.

After lunch in the pub, I walked up Mill Lane, then up Pembroke Street. Outside Emmanuel, I happened to see Jennifer leave her bicycle in the rack and enter the college. I hung around for a couple of minutes, studying the menu in the window of the Varsity, the little Greek restaurant. Then I crossed the road, pulled her unlocked bike from the rack and rode off on it.
I bumped into Stellings the other day in Chancery Lane. I hadn’t seen him for a long time, and he looked sleek and optimistic. His clothes were obviously expensive.

I have this odd feeling that, not far from where I work, there are people suddenly making huge sums of money – I mean, preposterous, dizzying, comical amounts. They are doing it legally, every day, and getting home late. No wonder they look . . . Glazed. Honey-glazed. Money-glazed.

I don’t know how this happened. When I grew up in Reading, there were rich people, I suppose. The man who owned the paper mill, for instance. He had a new Jaguar and a house with remote-control gates. There were toffs who lived in the countryside nearby who’d inherited money. Then there were prosperous people who worked in industry or business and maybe at the top of the professions.

But there weren’t millionaires. Above all, there weren’t vacant-looking gonks in their twenties who had to keep opening new accounts in different banks to stop their inflow from flooding the pavements; there weren’t young men who, by making a few stabs in the dark about pig-iron prices found themselves grossing more than Portugal.

Do you know what? I think I missed a trick. Most Chatfield leavers went into the navy; some went to university; plenty went off to train as accountants. No one really contemplated ‘the City’. It was considered a last resort, appropriate only for boys who, even by Chatfield standards, were desperate. Bograt Duncan, for instance, became a stockbroker. I believe ‘Backward’ Page surfaced in the reinsurance business. Even Plank Robinson eventually found a berth playing housey-housey with futures prices in some sort of on-screen gambling outfit.

What I want to know is: when did these guys stop being charity cases and become arterial cash explosions? I made an error of judgement there, didn’t I? I didn’t find out enough about ‘the City’; I was sniffy about it, just because of the people I knew who tried it. Is it too late for me now to broke some futures, plant a hedge fund or take a few positions in derivatives? If it all went belly-up I could blame the ‘market’.

If only I could have my time again.

As for Stellings, he’s just a solicitor, for crying out loud; the father of a boy I knew at the grammar school was one of those and they used to live in a semi in Tilehurst. Stellings qualified as a barrister, but he didn’t like it; now he’s in the litigation department of Oswald Payne and he seems to like that very much indeed. He’s married to someone called Clarissa and they already have a child – a boy called Alexander. He mentioned twice in the space of our short talk on the pavement what a small wedding it had been – presumably so I wouldn’t feel put out at not having been invited. We arranged to meet for lunch at an upmarket curry house on the far side of St Paul’s the following Tuesday – after ‘conference’, by which time I would have drawn my expenses, for which modest weekly writing exercise we are reimbursed with rolls of new cash.

‘Great place, this,’ said Stellings, sitting down. ‘They have Puligny-Montrachet for ten quid a bottle. When it changed hands five years ago, they forgot to update the wine list. You often find great deals in ethnic restaurants.’

‘I’ve heard of Montrachet. It’s famous, isn’t it?’
‘Not Mon-trash-ay, Groucho. The “t” is silent. Think of it like Mont Blanc. Mont Rachet.’
‘I’ve only heard it said the other way.’
‘A common error. In both senses. I’m having Chicken Madras.’

I didn’t mind Stellings correcting my pronunciation. Fine wines was not an area Mug Benson took us into during preparation for O-level oral, though come to think of it, he did provide that natty phrase angoisse des gares. Perhaps it was his translation that stuck in my mind: ‘It’s that moment when your parents put you on the train at the age of eight and as you puff out of the station you think that you might never see them again.’

Stellings poured the wine, whatever it was called, and banged on euphorically. He seemed to be high on something. ‘Things are changing, Mike. Faster than they’ve ever changed in our lives. Take Gorbachev, for instance. I think he’s going to bring the Cold War to an end.’

‘But he’s a KGB man, isn’t he? Andropov’s protégé?’

‘Yes, but he’s seen the writing on the wall. Do you know how many heart clinics there are in Moscow? One. It’s on the eighth floor of an old building. And there’s no lift. Do you know what the most common form of birth control is in the Soviet Union?’

‘No.’
‘Abortion. The average Soviet woman has six abortions in her life. It’s cheaper than the Pill. Gorby knows they have to have more money. They have to open up to trade.’

‘I feel a bit nostalgic at the thought of that era coming to an end,’ I said. ‘I grew up expecting to die in a nuclear
war.’

‘Me too. For the first time in my life, I don’t think it’s going to happen. The fax machine is also partly responsible. And the proliferation of telephones. You can only run a totalitarian society if you keep your citizens in the dark. But the means of information have now overrun their defences. Your average Joe in Irkutsk knows about what’s on offer in the West. He wants colour television, Coca-Cola, Scotch whisky and a choice of candidates. Plus if they don’t make more money they won’t even be able to manufacture tanks.’

Lunch with Stellings brought home to me how little the world had changed in the 30-plus years I’d lived in it. It seemed to me that the divide between West and East was exactly as it had been since 1946, but more deeply entrenched. The Terrors and Gulags and invasions, and all the lies and oppression needed to deny or enforce them, had only made it more difficult for the Eastern Bloc to compromise. They reminded me a little of the police psychologists in the Sutcliffe case. The more you’re challenged, the more rigidly you assert your beliefs. You have nothing to lose because without your beliefs you’re nothing anyway: they make you what you are. It’s shit or bust.

I thought Stellings was mad to think that the Cold War could just come to an end — snap your fingers and it’s over. Say what you like about totalitarian communism, it’s been in Darwinian terms quite a ‘successful’ organism. Because it’s a closed system, it’s to some extent immune to reasoned criticism. Like Christianity or Freudianism, its core beliefs are self-verifying. This may make it ‘unscientific’, but it also makes it formidable.

Future generations may be surprised to know that growing up in a world that you expected to explode at any time was not as frightening as it sounds. But in order to manage the background fear, you had to put it to one side of your mind. And by making that manoeuvre you tacitly admitted that you had – with whatever reservations – accepted the status quo. I found the prospect of it all changing, as outlined by Stellings over a second bottle of Puligny-Montrachet, rather unnerving. A free world? How on earth would the Russkies manage that? No imminent Armageddon? How were any of us meant to live with that?

‘And apartheid,’ I said. ‘I suppose you’re going to tell me that’ll soon be all over, too.’

‘Shouldn’t wonder,’ said Stellings, sticking a shard of poppadom into the mint sauce.

‘You mean Botha’s just going to say, Sorry, Kaffirs, it’s all been a big mistake. Let’s have elections. And while I’m at it, Mandela can come out of prison. For a start, all the Nelson Mandela student union bars in Britain would have to rename themselves.’

‘I promise you it’ll happen within ten years. Botha won’t last forever. There’s this guy de Klerk coming up. He’s a realist.’

‘I bet you a hundred pounds it doesn’t happen in the next ten years.’

We shook hands.

‘All right, Stellings, here’s one last test before we send for the straitjacket. Women.’

‘What about them?’

‘You know what it’s like at the moment. How we have to pretend that they’re the same as men in every respect. Otherwise you’re a sexist.’

‘You mean the feminism thing.’

‘Yes. We make out that they think, act and feel identically to men. Not just that they deserve equal opportunities and equal pay but that they are at all levels already indistinguishable from men. We know it’s not true. But that’s not the point. What’s required is to pretend that we’re identical. They also know it’s not true. We know they know it’s not true. And they know we know they know they know it’s not true. Yet every occasion at which women are present is a test of your orthodoxy. One deviation – and it’s all over. The whole room turns on you and you might as well—’

‘Christ, you must know some real schnauzers out there in Bayswater, Groucho. You should meet Clarissa. Come to dinner one day. After all—’

‘But you know what I mean.’

‘It’s called politics, Groucho. That’s how politics work. You overstate the case. You brook no compromise, take no prisoners, till you’ve got what you want. Equal pay, equal everything. Then you relax.’

‘And when’s that great volte-face due? Friday?’

‘We have to live through this. It could be worse, Mike. If we’d been born in the 1890s we’d have been killed in the first weeks of the Great War. Or twenty years later, on the Normandy beaches. If all our generation has to endure is a bit of flak from grumpy feminists, then—’

‘But what about the whole generation of men who—’

‘It’s better than the Somme.’

‘And do you think that when it’s over we’ll forget the lies we all subscribed to?’

‘Of course! Because it’ll be so much fun we won’t want to bring up the past, we’ll want to forget it asap. By the end of the century it’ll all be forgotten. You’ll have women writing books about their own girlishness. Female chief
execs of public companies admitting they can’t read a map. They’ll take pleasure in it. Because they’ll have won the
war, they’ll be generous in the peace. There’ll be a boom in pink lipstick and lacy underwear.’
I had to laugh. ‘And will they let us call them “girls” again?’
‘My dear boy, they’ll call themselves “girls” again. They’ll call their own films “chick-pics”.’
‘Are you on drugs, Stellings?’
‘Curry leaves and Puligny.’
‘You’re on a different planet.’
‘Though sometimes I do have a tiny sniff of charlie at this time of day. It gets me through the afternoon. Want to
join me in the Gents? The manager doesn’t give a stuff.’
I looked at Stellings through the remains of the disembowelled paratha and the empty green Perrier bottle. I
hadn’t got much on that afternoon, so I followed him into the toilet.

Things have been going well with Margaret, the woman’s page sub-editor. Since I couldn’t face the canteen, I
decided to ask her out to lunch with me. Most journalists don’t eat at lunchtime, they only drink, so it’s quite a
palaver proposing a real lunch with knife and fork: people think you’re odd. I already knew Margaret wasn’t a big
boozier and that she did eat sometimes (that half-invite to the canteen), so I was hopeful of a yes. First I had to steel
myself to ask. I didn’t want to go to the usual place in case I was seen, so I took a blue pill, had a couple of pints of
cloudy Burton and large vodka chaser in a fiendish little slit of a pub called the King and Keys, which was full of
red-faced men from the Telegraph with grey hair and ash on their suits, haranguing one another, already drunk by
five past twelve. When I got back, I took the lift to the woman’s-page office on the fourth floor, put my head round
the door and popped the question. Margaret looked a bit embarrassed to be asked in front of all her colleagues, but
agreed to meet me at the front door at ten to one, by which time she was looking slightly more made-up and coiffed.
We went to a Chinese called City Friends, near the Old Bailey. She told me she’d been married and divorced. He
was a crime reporter for the Sunday Express and they’d met when both were working briefly for some regional
paper. I gathered he was a big drinker and used to knock her about. She had custody of a girl, now ten years old,
called Charlotte; they lived in a flat in Holloway. Derek, the husband, no longer visited, though his standing order
towards maintenance had so far been honoured.
Margaret squeezed some rice between her chopsticks. ‘I always look at the Sunday Express first and make sure
he’s got a piece in. That way he’ll be happy and won’t drink so much and he’ll keep his job.’
Like me, she’d stumbled into newspapers. She came from Hertfordshire somewhere and, reading between the
lines, I gathered that her family were a bit smarter than the Englebys (hard not to be). Local high school, some sort
of further ed at the tech. Then, after spells as a secretary and a job in ‘marketing’, she met someone who suggested
she train at Hemel Hempstead with a newspaper group. Thence to the regional rag where she met boozier Derek: a
bit of news, some feature writing, but she had no ambitions in that direction, she preferred editing and layout.
Couple of jobs with IPC (Woman’s Realm, Woman’s Work, Woman’s Trouble), and then on to the Sunday paper,
where she liked it very much indeed. She was six years older than I was, though she could have passed for a bit
more. Marriage, children, the uncertainty of Derek . . . I don’t know; but while she wasn’t exactly motherly, she
seemed experienced. What was nice about her was that she didn’t come over as embittered. She was candid,
optimistic and polite. She offered to pay for lunch, but I didn’t let her.
I hadn’t a clue how to move on to the next stage, whether she wanted there to be a next stage, or in fact whether I
wanted there to be one. I hoped, perhaps, that with her greater worldliness she might take charge.

The interview with Ken Livingstone didn’t go quite as well as I’d expected.
I did try to be something completely new – disarming, liberating, original – but he treated me with world-
weariness, as though he’d dealt with my type a million times before.
We met in the Greater London Council offices at 10.30 on 29 May, 1985. It’s always rather odd when you meet
someone who’s been so much written about. I couldn’t help but expect a bloody-handed ogre of the tumbrils;
instead, I saw a tall, knock-kneed figure emerge from the humdrum twilight of a local government committee room,
at the end of a long wood-panelled corridor. I wasn’t sure if it was Robespierre or the borough surveyor of Dudley.

We had some milky coffee from a trolley brought in by a tea lady. Mrs Thatcher doesn’t like Ken’s policies, but
he keeps getting elected, so she’s had to close down the whole GLC. It was the only thing she could do. Short of
having him rubbed out, I suppose. He’s off to be an MP now for Brent East, wherever that is. It’s a parliamentary
invention rather than a real place; there was nowhere called Brent in the A to Z when I looked. I think it may take in
the area round Harlesden and Dollis Hill. I remember taking the Harlesden night bus once and I was the only white
man on it. (Ken must know where it is, though, because the very last thing he did as GLC leader was to give Brent,
his future base, a ‘stress grant’ of two million pounds.)
He had no qualms about leaving his fellow-travellers in the scuppered GLC. He was quite perky about the whole thing, in a sour, corner-of-the-mouth way. ‘The orthodox Trots have never taken on board minority groups, like blacks and gays,’ he said. ‘But we can now make a permanent new governing majority in Britain.’

I tried to picture the kind of cabinet this grouping might throw up.

‘By the “orthodox Trots”, do you mean people like . . . Like what’s his name. The leader of Lambeth Council.’

‘Ted Knight. Yeah, those people live in a workerist laager.’

Wow. I hadn’t heard anyone speak like that since I was a student. Anyway, I quickly got the boring stuff out of the way, and began to ask from my list of ‘interesting’ questions.

‘What are your favourite books?’

‘I never went to college so I never got into reading much.’

‘You must have gone to school?’

‘Yeah, but I was useless at school.’

‘Isn’t it a problem being badly educated?’ (I was thinking how I could be working in the paper mill.)

‘No. It teaches you to trust gut prejudices. You mustn’t allow facts to divert your instincts.’

‘But you must have read something?’

‘Yeah, well I suppose about seventy per cent of what I’ve read’s been science fiction.’

I forced my fallen jaw back up. ‘And the rest? The other thirty per cent?’

‘Politics. Do you know the work of the early Jewish philosopher Hillel? He was a contemporary of Christ, only much more popular.’

His eyelids flickered with shy pride as he dangled this name for me.

(I hadn’t heard of Hillel, unfortunately, so the next day I looked him up in the British Library catalogue. There was a book about him by Glatzer, Nahum Norbet, called Hillel the Elder: the Emergence of Classical Judaism (1957) and a lot of books about soil mechanics by someone with a similar name; but the man himself seemed, like Jesus, to have written nothing, so it was hard to see how Ken had ‘read’ him.)

Anyway: back in Ken’s office, I returned to my prepared list of questions.

‘Where do you take your holidays?’ I asked.

‘I can’t afford to take holidays.’

‘How much money have you got?’

‘None. I haven’t had a job since 1970, when I stopped working at the Royal Marsden hospital.’

‘Were you a nurse?’

‘I was an auxiliary.’

‘So what do you live off?’

‘Off the councillor’s attendance allowances that were introduced by Michael Heseltine and Peter Walker when they were the Tory environment secretaries.’ He crossed his legs. ‘I suppose I’ve got a lot to thank Michael and Peter for.’

‘Do you have a girlfriend?’

‘I can’t discuss that.’

‘Are you gay?’

‘Private life. I never talk about that to the Press.’

‘Do you believe in God?’

‘No.’

I looked back down to my list of questions, and as I did so I noticed something odd about Ken’s ankles. He was wearing flared trousers. I didn’t know you could still buy them.

I asked if he liked cooking, but he quickly turned his answer, via kitchen work, into a lecture about sex and oppression. ‘I don’t believe in traditional gender roles in any case. The best men exploit women. Even the best whites exploit blacks.’

I guessed he wasn’t much of a cook.

‘Are you patriotic?’

‘It’s impossible not to feel some sort of crude stirring when you hear “Land of Hope and Glory”, but you have to set that against the systematic slaughter of the Tasmanian Aborigines.’

I looked down at my reporter’s notebook. I’d covered about five sides of it, but that was nothing like enough for a 1,500-word article.

In the end, I had to resort to talking politics; he’d left me no alternative.

His round Chinese laundryman’s face at last became animated. ‘Oh yeah, I’m the most powerful left-winger ever to hold office in this country. Michael Foot and Tony Benn never had ministries in which they could really influence people’s lives like I’ve done.’
Scribble, scribble. When I’d covered ten more pages, I called a halt. I’d been outflanked by someone determined not to let me let him be interesting. I felt doomed to write about the received ideas after all. Loony this . . . Newt that . . . I’d have to wear out the inverted-comma key on my typewriter.

As I left and walked back down that dingy corridor with its numbered doors, Ken called after me to point out that the very last thing he’d done as GLC leader – even after the Brent handout – was to twin London with Managua.

‘Thank you,’ I called back.

I left with a smile. I felt that Jen Soc, at least, would have liked that twinning. They’d have voted for it, eight to five with two abstentions. Then a glass of Hirondelle to celebrate.

The Chatfield Old Boys’ Society contains some dogged sleuths. I’m flabbergasted by their persistence. Each year since I left I’ve dropped their pathetic entreaties for information into the bin; every time I changed address, I failed to tell them. Yet in the morning yesterday I found a copy of the Chatfield Year Book on the doormat. How on earth do they do that? It was addressed to me as M. Engleby, though in the Old Boys’ News section, I was appalled to read: ‘M. Engleby (Collingham, 1966–70) is reportedly working as a journalist in London under the nom de plume Michael Watson. Further sightings, please!’

The only thing that cheered me up was an entry in the Valete column. ‘J.T. Baynes (Collingham 1963–68) died from a stroke in Stoke Mandeville hospital. He had suffered gradual paralysis over many years. Our sympathies to his widow Jane and their two children.’

‘Gradual paralysis’. Was that a bona fide medical term? It was good enough for Lt Commander S.R. Sidway, RN, retd, editor of the Year Book. And good enough to have finished old Baynes.

As I climbed out of the underground at Chancery Lane and looked in the clothes shop with the Tudor half-timbering, I puzzled over one thing: how ‘Jane’ allowed that faceful of pus to rub on her skin while he impregnated her. I also felt slightly disappointed that he’d managed to find a wife at all – though Christ knows what sort of swamp-dweller he’d bagged.

For the rest, of course, the news was unalloyed delight, and at lunchtime I took Margaret to Langan’s Brasserie to celebrate. We both had the spinach soufflé with anchovy sauce to start, and a bottle of the house champagne to wash it down. Then another bottle with the main course. Afterwards we walked over to the Ritz, took a room and had it off.

There was a message on my desk last Friday. The handwriting was that of Felicity Maddox, the sarcastic newsroom secretary. ‘James Stellings’s office rang. Would you go to dinner Thursday the 11th. 8.30, 152 Elgin Crescent, W11.’

I found the word ‘dinner’ a bit intimidating. Would it be just me and Stellings and his wife and child or was it a ‘dinner party’? I’d never been to one of those, though I’d seen them in plays and films. (In Accident, by Joseph Losey, for instance.) Christ. I pictured this Clarissa in some sort of ball gown saying to the other guests, ‘James has asked his funny little friend Toilet Engleby. He’s known him since college, apparently. What a scream! Do be kind to him, won’t you?’

Shit. I was actually out of London on the day in question, in Birmingham, and didn’t get back till about seven. I had a bath and put Steely Dan on the record player. I ought to explain that I don’t like new pop music any more. I’d always liked the latest thing, sequentially: rock’n’ roll, pop, soul, psychedelia, hard rock, progressive, glamour, punk, then: whooaaaah! I remember the day I suddenly stopped. A deejay played a song that started ‘I was working as a waitress in a cocktail bar,/That much is true . . .’ When it finished, he banged on about how brilliant it was, how it was the future and everything. And I thought that pathetic sound, those gutless hairdressers with a toy kazoo – that is the inheritor of Hendrix and Dylan and Stevie Wonder and the Beatles and Cream and . . . Dear God. I lowered the top half of the sash window, took careful aim and hurled the small radio out as hard as I could: over the street and into the grassless ‘garden square’, where it landed noiselessly. I liked to think of them warbling on till the batteries died, face down in the dog mess.

So for five years or more I’ve just listened to old stuff. I always liked Steely Dan. They must be two of the strangest men ever to imagine they were pop stars. You’d have had them down for maths professors or computer programmers. ‘Dr Donald Fagen at nine on Statistical Analysis; Professor Walter Becker at ten on Boolean Algebra.’ Except they were rockers, and so were the others in the picture: Jeff ‘skunk’ Baxter, responsible, I gathered, for the fret-shattering guitar solo on ‘Bodhisattva’, Jeff Porcaro and the others.

That night, before Stellings’s do, I was listening to the melodious, early Can’t Buy a Thrill. I thought its sweetness of nature would put me in the mood. I must have heard it a thousand times, but there’s always something new there. I was humming along to ‘Brooklyn (Owes the Charmer Under Me)’ when I noticed with a jolt that I must always have misheard the lyrics. For a decade or more I’d had it as ‘A race of angels/Bound with one another,/A
dish of dollars/Laid out for all to see,/A tower room at Eden Roc/His golf at noon for three:/Brooklyn owes the charmer under me.’

Now this had always bothered me because in my limited experience of golf, a three-ball is frowned on. Some clubs you even have to get the secretary’s written permission. But here was Donald Fagen, and maybe some girl he’s singing to, or possibly Walter Becker – anyway, that makes two: but who was the third, and how were they going to swing it with the caddymaster? Maybe Don had the secretary’s ear, and with a back catalogue like that, who’s complaining? But it bothered me. Christ knows what Jeff ‘skunk’ Baxter’s short game was like.

Then, as I lay in the steaming water, it struck me that the words in fact were ‘A tower room at Eden Roc/His golf at noon for free’ and it all made sense. I got out of the bath, laughing with relief.

Why was I having these peculiar thoughts and chuckling to myself? My mental processes, I believed, could sometimes include humour, but they weren’t normally facetious. What was going on?

I suppose I was nervous.

I’d bought a suit some time ago for going to Fleet Street, but it wasn’t very new or very fashionable or very clean. I didn’t have much else apart from jeans. It took me only a minute to glance through my ‘wardrobe’. I picked a tan seersucker jacket that Margaret had once said she liked, some fairly new straight-leg trousers and a clean shirt (there was only one: it was a sort of maroon colour. It didn’t quite go with the jacket, perhaps, but there was no time to wash and iron another one). I wasn’t sure about ties. Most of mine were a bit on the kipper side. Then I remembered I still had a cowboy bootlace thing that Julie had given me one Christmas (it was one up on the Donny Osmond tee shirt. Where the hell did that go, by the way?). I put the tie on and I thought it did a job. If they were all wearing ties, well, so was I; if not, mine was a joke. My newest shoes were a pair of rubber-soled caramel-brown lace-ups, so on they went.

At the weekend I’d bought a pricey bottle of Montrachet to amuse Stellings and I got some flowers (dahlias, I think; I’m not good on flowers – orange jobs anyway) at 8.22 from the garage on Westbourne Grove for ‘Clarissa’. I was keeping a tight watch on the time because I didn’t want to be late. I walked on briskly.

When I first came to London, Notting Hill was full of squatters, potters and banjoists; but the tide seems to be turning. Many rooms have gone to flats, the flats back into houses and the houses have been bought by people in American banks who wouldn’t know a Bacon from a xylophone.

At 8.29 I punched the front doorbell in Elgin Crescent. It was opened by a small oriental woman in a white apron. She showed me into a large, empty sitting room with an open fire and a couple of huge oil paintings. One was of an old bloke in Gainsborough style (a Stellings or Clarissa ancestor, perhaps) and the other a more or less random splosh-and-twirl in grey and tangerine that seemed designed to trigger a sequence of sophomore thoughts about ‘art’.

I was still shuddering at the banality of my own responses when Stellings breezed in.

‘Christ, Groucho, you’re punctual. Or Gaucho, we’ll have to call you with that tie. Have a drink. Champagne? Wine? Scotch?’

‘Yeah, Scotch.’ I thought it would sit better on the three Johnnie Walkers and the blue pill I’d already had in my flat.

‘Clarissa’s just saying goodnight to Alexander. How’s things? Any good scoops lately?’

I told Stellings a bit about the work I’d done. He was wearing jeans with an open-necked white shirt, espadrilles and no socks. He hadn’t made much of an effort, I thought.

My drink was brought to me by the Thai or Filipina in the white apron.

A woman appeared in the doorway: tall, fair-haired, dressed all in black, so I wondered if she’d been to a funeral, down to the thin black tights on her long legs. She had rather more mascara than you’d expect for a wake, though, and reddish-pink lipstick. Also, she didn’t look tear-stained or sad. I felt her eyes flicker over me, pausing for a moment at my feet.

‘Darling, this is Mike Engleby. Mike, this is Clarissa – the old trouble and strife.’

Clarissa’s soft hand entered mine and withdrew almost before it had made contact; it was more of a stroke than a shake. ‘James has told me so much about you. Come and sit down. James, you’re not looking after Mike properly. Have an olive.’

‘Is it all right if I smoke?’

‘Of course it is. Letitia, would you mind getting an ashtray?’

Clarissa’s large blue eyes fixed on my face as she perched next to me on the sofa, shifting away only a few inches when some of my smoke seemed go up her nose. I felt swaddled by the intensity of her interest.

‘And tell me more about your family,’ she was saying. ‘Are they still in . . . Reading? I had a friend who lived not far from there once. In Stratfield Saye. Do you know it?’

Her expression had the life-and-death curiosity of someone needing only one more score-draw for the pools jackpot.
‘No. My mother’s in the hotel business.’
‘How interesting. I believe it’s awfully hard work.’
‘Yes. Yes. And . . . Er, my sister’s in brewing.’
‘Which side of it?’
‘Accounts.’
‘It’s such a volatile market, isn’t it, wines and spirits? There are so many conglomerates, aren’t there, but I believe many of the independent breweries have done well recently.’
‘Yeah, well I think the real ale thing’s helped a bit. And you know—’
‘Of course. How clever of your sister. And is she married, did you say?’
‘Not yet. She—’
‘Sensible girl. Career first. And are you a Berkshire family on both sides?’

I did my best to make Mum and Julie’s life worthy of this apocalyptic degree of interest. After a while, I half began to believe it myself, as the Englebys, in my account, emerged as yeomen of Mercia, devoted to their victualling heritage. Still, I was relieved when at about nine-fifteen some more people arrived.

I didn’t catch many names, but there were I think four more couples, making eleven people in all, with only Engleby unpartnered. The men all had the same haircuts: shorter than mine, with straight edges, dark gloss and burnish. They had suntans and made candid eye contact with one another. Most wore suits and apologised for having come straight from work; they loosened their ties and showily threw the first drink down their necks – presumably to prove they were at home chez Stellings and no longer in the office. They talked mostly about sport and cars. The women were without exception good-looking. All were thin; most were in dazzling colours – puce and amber and lilac – as though they were stating some primal confidence. Their hair, too, smelled of salons and looked brittle and dry, though gleaming. They all had slim legs covered with some fabric I’d never seen before: like nylon, but finer. I orbited round with a B&H on the go, and occasionally got a word in.

For dinner, we went downstairs to a long table with a floor-length white cloth, candles and bowls of tall hellebores at intervals. I know they were hellebores because I heard Clarissa say so when one of the women asked. I was put between someone called Laura and someone called Cecilia. The layout of the table meant that I couldn’t really see through the flowers to anyone opposite and in any event they would have had to shout. So I talked to Laura for about twenty minutes, then to Cecilia for about twenty. Then when I swivelled back to give Laura her ration, she’d turned to her left. I switched back to Cecilia, but she too had turned the other way. So I stared straight ahead while the first course and the main course came and went and the maid filled and refilled my glass with white burgundy, then claret.

Then I had another right-and-left stint.
What did they say?
One had three children and told me about the schools they attended and the schools they hoped to send them to after that. She asked if I had any children and I said no. Then she told me which of her children were good at which subjects and which were having extra tuition. One of her daughters was also good at the violin, whereas her son was mad about football. Then she talked of the reputations of various schools that her children were not going to but which friends of hers had children at. She also talked of a new school that had just been started – somewhat too late for her elder children, and her youngest couldn’t be moved because he was happy where he was – and how she thought it might be a great success because there would always be a need for good schools.
I agreed with her emphatically – as though she’d been only halfhearted in her own belief – that there would always be a need for good schools.
Something odd was happening in my head. Although I was receiving a large amount of random information, I didn’t feel I knew any more about anything. On the contrary, I felt that, as far as data in the brain were concerned, I had suffered a net loss.
‘And where did you go to school yourself?’ she said.
‘What?’
‘Where did you go to school?’
‘Eton.’
‘Really? My brother was there. What years were you?’
‘Sixty-six to seventy.’
‘Which house?’
‘Collingham.’
‘I mean, who was your housemaster?’
‘You wouldn’t have heard of him. Which house was your brother in?’
‘H.R.T.’s.’
'Right. I didn’t know anyone in that one.'
'No one! Gosh, I thought only the scholars didn’t mix.'
'Well, I was a scholar, you see.'
'So why weren’t you in College?'
'I . . .' I took a long pull of white burgundy.
'I know. You were an OS, weren’t you?'
'Yeah, that’s right. An OS.' I had a brainwave. ‘And I met Stellings – James, I mean, at university. We were in the same college.’

I thought I’d got away with it. I don’t know why I told a lie. Maybe I couldn’t face talking about Chatfield. Or perhaps my brain had just been scrambled by the occasion. As soon as I could, I turned to the other side.

This neighbour, she told me, had only one child, but had had six au pairs. She herself had returned to work at a bank – which was where she’d first met Clarissa, as it happened, when she was working in the mergers and acquisitions department – and so it was very important that the au pair should be a good one, since neither she nor her husband (who was sitting next to Clarissa and talking far too loudly as usual, she was sorry to say) was at home very often. He (the husband) had taken a bath, by all accounts, over some long term financial guesswork that hadn’t come off, but had turned it all around in the last six months to the extent that he’d been headhunted and was now on ‘gardening leave’. In his new job, he was going to be remunerated on an ‘eat what you kill’ basis.

So, I ventured to suggest, the au pair crisis must have eased off a bit.

Far from it. Things had gone from bad to worse. The Latvian was lazy, the Czech was greedy and the Pole took money from Laura’s (possibly Cecilia’s) purse. We tried a bit of a Czech/cheque/check thing here, but it didn’t really catch fire, possibly because it was the Pole who’d been the tea leaf. So we quickly got back to the child, who was now at a nursery school, which was a blessing.

Was it the new place, I wondered, the one that had just started?

It turned out that it was indeed the new one, and it was every bit as good as they’d hoped. They took such a lot of interest in the children. And it gave them a head start at big school. Talking of which, there were any number of possibilities for the little fellow – possibilities which we went on at some length to review.

My head cranked from side to side, ten minutes here, ten minutes there, like watching Wimbledon in slow motion.
I began to feel that I was no longer making sense. The more I heard, the less I knew. Someone had put their fingers in my brain and uncoupled the trucks.

When the au pair one came back for a fourth knock I could see the dumb pain in her eyes.

I had imagined that at a ‘dinner party’ you talked to your friend, the one who’d invited you, and maybe his wife, and who knows, a couple of others and the whole thing became a sort of convivial, pooled chat. Like a pub or a café.

I hadn’t thought it through.

It had never crossed my mind that I’d spend three hours talking to the wives of people I’d never met. It was like being stuck in a stalled Tube train, trying to make common cause with the strangers in the next seat, but without the Evening Standard for respite.

Coffee arrived at one o’clock. By then, I was no longer capable of thought. All that once I’d known, I had forgotten.

At one-thirty, I stumbled upstairs. I must have drunk at least a bottle of Stellings’s Meursault and a bottle and a half of La Dominique (I noticed he was still keen on the ‘poor man’s Pétrus’, or whatever he’d christened it). I was well into a second packet of B&H.

A couple of men were standing in front of the fireplace.

‘Ah, hello, er . . .’

‘Mike,’ I said.

‘Mike. Of course. We were just talking about this new school that’s started in Cambridge Gardens. Do you know it?’

I felt a curious rage begin to swell in me . . . But I was tired and drunk and the blue pill swirled the last of its gentle magic through my veins as I sucked in deep on good Virginia tobacco.

‘You bet,’ I said. ‘I gather it’s fantastic.’

Back home that night, I restored some sense of sanity with a diary session. I lay in bed in the darkness and selected a special date, one of my favourites: the first ever.

THURSDAY 25 MAY, 1972

I’ve decided to keep a diary. My name is Jennifer Arkland and I’m 19 years old. I’m a first-year history student and I’ve just done my preliminary exams, or ‘prelims’. They don’t give you grades, but they tell you your
marks and I did better than I expected.

I’ve never kept a diary before, so I feel a bit odd writing this. Should I introduce myself? Why?! I’m not going to show it to anyone. And to herself, Jennifer surely needs no introduction.

If not to show it, then why write it? Do I have a ‘deep subconscious’ desire to be read – to reveal and be shamed? Doubt it.

I’m writing it for two reasons – or two that I’m aware of. One, so I can read it in old age, or middle age. Always regret so few photos of us as children. You think: what’s the point, today like any other day, nothing special, not worth recording. But it is, it was. Why? Because it’s all there is.

Don’t mean that to sound morbid, like typical first-year: ‘birth, copulation and death, that’s all there is when you come down to it . . .’ No. Key word is ‘all’. And that ‘all’ is plenty.

What I mean is that I don’t have teleological view (great new word from Dr Abraham seminar on Puritans. They v definitely did have tel. view). I believe that the living and the breathing and the being with people you are fond of and the friendly exchange with them of ideas and stories and encouragement and love is the totality of what we are and of what we can do. Don’t believe those exps can be forced into meaningful ‘shape’ or ‘journey’, as per tel. view.

Do believe that the richness available in those exchanges is definitely enough.

Enough for what? you may ask, Hypothetical Reader. Without tel. view there is no framework, no criteria by which the experience of being alive can be deemed ‘sufficient’ or ‘insufficient’. So: illogical question, dear HR!

I suppose I just mean ‘enough to make me happy, curious and full of excitement’. That’s why I feel. Agnostic but happy. (I sound like a puppy. Do believe am a fraction deeper than that . . .)

How so? Well, maybe the love generated between people who behave well and kindly adds somehow to the available pool of existing good feeling in the world, and lives on after them. (Now sound like drippy hippy, but actually it’s true and easy to prove.) Without good example such as preserved in literature, there would be nothing to live up to, no sense of transcendence or of our lives beyond the Hobbsian. So these feelings do endure and I believe they also survive through memory, orally and in families as much as in written word. So while living may have no meaning in any teleological sense, it does have practical purpose in the way that how we live can improve the experience of others alive and yet to be born; and thus, a bit more contentiously (because harder to define scale on which it’s measured), it also has value. This seems so obvious to me as to be almost axiomatic.

But brings me to second reason for starting diary. First is for future reading pleasure, period quaintness, as described above. Second is because I feel so happy. Haven’t always been this happy and know I won’t always be so in future; so wanted to pickle and preserve, not just for historical interest but as possible future store to draw on in leaner years. Contentment as chutney or sauerkraut.


Friends . . . Yes, but no one as close as family or Susan and Becky from school. Molly down corridor v nice and think Anne could become friend. Emma M? That Indian-looking girl – Malini, is it? Bit scary. So not exhilaration of fab friendships making me so happy.

Work is interesting, but, despite what Mum and Dad think, have never really been a swot. True, did well at school, but not hard, not v brainy school so not much competition – yet good teachers. In final term three of them teaching three of us univ candidates. What staff/pupil ratio!

Anyway, work here is fine, though I don’t think that in the appointment of dons to college or university positions the ability to teach was considered at any stage. Most v ungifted in that dept, and manifestly more into their own work than ours.

I like work, but not carried away by it, not like some people.

Am not ‘in love’ either. Don’t have boyfriend. Am rather freaked out by sex ratio imbalance. You feel quite self-conscious in lectures being one of sometimes four girls among 50 boys. Also, many of the academic girls – or women as we call ourselves – are not that glamorous, to be frank, and attract zero interest from boys – so others of us feel need to show solidarity with them rather than flirt vacuously.

Boyfriend thing is certainly one to take very slowly. Unless bolt from blue. Am romantic enough to hope a tiny bit for such a thing. Also realist enough to know that I couldn’t feel much happier anyhow, so to some extent: what wd be point of Prince Charming? (Listening to Miles Davis at Jazz Club last week, earnest boy from St John’s said that most touching part of ‘someday My Prince Will Come’ was ‘slight illiteracy’ of first
word of title, suggesting uneducated girl in Harlem standing on tenement balcony looking wistfully over broken neighbourhood . . . Could be.)

So where’s it coming from, this feeling, this funny low euphoria? A little bit from the town, I think. I do love the dirty brick of the miniature terraces and the mist from the river and the cold mornings, even now in May. And then the sudden huge vista of a great courtyard of King’s or Trin or Queens’, when everything that’s been pinched, and puritanical and cold and grudging and sixpence-in-the-gas-meter is suddenly swept away by the power and scale of those buildings, with their towers and crenellations and squandered empty spaces, built by men who knew that they’d calculated the mechanical laws of time and distance and that there was therefore no need whatever to build small.

Also . . . What? As Dad often says, I’m a ‘lucky girl’ – by which he means I have a good ‘temperament’. By this Jane Austeny word, he means that I am ‘naturally at home in the world’ while some people are ‘all across it’. Don’t know how scientific that is, but perhaps something in it.

I think I could put it more simply. I like being 19. I wasn’t that keen on being a child because I always felt I was missing out on things; and I know I’ll be no good at all at being 35 or 40 or – God help us – 50! But 19, 20 and so on seems to me wonderful. There’s nothing ‘they’ won’t let me do, and I occasionally think there’s almost nothing I couldn’t do.

Sometimes in my cramped room am so excited when I turn the light out by prospect of coming days and weeks that I can’t sleep. Must be careful. Pride before fall, Johnny Head in Air and so on. But can’t help being happy and am b***ed if will pretend to fashionable gloom.

That’s my girl. Interesting how she started off with all that show-offy stude stuff – ‘teleological’, ‘Hobbesian’ etc. – but her later entries were much more about sex and drugs. You grow up fast over those years.

But as Jen’s writing got cruder, I can’t help noticing, when I look back, that my own style has poshed up a bit. ‘I miss the eruptive blue ballpointed handwriting squeezed in so tight between the red feint rules.’ ‘The expanding town of Basingstoke seethed like Laocoön within its concentric ring roads.’

Bloody hell.

I see the blue pencil of Dr Gerald Stanley making a sarcastic wavy line under those sentences . . . Actually, come to think of it, he didn’t use blue pencil or red ballpoint, but black ink indistinguishable from that used by me and three-quarters of his students. A small thing, that lack of consideration and common sense, but in fact unbelievably irritating. It looked as though you’d scrawled graffiti on your own stuff.

The reason that my style has become less cramped, more expansive is pretty obvious, I imagine. I’m happier. It took me a long time to recognise that that was the name of this feeling – happiness. It, as they say, ‘crept up’. By this I mean that when I first acknowledged to myself that there was a fundamental change – in the way I viewed the day ahead, the way I looked at myself and my life, the mood that had become established as my default – I simultaneously admitted that the change had been in place for some time. That’s what’s meant by ‘creeping up’, I think.

Margaret and I had a party last week to celebrate our officially moving in together. It was her idea. She wanted to make some sort of ‘statement’, I think; she wanted to be respectable and show her friends that she wasn’t a discard.

I thought it was a bad idea. For a start, I’m keeping my flat in Bayswater; I’m only moving a few shirts and a toothbrush up to Holloway. Second, I thought that if husband Derek gets wind of it, he’ll stop the payments for his daughter.

I pointed this out to Margaret and it went down very badly indeed. The sincerity of my interest in her was called into question. She more or less implied that if I ended up footing the bill for someone else’s kid – so what? That’s what you did if you were ‘serious about a relationship’.

It was our first argument, but obviously a big one. I went off and thought about it for a few days (the paper had sent me to Manchester anyway). One of the things about never having any money as a child is that you really want to hang on to it when you do finally get some. I didn’t think I was particularly mean as a rule, but paying for wife-beater Derek’s kid . . . That just didn’t seem right to me.

On the other hand, I was happy with Margaret and I did like Charlotte. She reminded me of Julie at that age – obviously – though, to be brutal, she was not quite so gormless. She had a variety of friends from the local comprehensive whom I also – Christ, I must be ‘mellowing’ or something – rather liked. They tore through the flat, stripped out the fridge, took my cigarettes, misfired round the toilet, ‘borrowed’ Margaret’s videos, grabbed tins of beer and left. But I felt there was no harm in them. I admired their rush.

As for Charlotte . . . I think I liked her clothes as much as anything. The effort she put in to looking good each day: the ribbons and the torn jeans, the lace mittens, the combat gear from Lawrence Corner at the foot of Hampstead Road, the black-rimmed eyes, the puffed-out nylon skirts and coloured basketball boots . . . And she was
fun to talk to, when she could be bothered. She was very forthright, swore like a hooker and was experimenting with some sort of consonant-free London dialect. I went for her in quite a big way.

So I said yes to Margaret: yes, I’d take the consequences of a move and yes, let’s have a party. We cleared most of the stuff out of the living room into Charlotte’s bedroom and set up the record player. Margaret bought food from the large supermarket near Highbury Corner and got to work: sausages, paté, French bread, stodgy stuff to soak up the cases of Spanish wine I got from Oddbins.

Margaret asked about fifty people, many from the office. Tony Bollock, of course; the woman’s page staff en masse; her sister Brenda and her obese husband from Little Chalfont. Lots of people I knew by sight from various pubs and bars in Fleet Street.

We had invitations printed with some embarrassing words devised by Margaret. Something about ‘shared life’ or ‘new beginning’. I honestly forget.

I invited a few people from my old mag: Jan, Wyn Douglas, Bob Nixon the crime reporter; Shireen Nazawi, the EFL-speaking interviewer. I thought about asking Stellings and Clarissa, but I knew they’d hate it.

Then I wrote off to some of the friends I’d made through interviewing. Naim Attallah, for instance. (I did find out who he was in the end. He was a Palestinian steeplejack who’d chanced into a jewellery business called Asprey, then bought a run-down publishing house.) He wasn’t free to come, but he sent a card and a gift voucher to Margaret from his shop for £100.

I really wanted to ask Ralph Richardson, but alas he had died. In 1983, I think it was. I remember hearing the news on the radio while I was in the bath. At the time we met, he was pretty much the first person who’d spoken to me in a month.

I asked Ken Livingstone, but he didn’t reply; he must get a hell of a lot of invites. Of course I asked Jeffrey Archer. And not only did he come, he also brought a magnum of champagne and made a short speech in our honour. I recognised one of the jokes from a Foyle’s lunch, but he’d worked on the delivery since then.

The whole thing was more than just the usual pub bores on free booze and a change of venue. It felt like an event and it went on till three in the morning.

It certainly felt like an event when I was woken at seven by one of Charlotte’s friends blundering in. Margaret brought me aspirin and tea in bed. (I’m very much in her good books now.)

I had an uneasy feeling when I read the Daily Telegraph, though. Police in Fulham had discovered the badly decomposed body (well, skeleton, I imagine, really) of a woman in a ditch by a District Line railway cutting where the Tube goes overground somewhere in the West Brompton area. They think the body may be as much as eight years old, but they have established that it is that of a missing 29-year-old German called Gudrun Abendroth. She worked in the A&R department of a Frankfurt record company, but had at the time of her disappearance been lodging in London, in Tournay Road, SW6.

Although the photograph was blurred, there was something in her face that looked familiar.

I was, mercifully, too hungover to be able to place it and too busy to brood on it.
Nine

One of our Victorian Linotype machines broke down last week and we urgently needed a new part before Saturday. They eventually found what they needed in a printing museum in Burnley and bribed the curator to let them have it for a week or two while we looked for an iron foundry to cast a replacement.

There’s a secret room on the top floor where they keep half a dozen examples of a machine called a Tandy. These are small electric typewriters which, instead of paper, have a screen where you can read back what you’ve written; they also, amazingly, have a jack you can stick in a phone socket. Press ‘Go’ and the machine then transmits what you’ve written down the line into a computer in the office, from which it can be retrieved, messed up by the sub-editors, and printed.

We’re not officially allowed to use a Tandy, because if they found out what we were doing, the union of upmakers, stonehands and Luddites would shut the paper for good. Steven Stringer, a foreign-desk sub, once changed the light bulb on his desk lamp and we lost that Sunday’s paper in the resulting wildcat strike. It was a job for a member of the relevant union – Cosanostra or Natsopa – and the senior light-bulb changer is paid £75,000 a year, which is £2,500 more than the editor of the newspaper.

I know one of the compositors quite well. Terry, he’s called. We’ve been to Upton Park a couple of times to see the Hammers. You’d think he’d be working on a Saturday, what with it being a Sunday paper. Sixty of them are paid, but only forty exist and only twenty need to turn up. Terry, being a senior guy, also gets one of the twenty ‘ghost’ pay packets, which he takes under the name of Billy Bonds, the West Ham captain. So he’s paid double. For not turning up. And they’re on double time anyway, because it’s a weekend – even though it’s the only day of the week a Sunday printer works, and it was always, by definition, going to be on a Saturday. So he’s actually paid quadruple. The meat pies and the programmes and the Carling at the Boleyn Ground are therefore on him. He can’t believe how little I’m paid (£26,800); he won’t let me buy anything. He puts his big soft hand over mine when I go to get my wallet out and says, ‘You’re avin’ a laugh, Mick. On your wages?’

We have to get back sharpish to Fleet Street after the game, because that’s when Terry makes his real money.

As the bundles of printed newspapers come out on the conveyor belts, a fair number go into unmarked vans belonging to Terry and his brother-in-law Ray. These then go off to a depot on the Essex marshes where they’re put in smaller vans and delivered to newsagents. Ray is a builder, but also draws a wage from my paper as a compositor – under the name of Trevor Brookings.

Terry becomes quite anxious at this time of day on a Saturday and I tend to leave him to it. He invited me to ‘sunday dinner’ once at his home near Epping. I calculate that he must be earning £120,000 a year from the paper alone, but his house, though well equipped, wasn’t much bigger than our place in Trafalgar Terrace. ‘You gotta be a bit discreet, Mick,’ he said. ‘People don’t want you to wave it under their noses. Bloke opposite, see that little’ouse there, ’e’s a barristers’ clerk. Same difference.’ After lunch, Terry drew the curtains and showed me some slides of his place in Spain, with its underground car ports, heated pool and uniformed staff of four. He has them wear the old claret and blue, though I don’t think they have any idea that it’s the West Ham strip; they think it’s the eccentricity of the English milord. ‘Ere, Mick, this one, she’s called Manuela or some bloody silly name. Looks a bit like Ronnie Boyce, don’t you fink?’

In fact, I do secretly use a Tandy on some stories. Like last week, when I had to go back to my old university. Tony Ball sent me off to the top floor to be inducted into the secrets of the machine. I had to carry it home in a Tesco bag so as not to excite suspicion and was warned never to bring it within a mile of Fleet Street. If it broke, I was just to chuck it away.

As for the story, there was a row in some grand college about its new Master, who was thought to have been foisted on the reluctant Fellows via the vice chancellor as some sort of political favour to the prime minister.

‘Yeah, it’s a sort of Maggie’s Mafia/Trouble in Paradise piece,’ said Tony Ball over a cup of office coffee and an Embassy King. ‘Maybe twelve, fourteen hundred words. Could be a page lead. Ever been there?’

‘Yes, as a matter of fact, I spent three—’

‘Town versus Gown. The old farts choking on their port. Our readers love this kind of thing.’

‘Couldn’t I just go and find out what happened, then write it down?’

‘We might run a trail on the front. Dreaming Spires and—’

‘Technically, I think that’s Oxf—’

‘Establishment Blues.’

‘Might it be possible to just go and—’
‘Why are you making such heavy weather of this, Mike? It’s a bloody Corridors of Power story. Bog standard. Two Bloody Cultures. Twelve hundred words by five o’clock Friday. All right?’

It was almost twelve years since I’d been there and I was not prepared for its impact on me.

I walked down from the station, past a road I’d always thought was called Tension but now revealed itself to be called Tenison Avenue. Bloody silly spelling, as I think Tony Ball might have agreed.

I checked into the University Arms hotel and looked over Parker’s Piece. In the middle was the lamp post on which was written ‘Reality Checkpoint’ – scrawled, presumably, by some tripping third-year on his way back to Emma.

We knew nothing of drugs. I wondered how many of the bright-eyed boys – their parents’ treasures, the comets of their hope – were now in Fulbourn and Park Prewett, fat and trembling on the side effects of chlorpromazine: an entire life, fifty indistinguishable years, in the airless urine wards of mental institutions because one fine May morning in the high spirits and skinny health of their twentieth year they’d taken a pill they didn’t understand, for fun.

I had an interview arranged with one of the Fellows of the college in question at three, but nothing before then, so I went for a walk.

What was I hoping to find? The core, the truth. In any city I’ve always hoped to find the essence in some square or on some street corner; then I could stop walking and searching. The Marais, the Seizième, the Bastille, Pigalle, Les Halles . . . Make up your mind, I want to say, just let one of you be It.

I walked for an hour. Garret Hostel Lane, Tennis Court Road, Free School Lane . . . One of them must hold the key. Every few yards, there were churches. Yet I’d no recollection of that. How could I have missed them all? It was early March, but cold: not sharp, eartip-frostbite cold, but grey into-the-bone sepulchral cold. Many faces I passed in Pembroke Street were crimson, raw and watery-eyed; it looked as though almost everyone was crying.

I had lunch in the Mill, at the corner table overlooking Scudamore’s Boatyard, sitting on the very bench where my closeness had irritated Jennifer and Robin. I wondered what had taken place between them at the ‘reconvened summit’ at the Free Press.

My ordered sausage and mash arrived, the single sausage coiled on top, the potato an island in a sea of gravy. It didn’t matter. I wasn’t even living in the present. I was pushing, with all my might, at the thin door into the past.

It was so flimsy, so transparent. Why couldn’t I just go through it? Christ, how much willpower would it take? I could picture my brain cells groaning with the effort. Compared to all the things we can and do achieve, how difficult can this really be? To do what we know is possible: to be in time as it truly is – non-linear.

I saw Rob lean forward at the table, his cord Wrangler jacket riding up a little, showing two or three lower vertebrae of his thin student back. I saw Jenny’s bare legs, with their sharp knees beneath a floral print skirt. I reached over and put my hand on the bench, on the same place, on the same molecules of wood that her thigh had rested on. I felt them on the skin of my hand. Please, please, let me go back . . . Dear God, is it really so much to ask?

I was on time for my interview, and the don in question, a History Fellow, was helpful. He recommended other people for me to go and see; one of them, who knew the existing Master well but had no personal interest in the matter, was in my old college.

He even telephoned this man (Lightfoot: I remembered the name) to ask if I could go and see him. ‘Yes, that’s right. He’s called Michael . . . ?’

‘Watson,’ I said.

‘Watson, yes. About five o’clock? Yes, he says that would be ideal.’

I arrived at the college half an hour early and walked briskly past the porters’ lodge. I felt like an impostor. I expected to be arrested.

I kept a lookout for anyone who might remember me. Waynflete, Woodrow. Dr Gerald Stanley. Dr Townsend (fat chance). My feet took me to the staircase where I’d first been lodged. Nothing had changed. It had the same smell of overheated concrete and lino. The students’ names were painted white on black, with some of the signwriter’s guideline horizontals still visible. I went up to my room, but when I got there, couldn’t remember whether it had been on the first or second floor.

I felt encouraged by this, as though I was not utterly the captive of a temporal malfunction, and turned to go down. A girl in a duffel coat brushed past me and let herself into what might have been my room. Co-res. Of course. Right on.

I thought she would report me, sound her rape alarm, blind me with Mace. But she appeared not to have seen me. She didn’t even register my presence.
Back in my hotel room, I got on the phone and set up some interviews. Next day, I hit the dons: I dragged the rubicund fox-hunters from their cloistered wassails, marched them at gunpoint down the corridors of Tory power and landmined the shady groves of their academe. It was Town vs Gown, all right, and, boy, was I Town.

So I told Tony Ball.

In fact, all the dons I met were dyspraxic teetotallers with beards and a variety of uncompromising regional accents, like mine. All were helpful, off the record.

By noon, the story had fallen into place. You can tell when this has happened because you stop writing. The first person you interview, you can’t move the pen fast enough, because it’s all new to you. Gradually, returns diminish. When your pen is still, and you can pause to help the interviewee out with the names of his own colleagues he’s momentarily forgotten, you’re there. The blank page is the story done.

So I set off to lunch at the Free Press, and on the way I found myself in Prospect Row, a narrow terrace. I didn’t remember this street much, but something made me stop. Had Stellings lived here one year? I had a memory of a door opening and a plain girl standing in the entrance.

The past was suddenly rushing in on me in a way I found hard to fight.

I was starting to bleed.

It wasn’t me going back into the past and then reliving, doing better. It was the past that had broken through and was now enacting itself exactly as before, but doing it on me in my most reluctant present.

There was a small old-fashioned grocer’s shop, John Cook & Bros, with a pyramid of baked-bean tins in the windows. I found I was back not to my student days but to my childhood when England was full of such places, in every high street, grocers with slightly different specialities, this one for cooked ham, that one for dry goods. From the shop there stepped out a man in a white apron with shiny hair and – I blinked and checked, and it was true – a centre parting. He might have been Edwardian.

I moved on rapidly, abandoning the idea of going to the Free Press. I hoped to clear my mind by walking fast: Parkside, then Drummer Street and the bus station where I’d once seen off Julie when she’d been to visit me. I cut right, up Milton’s Walk, and emerged in King Street.

I paused. There was famously a choice of eight pubs in King Street. I picked the nearest one and drank two large whiskies, quickly. Then another.

It was important not to become too drunk. In order to open up the past, go back, relive and do better, one needed to be relatively sober.

I walked a short way and stood at the foot of Malcolm Street, where the press photographers had been corralled into their metal cage for the start of Jen’s Last Walk.

It was unchanged. I could see how the unexpected width of it where it met King Street had made an ideal base for the police.

Once more, I saw Peck talking confidentially to his lapel, raising his hand to a distant colleague on Jesus Lane.

I saw DC Cannon, all gingery self-importance, holding his arms out to the throng to keep them back.

Little WPC Kettle in her funny hat and plump black calves was walking up to the door from which Hannah, as Jennifer, would emerge.

With my eyes shut, I saw the evening mist, I felt the Fen cold, I smelt the smoke of student No. 6.

I pressed with all my mind’s imagining force against the transparent portal of time.

As I stood with my eyes closed in the afternoon, the door gave way and I was through …

But it wasn’t that night, the night of Jen’s Last Walk, the reconstruction, that came back to me.

It was a night exactly two weeks before, at exactly the same hour. For the first time since the day itself I seemed to have a clear picture of what had happened. I don’t know if it was a memory of fact; but it was certainly a coherent version of events.

I had parked the Morris 1100 – where else – on Park Street, opposite the ADC theatre. Having left the party, I got in and drove quietly round the corner into Jesus Lane, pulling over near a fine Georgian or perhaps Queen Anne building on the left, at the head of Malcolm Street. I turned off the lights, killed the engine and waited.

Occasional students – alone, in chatting twos and threes – drifted up onto Jesus Lane, laughing, separating, going home. The majority went the other way, left, from the party house, down towards King Street, the greater number of colleges lying in that direction.

Eventually, I saw a blonde head behind a cloud of vaporous breath, moving smartly towards me. I fired the engine, turned on the lights. She watched and waited, to see if it was safe to cross in front of me or if I was about to move off. Unsure, she stayed on the right-hand side of Jesus Lane and headed east.

She was opposite the main gate to Jesus, alongside yet another church, when I drew level and called out across the road through my rolled-down window.

‘Jennifer. It’s Mike. Can I give you a lift?’
She peered over the misty street, her eyes narrowing.

‘Who? Oh, Mike. Yes.’

She hesitated.

‘Go on,’ I said. ‘It’s on my way. It looks freezing out there.’

She smiled in the light of the street lamp. I knew what she was thinking. She was thinking: it would look rude to say no. I’m quite happy to walk, but it would look as though I was snubbing Mike.

Turning her head to see if there were any other cars coming, she crossed the road, went round and climbed into the passenger seat next to me.

She closed the door with a bang. The car was filled with her scent and her clothes and her hair and the visible cloud of her wine and cigarettes and the breath of her living.

‘This is very kind of you, Mike. Are you sure it’s not out of your way?’ And her voice: contralto, as though suppressing laughter.

‘No, really. I’ve got to drop an essay off for my supervisor in De Freville Avenue.’

‘That’s just round the corner from us.’

‘I know. I was meant to hand it in today. I thought if I stuck it through his letter box he wouldn’t know what time it’d actually got there.’

Jennifer laughed as we swung up Victoria Avenue. ‘What a treat,’ she said. ‘A real car, with heating. I normally bicycle, but some bastard nicked my bike from outside Emma.’

‘Bastard.’

‘I’m getting a new one tomorrow. My dad’s coughed up.’

‘Brilliant.’

I couldn’t believe how fast the journey had gone. I drove as slowly as I could but we were already almost there. We went past the Fort St George to the right, the boathouses to the left, onto the bridge and all too soon we were at the junction with Chesier ton Road. I had her all to myself. It was the best two minutes of my life.

Then Jennifer began to search in her bag, presumably for her front-door key. Although we were not yet in her street, she obviously didn’t want to linger in the car, outside her house, while she looked for it. She wanted to be ready to leap out. I found this irritating.

Then . . . And then I had no further memory – if memory is what it was.

The recollection – no, I can’t call it that – the narrative, the sequence of events that had come into my mind, was all quite clear up to the point we crossed the Cam. I could play it and replay it and it never varied. I remembered every word she said, the inflection of her voice, the super-friendly relaxation with which she overlaid her slight anxiety.

But at the moment the front wheels of the 1100 were north of the water – nothing.

I opened my eyes. It was two o’clock in the afternoon on King Street; the taste of Bell’s whisky was in my mouth. The present was back with me in all its inescapable banality. ‘The present’. God, I hate it. It has no depth of field; no context.

I walked back to the University Arms, took the lift, forged my way through the Trust House fug, heaved back the series of sprung fire doors and went at last into my room. I took two blue ten-milligram pills and drank deep from my emergency Johnnie Walker.

What are you going to do, Mike?

Well, nothing. Obviously. Wait for the drugs to take a grip.

Then write my piece for the paper on the Tandy.

I can’t go into the past. I can’t get back there. So why would anyone else want to?

And if they managed – somehow – to get there, how would they know what was true?

It’s my dearest, most passionate wish to revisit, re-experience and do better.

With every atom of my being I long to be nineteen again.

Who in the whole world, if they were given a single wish, would not choose for the dead to live? Those you have known to breathe again and you to walk among them.

Who wouldn’t give all they own to be that age again, living in those days of hope but knowing what you later learned. To meet once more those bright-eyed girls and boys, to use them with the kindness of age but the vigour of nineteen.

But if I can’t manage this simple manoeuvre through the dimension of time that we poor, incompletely evolved homo saps can’t fathom or bend to our will, why should anyone else?

And even if they did, why should we listen to what they claimed to find?

I opened up my notebook, folded the pages over, and began to type on the plastic keyboard.
Tony Ball didn’t like the piece much; he thought it was ‘a bit pipe-sucking. A bit too much on-the-one-hand-on-the-other.’

Margaret liked it, though.

‘You’re so funny, Mike. And that piece with Jeffrey Archer was hilarious.’

‘It wasn’t meant to be.’

‘And Ken Livingstone.’

‘That was meant to be serious, too.’

Margaret gave me the look of exasperated affection that was starting to get on my nerves. You’re a funny boy, but I don’t mind, it seemed to say: you can’t fool me, because I understand you.

Anyway, I stuck the piece, along with three others, in for some more press awards, and I got another commendation, which meant another lunch, this time at the Savoy, where someone from the Mirror threw up at our table.

I was sufficiently pissed off by Tony Ball, though, that when I read in the Observer that three journalists from the Telegraph were starting a new daily newspaper, I rang them up and arranged to go along and see them.

To be honest, I also felt that working on the same paper as Margaret as well as living with her, some of the time, was becoming too much. I’d never chosen to be alone, but that was the way things had turned out, and I’d grown used to it.

The new paper’s offices were in a modernish block in City Road, near Finsbury Square. I would have thought it impossible for an architect to have designed a building so completely lacking character or distinction. But it had an advantage: it wasn’t in Wapping or the Isle of Dogs, where the other newspapers were all fleeing from the trade unions.

Three men in suits were waiting at the end of a long open-plan room on the fourth floor. They explained that they were exasperated by the criminal practices of the print workers and the incompetence of management. A fresh venture could use new (in fact pretty old, but new to England) technology to produce a high-quality paper which the journalists could effectively typeset for themselves, on screen. Press a button and – bingo, out it rolled on fresh newsprint at four or five regional centres, ready for distribution to the hungry public – readers who were tired of the Murdoch-Maxwell tat.

I could imagine Terry’s indignation. No on-site printing? No hot metal? No back-alley vans? You’re ‘aving a laugh, Mick. Next thing you’ll be telling me we’ve sold Tony Cottee . . .

The three men told me how they’d blagged millions from banks and pension funds to get the paper under starter’s orders. Then they told me all the distinguished journalists who’d agreed to write for it. I’d heard of some of them.

‘Who’s going to be your features editor?’ I asked.

They hadn’t got one yet.

‘What’s the paper going to be called?’

They didn’t know, but possibly. The Nation.

‘Who’s going to be the editor?’ I asked.

‘I am,’ said the oldest of the three. He’d previously edited the Investors Chronicle. ‘And what do you think you could offer us?’

‘What I do now, I suppose. What other feature writers have you hired?’

‘None yet,’ said one of the younger two, a solemn, dark-haired man of about my age. He looked like an archdeacon after lunch; in fact, he looked as though he was struggling to stay awake. Despite having it written down in front of him, he couldn’t get the hang of my name and ended up triple-barrelling me: ‘Mr Ingle-Engle-Anglebury.’ This wasn’t promising.

‘We may not have feature writers as such. All our reporters and specialists will contribute to the features pages.’ This was the third man, a zippier proposition with an explosive vocal style and narrowed eyes.

It was a bloody odd triumvirate. They seemed to have nothing in common with one another, for a start. Also, no one had heard of any of them – except maybe the older one, a little, if you read the City pages. Having tried once, I never did. The articles weren’t real journalism, they read as though the reporter had gone along for lunch then taken dictation from the company’s PR office.

I couldn’t imagine anyone with a proper job on an existing newspaper throwing it in to take a chance with these jokers, unless . . .

‘How much are you paying?’ I said.

‘We recognise we have to pay at the top end of the market, or above,’ said the boss. ‘How much are you paid at the moment?’

I was so surprised by the question that I told him.

‘We could do better,’ he said. ‘To give you an idea, the head of a small department would get thirty-five thousand
and a car.’

Well, I don’t know. There hadn’t been a newspaper started from scratch for more than sixty years, and the financial, technical and talent problems were surely insurmountable. But I was tickled, I admit, by the Three Stooges – by their posh voices and expensive grey suits; by the money they’d already raised and by the way they seemed to be making it up as they went along – trying to convince themselves as much as me that what they were saying was more than make-believe.

What it came down to was this. The old ‘can’t do’ sub-Soviet Britain, where you waited three weeks to get your phone mended, was dead. That was their belief and their proposition. The country had changed, and the change was somehow connected to people like Plank Robinson grossing half a mill. From now on: forget early closing, go-slows, strikes and demarcation – you can do what you want. We’ve become America. Enjoy!

We left it that I’d write a job description for myself, along with an analysis of how the other dailies handled features and how a new paper could do better. Then I’d send it to them, with a note on what I wanted to be paid and so on.

On the way down, in the lift, I met a bearded man with large blue-rimmed glasses who told me he’d be working on the listings pages – the ‘what’s on’ bit they planned for the back. If I came to work at the new paper, he said, I should perhaps come and stay the weekend with him in Suffolk. He and his wife had lots of guests and they were very ‘easy-going’. Blimey. I couldn’t wait to get through the swing doors and onto City Road again.

I never got round to sending in my application. The listings bloke had put me off. Also, the more I thought about it, the more ridiculous the whole thing seemed. I didn’t give it better than one chance in ten of getting through to launch.

Word got out, though, that I’d been to see them. I was called in by the managing editor of my rag, a ravaged trembly old hack called David Terry, known as DT’s, who raised my pay to £32,000 and gave me sole use of a Peugeot 405.

It was the first car I’d had since the 1100 had finally conked out, so my trip to City Road hadn’t been wasted.

It’s General-Election time again. Midsummer Folly has taken the country in a gentle grip, and Tony Ball has sent me on the road. I had a day with Bryan Gould and Peter Mandelson, the Labour campaign organisers, who spent most of the time trying to neutralise wild remarks made to the press by Ken Livingstone. Now that Ken’s an MP he seems to feel licensed to foul the nest at will and even the hardest heart (mine) grew weary of laughing at Bryan and Peter’s anguish. ‘Oh God. What now?’ Peter would say to Bryan as the hotline rang once more. They were good to me, though, P and B, and let me into all their meetings.

‘What are you going to do if you lose?’ I asked Gould.

‘Go into the country and find out what people want, then develop our policies to meet their aspirations,’ he said.

I’d never thought of politics like that. I thought you stood for what you believed – and if the voters didn’t like it, then tough luck. But I could see the attraction of doing it the other way round: like looking at the football league and seeing who was most likely to win, then becoming their supporter.

I don’t really understand British politics, I must say. It’s a bit silly for me to be writing about it. You’d have thought that nowadays most people would want some sort of market economy to get the motor turning vigorously, then buckets of free health care from the resulting tax take. Not so. Anyone who prescribes that mixture is viewed as pathetic, ‘not having any policies’ and not really being part of our island history. No. As of May 1987, a true Brit wants either a) socialism with as few deviations as possible from a command economy (Kinnock); or b) a Malthusian free-for-all, in which survival of the fittest takes on a quasi-moral dimension (Thatcher).

What a very odd people we are. Do you think we’ve read a book between us? Looked abroad? Learned anything at all? You have to wonder.

Off I go on the ‘Battle Bus’ with Mr Steel and Dr Owen. To general derision, they preach a middle way. They’re considered to have ducked the question. Another problem is that they don’t convince as a twosome. It’s a mariage blanc. There’s no heat, just a winsome cordiality. (Bet they have separate bedrooms.) Back home, Steel stays up drinking cider with the beardies; Owen’s on the phone to orotund Roy Jenkins – who I think is going to lose his seat and concentrate on building up his stocks of Pomerol.

The other day I was with Margaret Thatcher. She’s a rum one. I think she may be a natural scientist, like me. Or did she read Chemistry? Actually, that would explain it.

To prepare myself, to fill in the background, I had lunch with a man called Alan Clark, whom I’d rung a couple of times for his opinion of other politicians I was writing ‘profiles’ of. Most of it was unprintable, but I’d used the odd ‘quote’, always off the record. So for instance, in my article on an incoming minister, it might go: ‘For all his high reputation as an organiser in Whitehall, the new Minister for X is not without his critics. As one colleague put it: “He’s a pushy little Israelite who had to go out and buy the family silver.”’
Mr Clark had accepted my invitation to a swanky French restaurant near the Opera House in Covent Garden. ‘What’s so great about Mrs Thatcher?’ I said. ‘Is she very clever or what?’ ‘Not particularly, no. She intimidates people.’ ‘Who?’ ‘Howe, Baker, Channon. Fe-owler.’ He pronounced the name in imitation of the way the man himself said it. ‘What about you?’ ‘What about me?’ ‘Are you frightened of her?’ ‘I don’t like this food. Waiter. Take this away.’ ‘Monsieur does not like the sea bass?’ ‘No. It died in the water.’ ‘Would Monsieur like something else to—’ ‘No. Just take it away, will you.’ He lifted the plate up and thrust it at the waiter. ‘I’m sorry about that,’ I said. ‘This restaurant’s supposed to be—’ ‘Do you honestly like French food?’ said Clark. ‘No, not at all. But I thought you would.’ ‘I like it in France. Not this chi-chi nonsense.’ I breathed in deeply. I wanted to go to the toilet. ‘Mrs Thatcher, then. Do you . . . Do you like her?’ ‘Like her? Christ.’ He probed at an interdental cavity with a restaurant toothpick. Then his face relaxed a little. ‘She has a certain provincial sexuality, I suppose. Women of her type often do — from that Nonconformist background. Sex for them is a way to bettering themselves, certainly not a pleasure. Yet there’s something . . . Something there, and she seems to know it.’ ‘But are you frightened of her?’ ‘Yes, I suppose I am.’ ‘Though you’re cleverer than she is.’ ‘God, yes. It’s hard to explain. She has a peculiar force.’ ‘Who else is any good in your party? Geoffrey Howe?’ ‘Howe? Christ, no. I’d let him tie up the codicil to my auntie’s will in Swansea, that’s about all.’ So it went on (‘Wykehamist arse-licker’, ‘poor man’s Enoch’, ‘tub of kosher lard’ and so on), but by allowing him to choose the wine, I managed to stretch out our meeting to the respectable time of two-fifteen before he rose abruptly from the table and strode off down Bow Street.

I waited for my first sight of Mrs Thatcher in the flesh with several other journalists on a Midlands factory floor. I honestly forget what it produced. Pins and needles, pottery, brake linings. Something that entailed a fair amount of clanking, anyway.

I’ve always liked factories. The paper mill held no fears for me.

Factories are good for friendship. One of the hardest things about being alive is being with other people. Take Alan Clark. His face was deeply lined, but his hair, while greying, was thick, like a young man’s. And his suit, though presumably expensive (I can’t judge these things; I’m not a clothes man) was . . . Well, there was too much flannel and pinstripe, just too much suiting. And I didn’t want to see his teeth and his uvula. And his hand with the hairs on the back of the fingers wrapping round the glass . . . He was physically over-present. His molecules extended too far.

In factories, all being well, you don’t hear that much. To be heard, people have to call out. You’re alone, but it’s companionable. I like the floors of factories, the pocked cement slab with pools of oil and small puddles of water; I like the stained tea mugs and the low grade paper towels. I like the way it’s all stripped back, undecorated and it doesn’t matter if you make a mess.

I don’t suppose many of the journalists there that day had ever worked in a factory. They didn’t know, like me, the secrets of the brew-room and the toilet break and stores where Fat Teddy used to have a twice-weekly knee-trembler with Mrs Beasley from the back office. Through a side window on the factory floor, you could see her emerge from the stores, all flushed, smoothing down her skirt, checking things off on her clipboard in a pathetic dumbshow of normality.

Mrs Thatcher’s entourage consisted of about a dozen men in dark suits with carnations, blue rosettes or both. They talked to one another behind their hands as they waited; perhaps they were checking for halitosis or remarking on each other’s ties. Should they all have gone for yes-man’s Tory blue, or did a splash of daffodil show greater self-confidence? They stifled laughter. Each time one of them gave way, he immediately coughed and straightened up: his tie, his face, his spine. Even the older ones made repeated attempts at looking more dignified as they waited; then a whisper would start, and a giggle passed through them, making them look like ushers at a gay wedding.
From the machine room, the procession entered. There was a factory foreman in a brown coat, a couple of pinstriped youths and the sixty-year-old local MP – the undersecretary for postal orders or similar, who looked grey, shattered, as though he hadn’t slept for weeks, padding in on rubber-soled shoes, gesturing and talking to his leader.

She herself wore a check woollen suit and moved with a purposeful bustle from the hips, head slightly to one side – the combination of forward momentum and strained patience that had struck fear into the chanceries of Europe and the barracks of Buenos Aires.

Standing well apart from the others, she addressed the gathered press about the qualities of the local candidate, the postal-order chap. Then she moved on to Europe and the economy and her desire for low taxes. When she spoke of the Labour Party, her voice hit a different frequency. It stopped modulating like normal speech and seemed to lock on to some short wavelength, perhaps favourable to dogs but hard on the human otic nerve. It was bad luck that she stood beneath a sign that said ‘Ear defenders must be worn’.

When she’d finished her address, the supporters applauded showily, and it seemed surly of the press to keep their hands in their pockets, as their tradition of impartiality required.

Some of the local hacks then asked her trick questions about the town’s hospital and schools and so on, but she swatted them in the direction of the MP, whom she once more endorsed. She said he was sure to win. Or else, you felt.

I managed a few moments alone with her later on.

‘And this is Michael Watson,’ said the grinning young minder, pointing me towards the Prime Minister, who was sitting on a sofa with her knees together in the office of the factory manager.

I sat down on a hard chair opposite.

‘Do you read a lot of books?’ I said.

Her eyes shot up to the minder. Her hair was like fine wire wool at the front, lacquered, though thin. There was a trace of orange in the colouring that I hadn’t expected.

She smiled slightly and inhaled, tilting her head again fractionally, like a cardinal who had decided, on balance, to grant an indulgence to a pilgrim. In private, her voice was gentle and low, an excellent thing in woman.

‘I like to read biographies. I recently read one of Disraeli. One doesn’t have as much time to read as one would like.’

‘Do you believe in God?’

‘We are a Christian family. We go to church.’

‘Can you forgive the IRA men who tried to kill you in Brighton?’

‘It’s our job as the Government to help the police to bring the terrorists to justice.’

‘Would you like to see them hanged?’

‘There is no capital punishment in this country, as you know.’

‘But for terrorists?’

She didn’t answer, she merely looked at me, her blue eyes filled with pity and menace. I saw what Mr Clark had meant.

‘When you closed the pits in South Yorkshire, might you not have helped the miners to find new work?’

‘“Helped”? “Helped”? What do you mean?’

‘By putting money into starting new projects or—’

‘Whose money?’

‘Money from the relevant department. The Department of Trade and—’

‘That money would have come from the taxpayer. From you and me. It’s not the role of government to start up businesses. It’s our job to create a climate in which people can do that for themselves.’

‘Talking of money, are you personally well off? How much money do you have?’

‘Do you have any more questions about politics?’ said the minder.

I thought for a moment. ‘Not really. Yes. All right. Who do you think will win the election?’

‘We shall of course!’ The sun came out on Mrs Thatcher’s face again. ‘The Conservative Party. People trust us and know that we have done a marvellous job for Britain.’ She had a slight wobble in the middle of the ‘r’: Britain. ‘Though there is work still to do. In those inner cities, for instance, where we—’

‘Sure, but . . .’

‘What?’ The face was plump and powdered, like a rich aunt’s, but the nose was sharp. I could see the tiny blood vessels inside her nostrils.

‘Sorry.’ I’d lost my place for a moment. ‘Yes. I know what I wanted to ask. When you look back at the riots in Brixton and Liverpool and places, the miners’ strike and the Falklands War, the rate of unemployment and so on, I wonder if you had any regrets, if you would—’

‘Of course not. Britain is a far stronger country, far better equipped to face the future than when we came to
power in 1979. Inflation is at a quarter of what it was, our competitiveness has—'

‘But surely you must have some regrets. It’s only human to—’

‘Let me tell you something . . . Michael,’ said Mrs Thatcher, leaning forward so that her face was closer to mine. ‘Let me give you a piece of advice. “Too much looking back is a weariness to the soul.”’ She wagged her finger. ‘It was St Francis who said that. If you want to make something of your life, you must keep your eyes on the horizon. Never be deflected. Don’t look down, or you may stumble. Above all, don’t look back.’

‘Like Orpheus, you mean.’

She didn’t answer, but she smiled in my direction and nodded graciously as the minder showed me to the door.

When I read through my notebook later, there wasn’t much I could use. My article was thus made up chiefly of a description of the factory visit and of her entourage; for quotation I used some of the answers she’d given in public.

But in private, over the weeks and months, I did occasionally think about what Mrs Thatcher’d said to me.

I thought about it particularly when I was at an old church in Muswell Hill watching an amateur production of The Birthday Party by Harold Pinter. Margaret (Hudson, not Thatcher) was keen to go because a friend of hers had helped design the sets. I’m not interested in the theatre because I can’t deal with the level of non-reality it offers, but with Pinter it’s all right because he’s not pretending to be realistic. It couldn’t matter less whether you ‘believe’ in it or not.

I’d seen the play before, of course, in an undergraduate production. For students, it’s right up there with The Good Person and The Crucible; it’s nasty, brutish and not overlong. Posturing potential: limitless.

The other good thing about an old church is that it’s not, like a West End theatre, heated to sauna point. You don’t have to clap when the star comes on. You don’t have to gasp if someone uses the word ‘bloody’. You can stretch your legs and have a drink beside your seat; you can enjoy it.

And so I did. To begin with, at least. I’d forgotten how funny it was, the low-rent exchanges in the boarding house — like Steptoe or Hancock. And the way they can’t get over the fact that two strangers actually want to come and board in their dingy house. I’d also forgotten how early the landlord flags up the fact that he’s met these two men.

When Goldberg and McCann appeared, I presumed that whatever Stanley was meant to have done wrong had been invented by them. They were thugs, bad guys, so Stanley had to be OK. Anyway, how wicked could a failed pianist have been? Then there came a moment when I felt, with a lurch, that even if Goldberg and McCann are genuine villains, which they are, Stanley might still be guilty of something forgotten. That was not good.

It’s impossible to deal with a world in which the polarities aren’t mutually opposite.

When they turned the lights off to play blind man’s buff, I had to leave the church hall. I stumbled down the row of chairs, kicking over drinks and ran to the back of the hall.

Outside, I kept running, across to the main road, where the lorries were thundering down towards Archway. I thought of throwing myself beneath one.

It was like the attack I’d had in Basingstoke. I didn’t know what the hell was happening. But I crunched two blue pills in my dry mouth and got into a pub where I poured vodka down me.

It occurred to me as I stood there, waiting for the effect, that at such moments of extreme panic and anguish you do manage that trick with time: you are at last free from the illusion that time is linear.

In panic, time stops: past, present and future exist as a single overwhelming force. You then, perversely, want time to appear to run forwards because the ‘future’ is the only place you can see an escape from this intolerable overload of feeling. But at such moments time doesn’t move. And if time isn’t running, then all events that we think of as past or future are actually happening simultaneously. That is the really terrifying thing. And you are subsumed. You’re buried, as beneath an avalanche, by the weight of simultaneous events.

I have no memory of what happened then. The next thing I can recall with any clarity is the following day, being in Margaret’s flat.

I was in bed and the alarm clock showed a time of ten past twelve. I was wearing only my underclothes. I put on a dressing gown and went to the bathroom, then through to the living room, where Margaret was reading the paper.

She looked up and smiled. ‘Are you all right, love?’

I rubbed my head. ‘Yes, I’m fine. What happened?’

‘What happened? You tell me! One minute we’re watching the play, the next thing I know you’ve run out and disappeared.’

‘Yeah, I know, I remember that, but I don’t know what happened next. I think I went to a pub. What did you do when I ran out?’

‘Well, nothing. I thought maybe you’d just gone to the toilet or something. The speed you went, I thought maybe you were going to be sick.’
‘So what did you do?’

‘I left you to it. I thought if you were being sick you didn’t want me fussing over you. Plus I didn’t want to disturb
the other people, or the actors. It was quite a small place and you’d already made an almighty racket going out.’

‘I see.’

‘Anyway, after about ten minutes, there was a short break and I crept out to see if you were all right. I expected to
find you sitting in the churchyard, but you weren’t there. I decided to have a look in the street, but you weren’t there
either.’

‘Were you worried?’

‘A bit, but not really. You’re a big boy, Mike. I knew you could find your own way home. To be honest I was just
a bit cross that you hadn’t let me know.’

‘Know what?’

‘What you were doing. I mean, you might have said something, or left a note for me – to say you were going
straight home, or whatever it was you were doing.’

‘Yes.’

‘So, anyway, what were you doing?’

‘I don’t know. I felt . . . I felt ill in the play. I went out and then I went to a pub. But I don’t know what happened
after that. What time did I get in?’

‘Not very late. About twelve. The play finished at ten, I had a drink with Carol and Tom. I was back here soon
after eleven and I’d just fallen asleep when you got in. You seemed a bit the worse for wear.’

‘What? Drunk?’

‘Yes. And your hand was bleeding. You seemed . . . Woozy.’

‘How had I got back from Muswell Hill?’

‘I suppose you took a cab. You didn’t say.’

‘I didn’t say?’

‘No.’

‘But it must have been nearly three hours since I left the play. Didn’t you want to know?’

‘Yes, but you weren’t very chatty. You went to the bathroom then just crashed on the bed. I helped you take your
clothes off and you were asleep inside a minute.’

The timings all made sense. The narcotic effect of the blue pills and the alcohol must have taken hold eventually.
But as to what I had been doing between, say, nine-fifteen, when I felt subsumed by panic, and, say, eleven-thirty
when I had found a taxi, I hadn’t the smallest idea.

I was in the Peugeot 405, on the M4, on my way to Wales, listening to The World at One on Radio 4. I suppose I
was somewhere near Hungerford and I was calculating whether I had time to leave the motorway and find a pub
with reasonable food, or whether I should try and hold down whatever Membury Services had to offer.

On long drives I usually talk to myself and try to sort things out. I rehearse what I’m going to say to Margaret or
to old DT’s, when I go to ask for a rise; or to the people at the Independent (in the end they opted for that name over
the Nation) when I submit my tardy job application. Sometimes I make a short political speech or argue the case for
re-evaluating Emerson, Lake & Palmer’s Tarkus. What I’m trying to say is that although I have the radio or the
cassette player on, I don’t listen carefully. I’m in my own world.

So it was with some difficulty that I tried to rewind mentally and remember what I’d not been listening to. The
first words to penetrate my private thoughts were these:

‘. . . reports that police in East Anglia have discovered the body of a young woman.’

Perhaps there weren’t any important words before that for me to have missed.

At any rate, my car swerved, the lorry behind blasted me with his horn, I straightened up, regained the centre of
the middle lane, switched to the inside, after indicating, and turned up the volume on the radio.

‘Yes, Brian, that’s right. The police are expecting to hold a televised press conference at five o’clock this
afternoon in which they’ll be giving details of their discovery. At this stage they won’t confirm or deny that the body
is that of the student Jennifer Arkland, who disappeared in 1974. Her disappearance caused a great public outcry at
the time.’

‘Can you tell us any more at this juncture, Sally?’

‘Not a great deal. I understand the discovery was initially made by a man walking his dog yesterday evening, near
the village of Rampton. The police are unwilling to give any more details at the moment, though the secrecy with
which they’ve surrounded it does suggest that they have a major announcement to make.’

‘What would the identification process consist of?’

‘Well it depends of course on how long the person has been dead. But if it really is Jennifer Arkland and she died
at the time of her disappearance, then they are probably looking at dental records.’
‘And that would be straightforward?’
‘As I understand it. Yes, Brian.’
‘And have her parents made any comment?’
‘Well, her father died some years ago and her mother is unavailable at the moment.’
‘Thank you, Sally. You can hear more about that story on the P.M. programme at five.’

I pulled off the motorway at Membury Services and followed the signs into the car park, where I pulled up and turned off the engine.
I didn’t quite know what to do. I felt drained of energy. I leaned forward and rested my head on the steering wheel. Poor Jen. So she really was dead.
The sensation of immense fatigue climbed slowly through me, from the foot well, through the seat and up into my shoulders. I felt as though I might never move again.
I was in a hotel room in Cardiff at five o’clock. I had both the radio and the television on.

The press conference was about to start. There was a long table with a white floor-length cloth and blue screens behind it, on the central one of which was the coat of arms of the local constabulary, slightly skew-whiff. There were five seats with name cards in front of them, illegible at this distance, jugs of water, a bouquet of microphones pointing at the central chair and a single one in front of all the others. The orange, blue and black electrical leads trailed off the front of the trestle. Various technicians and town-hall clerks came in and adjusted seats, straightened mikes and disappeared again. The television camera briefly turned to show the rows of assembled journalists on foldaway council chairs. Bright overhead lights and spots were creating a circus atmosphere. The journalists chatted excitedly.

I thought of the child Jennifer in her first year, in a college scarf.

The TV reporter was beginning to struggle with the delay. There were only so many ways he could say that he didn’t know what to expect. We were taken briefly back to the studio.

I stood up and poured some whisky. I went to the bathroom for water, and looked at myself in the mirror as I ran the cold tap.

The face that looked back was nearly 35 years old. My hair was receding on either side and had vanished from the crown of my head. My student days had been in another life. My current life was fine.

I sat down in the armchair and waited. There was a rustle and a sense that it was all finally happening. Figures emerged from behind the screens and took their places. They seemed burly and diffident as they clambered through the cables, trying not to trip up on the gathered tablecloth. The men stood back to allow a woman in plain clothes to pass in front of them, which created further awkwardness as each searched for the correct place, twisting the name cards round to check.

Eventually, they were settled. The central figure, a grey-haired policeman with silver braiding and a chestful of medals, leaned into the microphones and spoke. A caption identified him as Deputy Chief Constable Adrian Bolton, OBE.

‘Ladies and gentlemen, first of all, thank you for coming along this afternoon, and thank you for your patience.’

He then introduced his colleagues: a ruddy superintendent; the bobby who’d been first on the scene; a female pathologist called Hedgecoe; and, finally, the third of the cops who was none other than DC – now Chief Inspector – Cannon: baldish, but still gingery, still pent-up and smirking.

‘Let me come straight to the point,’ said Bolton. ‘At approximately five o’clock on Sunday afternoon a member of the public walking his dog near the village of Rampton discovered what appeared to be human remains. They were in a ditch, between the railway line and a watercourse at the edge of an area known as Westwick Field. This is open country, not close to any habitation. At the north side of the area is the end of Cuckoo Lane, an unmade road that leads into Rampton, and on the south side is the Oakington Road, though no lane or path leads up from it. It thus took some time for us to get the personnel and the equipment we needed to the site, which we approached from the Rampton end.’

I wondered how much more Fen geography this Bolton was intending to give. He was certainly in no hurry. He spoke with grave emphasis, enjoying his moment beneath the lights, unable to keep a tremor of self-congratulation from his voice.

‘The body appeared to have been carefully buried, and covered not only with earth but also with pieces of concrete which were further weighed down with an old railway sleeper. Presumably this was in order to prevent the body being discovered or unearthed by wildlife or by dogs. Preliminary inspection established that it was the body of a young female, approximately twenty years of age. It was removed from the site on Monday evening and taken to a police laboratory. Tests carried out in the course of Tuesday and Wednesday established that the cause of death appears to have been a blow or blows to the skull which caused a fracture of the cranium and – presumably – internal head injuries. One of the legs was also broken. The extent of the decomposition of the body means that it is impossible to discover what further injuries, if any, to the soft tissues may have contributed to the death of the individual.

‘I am not proposing at the moment to give further details about the young woman’s body and this is for reasons of consideration for her family, and I know you will understand that.’

Bolton paused hammily and poured himself a glass of water. There was utter silence in the room and in the broadcast.
He coughed and resumed. ‘I am further able to tell you that tests carried out yesterday evening and comparisons with existing dental records enable us to announce that the young woman has been identified as Jennifer Arkland, a 21-year-old student from Lymington in Hampshire, who went missing in February, 1974.

‘I can further confirm that we will be pursuing our inquiries into this case with the utmost urgency. The case has never been closed, though it has been reclassified from one of “Missing” to one of “Murder” as of today. We have been in touch with the deceased’s family, and I understand that it is her mother’s intention to make a statement in the near future. In the meantime, I would ask all of you to respect their privacy at what must be a very difficult time for them.

‘I would like to end by congratulating my colleagues on the extremely swift and professional way that they reacted to this discovery. I know that this exceedingly sad case of a young person disappearing on the threshold of adult life was not only the cause of much public sympathy at the time, but also has long been something that my colleagues were determined to bring to a satisfactory conclusion one day. I know that Chief Inspector Cannon is one of many officers who consider the pride and reputation of their force to depend on a successful outcome to this case and I want to stress that I have every confidence in them.

‘If you have any questions you would like to ask me or my colleagues, then this is the moment. We have a time limit of fifteen minutes here, so I’m afraid you can ask only one question each. The gentleman in the blue blazer will bring the microphone to you and I’d be grateful if you could wait for him to reach you before you begin your question. Yes. We’ll start with you. The gentleman in the front with the grey anorak.’

‘Have you been able to date the time of death? I mean, how soon was it after she disappeared?’

Bolton nodded to the pathologist, Hedgecoe. ‘We can’t be certain,’ she said. ‘But soon afterwards. Certainly within months, I should say.’

‘So it’s possible she was alive for some time?’

‘On the scientific evidence, yes.’

‘But on the circumstantial evidence,’ said Bolton, ‘it seems unlikely.’

‘Have you completely ruled out natural causes?’

‘Yes,’ said Hedgecoe. ‘In our view it’s impossible for the head injury to have been accidental.’

‘There’s also the question of the interment,’ said Bolton. ‘Unless you’re suggesting that she died in an accident and then someone buried her. Which would anyway be a serious crime.’

‘Can I ask Chief Inspector Cannon if he’ll be re-interviewing old suspects or starting from fresh. Is he in charge and what’s his line of inquiry going to be?’

‘I think that’s four questions,’ said Bolton.

Cannon leant forward eagerly. ‘First of all, I’d like to stress that this file has never been closed. So all our records are up to date and accessible. It’s not a question of “reopening” anything, merely of continuing with an ongoing inquiry.’

‘Does the discovery of the body give you new forensic evidence?’

‘You mean scientific evidence?’

‘Yes.’

‘It’s possible. It’s too early to say.’

‘Do the recent techniques used in clearing the suspect in the double murder in Narborough in Leicestershire – the so-called DNA testing – have any bearing on—’

I fired the ‘Off’ button on the remote control and the screen flashed away into darkness.

Over the next few days, the national papers disinterred, as it were, the whole story and printed many heart-stopping pictures of Jennifer.

There were at least three interviews with Anne, now head of a neighbourhood law centre in south London, and two with Molly, a GP in Staffordshire with plump twin girls – though none with the unfortunate Robin Wilson who, although he presumably long ago dispensed with the National Health psychiatric services, lives ‘quietly’ somewhere in Wales, where he teaches at the local college. There was also a ‘quote’ from Malini Coomaretcetera, a New York paediatric consultant; from Stewart Forres (‘director of the edgy 1982 cult British film Sheet Lightning’) and from his ‘ex-wife Hannah Waters, who played Jennifer in the police reconstruction of her last night alive and is currently with the Bristol Old Vic theatre company’.

That ‘ex’ shook me up a bit. How fast other people had moved onward in their lives. I hadn’t been to see the Forres film because the word ‘edgy’ put me off. It’s code for ‘the men all swear a lot’. (‘Feisty’ means the women all swear a lot.) I hardly ever swear myself and find it irritating. Perhaps I was also jealous of Stewart.

Eventually, I stopped reading the coverage. I couldn’t stand another article about 1970s fashions, Abba or tank tops. This kind of decade-drivel used to be the territory of Chick’s Own or Bunty but has now run through whole
sections of once-serious newspapers.

On the following Monday I was telephoned by Tony Ball at home, and this was unusual, in fact unprecedented. He was ringing to suggest I do a big ‘background’ piece on Jennifer for the following Sunday.

‘But you didn’t like the thing I did about the new Master.’

‘This is different, though. It’s more your line of country. I remember that great piece you did on the Ripper. All that footwork in Bradford.’

‘This isn’t a serial killer, Tony.’

‘How do we know?’

‘Because there aren’t any other bodies.’

‘Could be linked to other unsolved crimes. Just that they haven’t made the connection yet.’

‘It looks like a straightforward domestic. It’s bound to have been the boyfriend.’

I talked my way out of it, and for a time all went quiet. Ball still had no idea I’d been to the same university, let alone that I’d known Jen; and I certainly wasn’t going to tell him now.

Then, a little over a week after Jen’s body was discovered, Mrs Arkland made a statement for the television cameras. She read it in a comfortable-looking lounge, dimly lit by a couple of table lamps in front of drawn curtains. She had grown plumper over the years and her hair was grey.

You could still see in her face the happy housewife who had sent her eldest daughter off to university before turning her attention back to the three still at home, but her eyes were glaucous and bulky with pain.

‘My eldest daughter Jennifer would have been thirty-five,’ she said in a pitiless, accusing voice. ‘No day has passed since her disappearance without my first thought on waking being of her. Not a single day. I have felt her presence in everything I have done. I have heard her voice in all my thoughts. I have taken her back inside myself.’

She looked down at her paper through the bottom of her bifocals. ‘My husband died some years ago. He never recovered from the shock of losing Jennifer, from the agony of not knowing where she was. I thank God he did not live to see this dreadful day and to know the worst. My other daughters have suffered too. They have lost a sister and a father and I have not been the mother to them that I should have been.’

She looked down again and breathed in deeply. It was difficult to watch. I pictured people all over the country crying.

‘I shall not be giving any interviews to the press or making any further comment. I ask all of you to leave me and my family alone. You will get nothing from us.

‘We shall shortly be able to give Jennifer the funeral that has for so long been denied her. It will be a private ceremony at a private location. So we will bring this terrible story to a close. That much at least is a relief for us, and I would like to thank the police for their help and understanding both at the time of Jennifer’s disappearance and over the last ten days.’

It seemed as though she could hardly bear the weight of her own head. Although she read from a prepared script, her voice didn’t run smoothly; it seemed to have silted up with age, with the gravel of her fourteen years’ wait.

‘I would like finally to appeal to anyone who may know anything that might help us bring to justice the person or people who killed my daughter. I ask this not for revenge. It’s too late for that. But I hope that any parent listening will understand why it is important that whoever was responsible for this terrible deed should be apprehended. If only so that no other family may suffer what we have been through.’

She took off her glasses and stared into the camera. ‘I never stopped hoping. I never, ever gave up hope that one day Jennifer would walk up the drive, alive and well, with some explanation of where she’d been. Now I have finally despaired. I know that now we can be reunited only at my death. Good night.’

For several days I didn’t see anyone, even Margaret.

I felt that my life was on two paths. There was the one I knew about and understood: Margaret, the paper, Charlotte and her friends, work, people, drinks and all the stuff of living in London – Saturday afternoon, the football crowds on their way to Highbury, the kettle on, a film in the evening, Chinese dinner, having enough money. All this had grown slowly better. I’d become more adept at being with other people; I’d lowered my expectations of them and learned to let my mind drift into neutral when they spoke. That sense of happiness just out beyond my reach – I’m not sure I’d grasped that exactly, but I’d got something close to it, contentment maybe, or at least a functioning routine with regular rewards.

But then there was the second path or strand, which I didn’t understand at all, and I felt this was principally because I couldn’t remember parts of it. Here I was with a memory that others assured me was freakish in its recall of facts and dates and long passages of writing; yet actions and events in my own past that really should have been able to remember themselves without prompting from even a workaday, let alone a Rolls-Royce, memory – they
weren’t there. They were not only unstored, unregistered, not indexed; it was as if these things had never happened.

So perhaps they hadn’t.

About two weeks after the police press conference, on a Sunday afternoon, I began to feel uneasy.

Then I started to have symptoms of panic, such as I had had in the course of The Birthday Party. I paced up and down my Bayswater flat. I put some music on, then took it off again.

I felt that events which should have been attached to given dates – however artificial and downright wrong it was to think of time in that way – had shaken themselves loose and were happening again, as for the first time. What we childishly called ‘the past’ was somehow present. And, as at that moment when I had run outside the old church, everything seemed to be happening at once – now.

I did what I always did: took pills and alcohol and tried to hold on. I went to sit on the bed, wrapping my arms tight round my ribs.

I’d had lunch at the Mill. I did know that. That much was sure. I went in there on my way back from the Sidgwick Site, where I’d been to a history lecture on Garibaldi and the unification of Italy. The lecturer was a woman called Dr Elizabeth Stich. I generally preferred the Anchor for its views and thought the Mill overrated, but for some reason, perhaps just for a change, I went in and sat at a table. I had a pint of bitter and ordered from the ‘baked potato with various fillings’ part of the menu. Probably with cheese. Good value. Jennifer was at the adjacent table with Robin Wilson. He leant forward to talk to her; they were having a conversation of the kind known as ‘heavy’ and didn’t want others to hear. I noticed his jacket and tee shirt ride up at the back. Jennifer sat back against the wooden settle in a slightly defensive posture; she wore a floral print skirt. I could see her bare legs. She had a sharp patella that gave a fetching inverted-triangle shape to the knee. She was smoking a cigarette and trying not to laugh, but her eyes looked concerned and vulnerable as Robin’s low voice went urgently on.

I have that picture of her with utter clarity. They talk of memories being ‘etched’ in the mind and you think of acid on a steel plate. That’s how fixed that image is for me. Yet it’s more living than the etching metaphor suggests. There’s blood and breath and movement and fleeting colour. She is alive, God damn it, she is alive. She looks so poised, with that womanly concern beginning to override the girlish humour. I will always remember that balanced, beautiful woman/girl expression in her face. She was twenty-one.

They left. She was so absorbed by what Robin was saying that she forgot to say goodbye either to me or to her friend Malini who was at the other end of the room. She went through the door, hoisting her brown leather shoulder bag up, the hem of the skirt fluttering for a second as she tripped down the step onto the cobbles. I went outside and stood for a moment opposite the end of Laundress Lane.

I had drunk three pints of beer by now and had taken a blue pill, but I didn’t feel good. I felt angry. I began to walk up the grey passage of Mill Lane with its high buildings. I felt trapped in a world that I couldn’t mould to my own desires. Others were in sunlight; I was in darkness.

I kept walking north up Pembroke, then Downing Street, past the Museum of Archaeology and Anthropology, which made me wonder yet again at the nature of the anthropoid Homo sapiens, this functional ape with the curse of consciousness – that useless gift that allows him, unlike other animals, to be aware of his own futility. The story of Adam and Eve put it with childish but brilliant clarity: Paradise until the moment of self-awareness and then . . . Cursed. For ever cursed. (Christians called it ‘fallen’, but it was the same thing: the Fall was the acquisition of consciousness.) As I walked past Downing Place, I remembered reading, on Dr Woodrow’s recommendation, I think, Miguel de Unamuno, the Catholic philosopher from Spain, and finding the same thought there: ‘Man, because he is a man, because he possesses consciousness, is already, in comparison to the jackass or the crab, a sick animal. Consciousness is a disease.’

Then in the wider light of St Andrew’s Street, I saw Jennifer, arriving from the west, pushing her bike up on the pavement and sticking its front wheel through the railings outside Emmanuel. I stopped and watched her go in. I decided to steal her bicycle because if she was on foot she would be less independent.

I looked down at the menu in the window of Varsity, the Greek restaurant: dolmades, kleftiko, moussaka, the usual stuff, keenly priced for students. When I was sure she would have crossed the front court and be well out of sight I went over and pulled the bike out. She hadn’t locked it, the silly girl. She was trusting like that. I rode it quickly away towards the station, then doubled round and took it back to the sheds at my own college. I put it in the furthest corner, in an unnumbered rack. Where better to hide a bicycle?

This much I remembered.

Then . . . Then . . .

Malcolm Street wasn’t a street you went to very often, since it was merely a cut between King Street and Jesus Lane, two other places you had no reason to go. In fact, when I heard Jen mention its name to someone after a lecture, I had to look it up in the map on the front of my Heffer’s diary. Then I went to inspect. It was a street which appeared to be subject to various planning restrictions because all the houses were painted the same colour. They
were of that Georgian design much admired by conservationists, though despite their value they were subdivided and let to students; you could tell by the many bells and entryphones.

Jen had mentioned a house number and the name of the people whose party it was. It was only two days after I’d taken her bike and I doubted whether she’d have got a new one already. I decided to crash the party. This was always easy enough to do, particularly if you took drink. I bought two bottles of wine from Arthur Cooper and went to the Bradford hotel to get drunk. I calculated that by eleven the little house would be so full that the door would be opened by a guest not a host and that two bottles and a confident attitude would get me in.

Why did I go to the party at all? Why didn’t I just wait for Jennifer to emerge? I don’t know. I had no conscious plans. The party was crowded, jostling, shouting, loud, difficult to tolerate. There was dancing in one room. It was pointless unless you were an anthropologist. A jackass or a crab might have had enjoyed working out what function the gathering performed in the social behaviour of the species. I stayed as long as I could stick it, then went back to the Morris 1100 in Park Street.

I drove it round into Jesus Lane and waited, listening to the radio. When the car was fuggily hot, I turned off the engine and the heating. I watched a few students coming up Malcolm Street towards me from the party house; I saw others go the opposite way, back into town. I watched to see if I recognised them.

I feared that Jennifer would be accompanied, though I hadn’t seen Robin at the party and anyway there were difficulties between them. But surely in his absence some opportunistic youth would have tried his luck. . . . Or failing that, one of her many female friends would emerge with her.

But no. Eventually I saw that familiar walk – familiar to me, at least, from so much study. She turned and waved to someone going the other way, paused, and for a moment made as if to change direction; then she continued north towards me, running for a few paces to re-establish her course. She settled to a brisk and cloudy walk. I started the engine. She looked over the street, expecting to cross to my side, but was unsure if my car was going to move off. To be safe, she stayed on her own side of Jesus Lane and started to walk quickly eastward.

I pulled up opposite and wound down the window. I called out her name and she looked suspiciously across the road to see who I was. I offered her a lift and she glanced both ways up and down the street. She didn’t really want to get into the car with me, but she did so for fear of seeming rude.

Once in the passenger seat, she made the best of it, saying how grateful she was and what a lucky coincidence it had been.

I was overwhelmed by her presence.

And in a minute, maybe three, it was over – as we crossed the river bridge. The ridiculous shortness of our journey together summed up everything that I hated about time and living.

It enraged me. When we came to the junction with Chesterton Road, I turned left in order to loop round the short one-way system, back eastward for a bit, then right and down into the quiet terrace where she lived.

But I didn’t loop round. I was too angry. I went left up Victoria Road, then swung right at random, by a church – where else – and drove hard through a modern estate, then left and right and onto Histon Road, going north. It was late and the road was clear and I put my right foot down hard.

Jennifer began protesting, asking me to stop. Her charm was gone. By taking the wrong road then accelerating hard I’d forfeited the intimacy we’d had for those wonderful two minutes. The only reason I’d not taken her home was because I wanted to keep her with me; I didn’t mean any harm. But the more I drove, the more it became impossible to return: she was backing me into a corner, and I didn’t know how to deal with her.

She’d become a whiny, frightened, selfish child – though you could tell she didn’t know quite how frightened to be. Sometimes she’d stop saying things like, ‘For Christ’s sake, you lunatic. Just stop’, and try to be reasonable or what she thought of as charming. ‘Listen, Mike. I don’t know what you’re playing at, but, look, let’s just stop and talk about it.’

But she wasn’t charming any more. Not to me. She was no more charming than the man behind the counter in the Basingstoke record shop.

Then she tried being silently sulky for a bit as I drove through Histon. It’s extraordinary the faith that women place in sulking. Someone should tell them that far from impressing people, filling them with remorse or changing their minds, this routine merely makes them – the sulkers – look ridiculous.

It wasn’t a road I knew. It wasn’t one of those that led to Over Wrought or Nether World or any of those villages with their Wheatsheafs and Red Lions. It was a flat Fenland strip and the large villages were stuck to it like settlements on a trade route, though with gnomes in their lamplit gardens.

In one of them – Cottingham, Cotham? – I swung off the main road down a village street with a signpost bearing two names I couldn’t read. As we left the village, the road was narrower, with higher hedgerows, a proper country lane at last, dark and uninhabited.

Then we came too soon to the outskirts of another village, Rampton, and I was furious that nowhere was there
open country, fields and fens and trees. Everywhere there seemed to be cheap buildings, low shelters for people who would never raise their eyes.

By this time, Jennifer had started screaming and swearing at me, hammering my arms on the steering wheel. She was trying to impress on me how desperate she was, how serious this was, that she was prepared to risk making us crash. I pushed her away.

In the village there were no lights on, but I saw a fork ahead. The upper road led straight out again, presumably, and on to the second named village I’d seen on the previous signpost. The lower road was marked ‘Dead end’ or ‘No through road’ — or something that suggested it went nowhere. So I swung down it. A dead end was what I wanted. I had to shut her up. I couldn’t go on driving all night, and her hysterical behaviour had left me no escape back into normality.

The road bent at right angles to the left. It stopped being made up and became concrete. I switched the headlights on to full beam and about a hundred yards ahead I could see that it stopped altogether and became a farm track. This really was the end.

I lay on the bed in my Bayswater flat, panting and sweating under the assault of memory.

Presumably it was the word ‘Rampton’, the name of the village, which I’d heard when Deputy Chief Constable Bolton mentioned it, that had slowly worked its way through my mind’s defences and precipitated the recall.

What I didn’t know for sure was whether the sequence of events it had eventually unlocked in my memory was a true or false account of what had taken place.

I drank more whisky and eventually I slept.

Two months passed and the story went cold. There were no arrests and no developments.

Then I went into work one Friday, roughly ten weeks after the police press conference, to find a message on my desk from Felicity Maddox, the sarcastic newsroom secretary.

‘Please ring Chief Inspector Cannon. Urgent.’ There was a number, and then, still in Felicity’s writing, ‘He says “confidentiality guaranteed” !? F.’

I could feel her eyes on me as I picked the message slip up off the desk, but I showed no emotion.

‘When did this guy ring?’ I called over.

“It says on the paper,” said Felicity. ‘Under “Date and Time of Call”, oddly enough.’

‘Right.’ It was the day before. ‘I’m going out now, I’ve got to go and see someone, so—’

‘Aren’t you going to ring your policeman?’

‘No, no, that’s just about a story I’m working on, a long-term project. There’s no rush. I’ll call him later.’

‘Can’t think why you bothered coming in.’

Her own coin, I thought, but it didn’t seem to register.

My heart was squeezed every time I thought of the word ‘Urgent’. There was something about it. I couldn’t pretend to myself that Cannon just wanted a chat for old times’ sake.

I took the Central Line home and tried to put my flat in order. I wrote cheques for a couple of utility bills; I turned off the boiler and made sure all the windows were double-locked. I took the photobooth picture of Jennifer with Anne out from my desk drawer, took it over to the window overlooking the garden square and looked at it.

There she was: my fate, my self. I kissed her face. Or rather, I kissed the cheap photopaper that had been squeezed damp from the side of the machine. I felt no remorse or sadness.

Then I took my file of newspaper cuttings about Jen’s disappearance and put a match to them in the fireplace. After a moment’s hesitation, I threw the picture in as well. Now she was gone. The edge didn’t curl up as it’s meant to; but I did see Jen’s eyes look into mine one last time. I felt as though someone was prising my ribs apart with their bare hands.

When everything was quite burned, I swept the ashes out and emptied the pan down the toilet, which I flushed until every speck was gone.

I wondered what to do about Margaret. Best to find out what Cannon wanted first. I dialled the number and after being put on hold for a minute, got through to a young woman.

‘Can I speak to Chief Inspector Cannon, please?’

‘Who’s speaking, please?’

‘Michael Watson.’

‘Will he know what it’s in regard to?’

I breathed in hard. ‘I’m not able to predict that.’

‘Pardon?’

‘I’m returning his call.’
There was a pause, then suddenly Cannon was on the line. ‘Mr Engleby. Thank you for calling back.’ He sounded exhilarated. ‘We’ve had the devil’s own job tracking you down. Thank goodness for your old school. They pointed us in the right direction.’

Cannon had become more confident with age; he’d also acquired a bit of bogus golf-club polish to his voice. ‘Good,’ I said.

‘I expect you know what I’m calling in connection with.’

‘Not really.’

‘The case of Jennifer Arkland. I’m sure you remember.’

‘Yes. Of course.’

‘One or two things have come to light. I’d very much like to talk to you again. I’d like you to come up here and see me.’

‘I can’t come today.’

‘Yes, you can, Mr Engleby. I’m sending a car for you. Are you at home?’

‘Yes.’

‘My man will be with you in a few minutes. I didn’t come to your newspaper because I didn’t want to make a scene in front of your colleagues. I have been requested by the family to play this very low key for reasons of press and publicity. In return for that, I’d appreciate your full co-operation. Please don’t leave your house. Otherwise I shall issue a warrant for your arrest. I can play it rough if you prefer.’

‘I understand.’

I put the phone down. I felt all right. He wasn’t arresting me; it was all quite amicable. If they really thought I’d killed Jennifer, if they really had hard evidence, they’d have marched in and grabbed me. They’d have taken no chances. That’s how the plods operate.

I called Margaret at work and told her I was going to Edinburgh and that I’d ring the next day. She received this news coolly, but things were not that good between us since I’d been spending less time in Holloway. I was relieved that she wasn’t too inquisitive.

The bell rang and two reasonable policemen took me away to a tactfully unmarked maroon Volvo. We stopped for a sandwich and fizzy orange drink at a garage in East Finchley before we hit the North Circular. By two o’clock I was seated in the interview room in Mill Road police station.

A constable in shirtsleeves sat with me, saying nothing. I had a cup of tea in a styrofoam cup. I asked if I could smoke and he nodded, so I lit up a Rothman’s, knocking the ash into a little tin ashtray on the table. One wall was clouded glass and I presumed it was a one-way, though that seemed a bit hi-tech for Mill Road. There was a cassette recorder on the table, housed in an odd, non-commercial wooden box.

What was I thinking as I waited? I don’t know. Does one ever really think? I seemed just to drift through it. In order to keep itself functioning under pressure, the brain releases chemicals that make the bizarre and the frightening seem normal. The Nat Sci Tripos taught me that homo saps who did not have this brain function were unsuccessful in reproduction, presumably because they couldn’t handle stress and got themselves killed a lot by animals or other saps. So we who were chosen, we survivors, have it in spades.

Oddly enough, it can work too well. It can sometimes render crises not just normal or dealable-with, but strangely flat. I had to keep on reminding myself to stay alert – that I was in danger.

Cannon came in, all beer belly and bluster. He shook my hand, sat down and lit up with orange fingers.

‘See you haven’t stopped either,’ he said with a grin. This was a false note because he didn’t know I smoked; I hadn’t had one when he came to my room in college. He hadn’t offered me one.

He swung his feet up onto the table. He was wearing brown suede shoes with uneven wear to the soles.

‘So let’s have a chat about Jennifer, shall we, Mike? Hang about. Better turn the old squawkbox on, hadn’t we? Is there a tape in, John? Jolly good. Here we go then. Date, 19 June, 1988. Time 14.24 hours. Those present . . .’

‘What happened to Peck?’ I said.

‘I beg your pardon?’

‘Peck. The policeman who was in charge before.’

‘He took early retirement on health grounds. He lives in Huntingdon. Follows the case, though. Anyway, Mike, I’ve been having a little think about you. Why did you change your name to Watson?’

‘I got a job for a magazine, but they wanted to hire women. So I took the name Michèle Watt. It was a joke. It was a mixture between my own first name and the surname of a famous scientist.’ I paused. ‘James Watt. But the magazine misprinted it as “Watts”. Then eventually it wasn’t necessary to pretend to be a woman any more. And I moved to another paper, where I wanted to be a man again, but my professional identity was sort of bound up with this Michèle Watts, so I just changed it as little as I could to make a clean start.’
Cannon looked at me, then at the tape machine, as though to make sure it had got all that down OK. He raised an eyebrow.

‘So you pretended to be a girl, then there was a misprint, then you pretended to be someone else again. Have I got that right?’

‘More or less.’

‘I see. It wasn’t because you were trying to disguise who you really were?’

‘Why would I do that?’

‘Did you change your name by deed poll?’

‘No.’

‘But you have credit cards in the name of M.K. Watson.’

‘Yes.’

‘That’s a fraud, Mike, isn’t it?’

‘It’s harmless.’

‘Ever been in trouble with the police – under either of your names?’

‘No.’

‘Never caught, were you? I asked around the shops a bit. At the time Jennifer disappeared. I showed your picture to a few people. Off-licences and that. I noticed the booze in your room – vermouth and gin – and I wasn’t sure how a boy on a full grant could afford it.’

‘I worked in the holidays.’

‘Some of the shopkeepers weren’t happy with you.’

I didn’t say anything. I thought carefully. I could say, ‘I don’t have a record’; but I didn’t see how that would help. So I stayed silent.

‘I’ve done a lot of checking, in fact,’ said Cannon. ‘You became a bit of a hobby of mine, to tell the truth, Mike. I’ve had my eye on you off and on for all these years. You know, it’s like blokes you were at school with. You’re not in touch all the time, but out of the corner of your eye, you’re sort of aware of what they’re up to. Know what I mean?’

I nodded.

‘Now let’s talk about Jennifer, shall we?’

‘OK.’

‘Were you her boyfriend?’

‘In a way.’

‘What way? Were you having sex with her?’

‘That’s none of your business.’

‘Quite a few boys did have sex with her, didn’t they?’

‘I don’t think so.’

‘According to what I read in the papers.’

‘I wouldn’t believe that stuff.’

‘Well, you should know! Anyway, I didn’t necessarily believe it either. So I went to check it out for myself.’

I could see that Cannon was trying to rile me.

‘Oh yes,’ he said, lighting up another Embassy, ‘quite a hot little number, our Jennifer.’

I didn’t rise to it. It wasn’t true. One problem with her and Robin had been what she called ‘sex, lack of’. Of course Cannon couldn’t know this, because he hadn’t read her diary.

I smiled, confident in my superior knowledge.

‘A boy in King’s and a boy in Downing both said—’

‘Both lying,’ I said. ‘Just schoolboy braggarts. Perhaps they kissed her at a party and they wished they’d gone the whole way.’

Cannon stood up and went to a drawer in a desk in the corner of the room. From it, he took a plastic bag containing a large padded envelope, addressed to Jennifer’s mother in Lymington.

‘Do you recognise this?’ he said.

I shook my head.

‘Someone sent it to Jennifer’s mother. It contained her diary.’

I nodded. It was not a time to speak.

‘There aren’t any fingerprints on it,’ said Cannon. ‘Maybe whoever sent it wore gloves.’

‘Have you read the diary?’

‘Oh yes.’

‘And was it helpful to you?’
‘Very much so, thank you, Michael. Now I wonder why whoever sent this diary to Mrs Arkland did send it. Do you think he was suffering from a bad conscience?’

I shrugged.

‘Anyway, there are just traces of possible prints on the diary itself.’

‘Won’t they be Jennifer’s?’

‘Could be. Hard to tell. She hasn’t got any fingers left. Just bones.’

There was a pause.

‘So,’ I said, ‘had this diary been with her flatmates or what?’

Cannon laughed. ‘You’re a bit late with that, aren’t you, Mike? It’s as though you knew it had been missing.’

‘No, I didn’t. I didn’t even know she kept a diary.’

‘You were her boyfriend and you didn’t know she kept a diary?’

‘I didn’t see her every day.’

‘Listen, Mike, I’m going to give you a chance. I’m going to let you make a clean breast of the whole thing. It’ll be in your best interests. It’ll play really well in court. Remorse, regret. You can talk about the strain of exams and student life and all that. You’ll get life, you could be out in ten, twelve years. You’ll only be about my age. It’s nothing.’

‘I don’t know what you’re talking about. Well, I do, but I mean I can’t confess to something I didn’t do.’

‘You might even end up in the loony bin. Broadmoor or Rampton. That would be appropriate, wouldn’t it? Rampton. Like the village where you killed her.’ He smiled. ‘Of course, you’ve been there before, haven’t you?’

‘Rampton?’

‘No. The loony bin.’

‘What do you mean?’

‘Basingstoke, wasn’t it?’

I felt the air go out of my lungs, and I slumped in the chair – but only for a moment. Then I bit my lip and pulled myself up. Cannon came round and put his face so close to mine that I could smell him.

‘Mike, I’ve pretty much got you. You had a car. You have a history of mental instability. You were obsessed by the girl. My chaps are in your flat in London at the moment seeing if they can match a typewriter to the address label on this envelope. In a moment you’re going to give me some prints and we’ll see if we can get something off the diary. You had no alibi for the crucial time on the night of the party.’

‘That’s all circumstantial crap and—’

‘Circumstantial’s OK, Mike. Circumstantial gets convictions. People like you journalists, you don’t understand that. You don’t often get eyewitness evidence. And people don’t often confess. I wish they would. It would make our life ever so much easier. And it would make it much better for you too.’

My mind had suddenly gone empty. I looked inside and there seemed to be nothing. I had the impression that my brain was actually emitting a sound, like that of a clean saucepan being scoured with wire wool, or perhaps of a wine glass being made to ring with the note that any moment would shatter it.

‘Please let it be recorded that I am giving the suspect one last chance to confess.’

I couldn’t confess because I couldn’t think.

‘Is there?’

‘Yes. It’s called forensic, by which we mean scientific. Ever heard of DNA?’

‘Of course I have.’ Part Two of Nat Sci had been full of it.

Cannon nodded to the constable, who left the room.

‘DNA was first used in a case in Leicestershire. Just recently. It got a man off. A man called Pitchfork, oddly enough. But it could equally convict a man. I do wish you’d confessed. I really do, Mike.’

While we waited for the constable to return I asked myself what I was feeling. Not guilt, not fear, not apprehension. By far my strongest feeling was of curiosity. I really wanted to see what they’d come up with and whether it would prove that I’d done something wrong.

The constable eventually came back in with what looked like a glass museum display case. Suspended inside on a coathanger was an orange tee shirt. On it was the face of Donny Osmond.

‘The suspect is being shown a tee shirt. Have you seen this before, Mike?’

‘It rings a bell.’

‘We took it from your room when we came to see you in college all those years ago. When we gave you your clothes back, we kept this along with a couple of other things. We looked after it well and kept it dry. Do you know why?’
‘No.’

‘See there’s some of it missing down here?’

A square of about two inches across had been cut from the tee shirt just below Donny’s chin.

‘It had a bloodstain on it. Not a big one, but big enough. That’s why it’s taken me so long to get in touch with you these last few weeks. We were having a DNA match done in Leicester. It takes them ages. But we got the results yesterday. The bloodstain on your tee shirt is a match with the DNA from Jennifer’s bones.’

I said nothing. I felt nothing. I was thinking of those two chemists who burst into the Kestrel that lunchtime to tell the uninterested boozers that they’d cracked the human code.

Cannon drew himself up and spoke clearly. ‘We believe you picked her up after that party, drove her out to the place where she was found, or very near it, killed her with a blow to the head with a piece of brick or a lump of concrete, and in a fit of rage you also broke her leg. You buried her either then or when you returned with a spade. You buried her in such a way that you hoped she’d never be found. You showed no pity, no remorse. You little shit.’

Cannon turned to face the cassette recorder and said solemnly, ‘Michael Engleby, I am arresting you for the murder of Jennifer Rose Arkland on or about . . .’

To be honest, I wasn’t really listening. It was hard to take it all in, the bad turn of events, the famous formula of ‘anything you say may be taken down’. I wasn’t thinking about Jennifer at all. I was wondering whether this would be a good moment to own up to having killed old Baynes as well.
Eleven

I rang Stellings from Cannon’s office to ask his advice. He was appalled. He said it wasn’t his line of work, but he’d find someone and they’d be in touch. The odd thing was, he didn’t ask me whether I’d done it.

Next, I was allowed to go to the toilet where I crammed in two blue pills before the constable who’d been sent with me saw what I was doing and stopped me.

Then they took me to a cell. I had to hand over the contents of my pockets, including pills, and I was anxious about how I was going to manage without them. There was a bed and a grey blanket in the cell. I lay down and curled up beneath it, but time had stopped and everything was crowding in on me. When a constable came with some food later I asked if I could see a doctor and he said he’d ask. I couldn’t eat. The pills began to work and time realigned itself a little.

In the morning, I appeared in court, represented by a local solicitor provided by the police. I was remanded in custody for two weeks, and that night, when no one could see, was put in a van and driven to a prison. I was alone in my new cell, and I was relieved about that. The spyhole in the door opened at twenty-minute intervals through the night. I suppose they thought I might try to kill myself, though I had nothing to do it with. I just lay there and thought of Jennifer. The trouble was, I found it hard to picture her. It was all so long ago and she didn’t seem real any more. I couldn’t see or touch her. I had no real way of knowing whether she or I existed.

Some lag asked me the next day what I was ‘in for’; I told him and he warned me not to tell my lawyer I was guilty – if I was. ‘If you tell him you’ve done it, then you have to plead guilty in court. You can’t confess to your brief, then ask him to run a not-guilty defence.’

‘What if I do?’

‘He has to turn down the case.’

‘And is he bound to pass on what I’ve told him?’

‘Who to? If he turns you down then he’s not in a case and there’s no judge for him to tell. And there’s client confidentiality.’

‘But you’re saying I can’t have it both ways.’

‘No. Make up your mind before you get a brief. Work your story out first.’

I was grateful for this unsolicited good advice but worried that an old lags’ code meant that I now had to pay for it in some unspeakable way.

That afternoon, I had a visit from a Mr Davies, the solicitor that Stellings had found for me. I didn’t know what to say to him, so I asked him to tell me what might happen. He looked young, maybe only thirty, but he seemed to know what he was doing.

‘If you’re charged with murder, you can plead not guilty. That’s fine, then your barrister will do his best to overturn the evidence against you, which I gather is largely forensic, with some circumstantial.’

‘That’s right.’

‘Or you plead guilty and we look for all the mitigation we can find. Just by pleading guilty you reduce the sentence. You show remorse and contrition. We look for circumstances in your past that would have had a bearing. We call character witnesses. That way we can perhaps get the minimum term recommended before parole is considered down to something like fifteen years.’

The chief reporter on one of the tabloids, it was well known, had done time for murdering his wife. He behaved well, got out early and went back to reporting salacious stories for Rupert Murdoch.

‘And?’ I said. ‘Any other possibility?’

‘Yes, there’s the hybrid, by which you plead guilty to manslaughter but not guilty to murder by reason of diminished responsibility.’

‘The loony defence.’

‘If it’s accepted, you go to an establishment that’s more of a hospital than a prison. But no picnic. And it’s not easy to get released. In any event, whatever you plead, I shall have to brief counsel. I have one or two very good barristers in mind.’

I thought for a minute. ‘If I’d killed more than one person, would the diminished responsibility plea have a better chance?’

He looked at me a little strangely. ‘I really couldn’t say at this stage. I advise caution. You certainly shouldn’t admit to anything you haven’t done. Best to say not guilty at this stage.’

‘I see. Then what happens?’
‘We wait for a date for the trial. It’ll be weeks, maybe months. It’s a big case for the Crown and they’ll need time to prepare.’

‘And meanwhile I stay here.’

‘Yes. They won’t grant bail in murder cases.’

‘This DNA stuff,’ I said. ‘Will they accept it?’

‘It’s too soon to say. It’s only been used by the defence in this country so far, though it’s been used by the prosecution to convict in America – in Washington, I think. But it’s new and untried and it’s something the defence could certainly attack vigorously.’

‘But if I plead not guilty and the jury accepts the DNA evidence and finds me guilty, then I’ll go down for murder with the maximum time in a standard prison.’

‘Correct. Though your mental condition can be reviewed later.’

I felt I needed time to think. Time was what I had. Time to think, time to do.

In my cell, I had a lot of diary sessions. I wished that Jen had written more because I knew them all too well by now. In that respect – only – they were like Vermeer’s paintings.

The sole consolation was that there were one or two special entries – revealing, surprising – that I didn’t allow myself to go over. I kept them back even from myself.

My barrister came up from London to see me. He was a fleshy man in a suit with grey curly hair and a high colour. His name was Nigel Harvey, QC, and he was accompanied by a ‘junior’ (who looked older than Harvey, though thinner and more anxious) and by Davies, the solicitor. We met in a stuffy little room set aside for such visits.

‘Very well, Mr Engleby,’ said Harvey, unscrewing the top from a fountain pen and opening a blue foolscap exercise book, ‘I’ve seen what you said to Mr Davies, but if you don’t mind, I’d like you to go over it again for me. In your own words.’ He had a rich brown voice that reminded me of Tubby Lyneham.

My own words? Who else’s words could my mouth frame?

I told him about the party in Malcolm Street and how I left early and returned to my car in Park Street, how I drove round the corner into Jesus Lane to wait for Jennifer.

‘Let’s leave you there for a moment,’ he said. ‘I’d like to know more about this girl. How well you knew her, your feelings for her. Anything you think might help us.’

I thought very carefully. I was inhibited by the warnings I’d received about how I mustn’t confess or say anything that incriminated me and still expect to be defended. This florid man was the closest I had to an ally and I didn’t want him to walk out of the door; so it was a bit like being on trial already.

The trouble was, I only knew how to tell the truth.

I chose my words – my very own – with precision. ‘She was attracted to me. Though perhaps she didn’t know or admit how much. I felt I had to make her see how much she needed me. She wasn’t right with the boy she was with and I didn’t want her to go off with someone else, as a kind of second best, or rebound. I was the right man for her.’

‘What were your feelings for her?’

‘Profound.’

I told him a lot about my family and my father and mother and childhood. He kept nodding. He made a few notes. It was surprisingly enjoyable. I must have wanted to get some of this stuff out of me.

‘Let’s go back to your car.’

‘I saw her coming up the street. She hesitated, then turned into Jesus Lane. She saw my car. She recognised me. I think she wanted to get in with me. But then she must have changed her mind. But I stopped alongside, and she sort of bowed to the inevitable.

‘She was in my car and I was happy. It was as though everything had come right. We were happy together. She was laughing and it was easy, there was something right about it. I wanted it to last. For ever, maybe. I didn’t want to have to let her out and go back to everything being all wrong again. But it ended too soon. And I couldn’t face it ending. So at the moment I should have turned right, I went left – just to prolong it. To prolong my time with her.

‘Then I was worried that she’d jump out if I stopped, so I had to drive fast, very fast, through this sort of housing estate, then once I’d got out onto the Histon Road – the main road – I had to put my foot down.’

‘Why?’ said Harvey.

I thought for a long time. ‘Because I felt a fool.’

‘Go on.’

‘The trouble was that she was reacting badly. She was behaving like a child and I didn’t like that at all. It made me feel as though I was some kind of freak. She was screaming and shouting and banging at my arms. I felt she’d backed me into a corner.’
‘What were your feelings towards her then?’

‘I didn’t like her any more. I wanted her to be like the girl I’d known before, not like this. She’d humiliated me and I wanted her to shut up. Yes, I wanted her to shut up.’

‘All right. Gently does it, Mr Engleby. Carry on.’

I tried to remember. ‘I thought I’d find somewhere quiet and let her out of the car and then drive off. That was bad, but not that bad. I could apologise, I could make it up. I wouldn’t have harmed her. But I couldn’t find anywhere quiet. It was all villages, you know, like ribbon developments almost. Then finally I got to this place, Rampton. There was a dead end.’

‘And?’

I looked at him.

He coughed. ‘I’m sorry. I understand. Please take your time.’

The road called Cuckoo Lane wasn’t tarmac, it was made of concrete, what’s called hardstanding, I think. At the end was a cart track into the Fens. I turned off the headlights. I didn’t want Jennifer to get out and run. There were houses not far away. I didn’t want her to make a noise. I squeezed her wrist very hard till she screamed; then I said, ‘stay there while I come round.’

I got out and went round to her side. I pulled her out. I couldn’t see much in the darkness, but she was quiet. She wasn’t screaming.

I said, ‘Keep quiet and it’ll be all right.’

She whispered, ‘What do you want? I’ll do what you want.’

She meant sex, I suppose, but that wasn’t what I wanted. What I wanted was for her to say something that would make it all right, that would turn time backwards, that would turn her back into the old Jennifer and would give me a way out.

I was gripping both her wrists very tightly.

I said, ‘say something.’

‘I thought you wanted me to be quiet.’

‘Say something quietly. Say my name.’

She struggled in my grip.

‘Say: “Please, Mike.”’

I don’t remember how, but I became aware that she had wet herself. Was there a smell? Did I hear it? I don’t know, but she’d made herself disgusting.

And she wouldn’t say my name.

‘Say it, Jennifer.’

Her face was ugly with sobbing. She couldn’t speak. I felt naked and humiliated by what I’d done.

My memory of what happened next is patchy. There are only flashes.

One thing I knew: I couldn’t go back, and I couldn’t let her go back. There was a piece of loose concrete at the end of the hardstanding, where it met the earth of the field. Holding one of Jennifer’s wrists, I bent down and picked it up. Then I swung it down on the back of her head. She cried out and fell to her knees. I hit her harder the second time and I heard her skull crack.

I went on hitting her. I think. I don’t remember.

I think I went on hitting her because I had no choice. Then I carried her for as long as I could manage and threw her in a ditch beside the field. I covered her as best I could. I listened to her to make sure she wasn’t breathing. She was dead. I lay on top of her with my face in her hair and I cried. I didn’t know how she’d died, but I was filled with fury at her, for what she’d made me do. I was furious with her for being dead, for making me do this thing. There was another piece of concrete not far away, on the side of a sort of small canal or watercourse. I smashed it into the back of her head once more to be sure, then I broke her leg with it. I was intensely relieved that it was over. I felt more like myself again.

It was what I’d done with Baynes, except with him I’d planned it better. I’d planned it for weeks, lain in wait by the bridge, and I didn’t kill him. Not at first.

The day after I killed Jennifer, I drove back to the place at three in the morning, parked my car in the village and walked down the lane, then the track, to where I’d left her. I had a spade with me that I’d taken from the gardener’s hut near Jesus Ditch on Midsummer Common.

I dug for two hours or more, then dragged her body in. It was stiff and ugly and her fine hair was clogged. I didn’t consider raping her, or even looking at her body. Then I covered her with earth, then with lumps of concrete that I fetched from the ragged end of the hardstanding, then with an old railway sleeper from the side of the track, then with more earth that I compounded hard. Finally, I roughed it up with the edge of the spade to make it look natural.

I felt relieved. Dawn was beginning to seep into the Fen horizon as I turned and left.
I told this – or a version of it, at least – to Harvey. It took a very long time, because I had to give him all the Chatfield stuff, all the background, as well.

When I’d finished there was a long silence in the small room. I could hear the rain outside in the prison yard.

Then I said, ‘I think there may have been a third person I killed. A German woman called Gudrun Abendroth.’

He nodded.

I said, ‘Do you think we could run the diminished responsibility plea?’

He said, ‘I think we could.’

I said, ‘Will I have to see a lot of shrinks?’

He said, ‘Yes, you will.’

I said, ‘That’s fine.’

Then a warder came in with some tea.

The preparation of the case has taken several weeks. It’s been very hot in my cell through the summer, but luckily I’ve been alone. With all the overcrowding, you’d expect that I’d be doubled up by now, but I think the nature of my case and the publicity around it has made them want to keep me apart.

I was also told by a doctor that it was for my own protection as ‘people like me’ were not good at ‘reading the intentions of others’ and could therefore be victimised. I exercise alone and don’t join in group work activities.

I’m not on the nonces’ wing or anything, it’s just that I have very limited contact with the other prisoners – just at meals, really, or occasionally in the library. Fine by me.

I have done numerous psychological tests, including the Rorschach ink-blot tests, which were ridiculous. One was a squashed cat, one was a bat in flight, one was a three-legged abominable snowman, but most were not suggestive at all. The psychologist sat behind me taking notes, presumably thinking I was unaware of what she was up to. I think she wanted me to say that various splodges resembled reproductive parts of the anatomy, but they didn’t; they looked like ink blots.

I’ve seen four psychiatrists, including the prison medical officer. Although I gather he’ll be for the prosecution, he endeared himself to me by prescribing some blue pills at our first meeting; I was allowed one at midday and one at night – by which I really mean nine o’clock, which for some incalculable reason is when they put the murderers to sleep, or anyway turn their lights off.

The shrink I’ve seen most of is called Julian Exley, who’s instructed by the defence. I told him I’d kept a sort of journal, off and on, and he encouraged me to bring it up to date. (Some plods brought the papers from my flat in Bayswater.) It’s been a good exercise for me; it’s given me something to do. I haven’t changed anything in it, I’ve just tidied it up and smoothed it over a bit. I sometimes work in the library and sometimes in my cell. The early parts are handwritten; between the typed lines of the later sections I write corrections with a ballpoint pen. I’m aware that there are long gaps, but it didn’t seem worth padding them out just for the sake of it.

This, of course – what you’re reading now – is it. Or rather, the preceding pages are. As I sat in the library on Monday, looking back, I noticed how much my style had changed – how much less crabbed and self-defensive it became, how much more rhetorical – and I thought perhaps I ought to try to homogenise it for art’s sake; but then I thought maybe Dr Exley could read something into the changes – some significant psychological development, or lack of. (Because obviously they all pored over it after it had arrived from London, and photocopied it, before they gave it back to me.)

And anyway, who knows or cares about unity or harmony of style these days? I read book reviews where the journalist doesn’t even know the distinction between ‘tone’ and ‘style’ – something even Plank Robinson had more or less mastered by O level. Ah, the treason of the clerks – the 1970s schoolteachers who decided, for some perverse political reason, to withhold knowledge from our schoolchildren. The first generation thus deprived are now themselves the teachers, so it’s less treasonous for them: they don’t have the knowledge to hold back. We were bound to see the results of this anti-teaching before long. Stellings tells me the graduates who apply to Oswald Payne with firsts from Oxford and Cambridge can’t spell or write grammatically; they have to send them on a basic six-week course before they can write a literate internal memo.

Anyway, when Dr Exley predictably asked if he could see the latest instalments of my journal/narrative, I said, ‘Why don’t we do a deal? I’ll show you my evidence if you let me see yours.’

‘What do you mean?’ he said.

‘Show me what else you’ve gathered. Show me your test results, your diagnosis, any character references from other people. All the stuff you’re using.’

He stroked his chin, something he did quite a lot, and smiled. ‘I can’t do that at the moment. In due course, though, I don’t see why you shouldn’t know what’s being said about you. I’ve always believed in patients having
access to their records as far as possible, so far as the law allows. The idea that the men in white coats keep your own secrets from you is very Big Brotherish, I think.'

I should have mentioned that this Exley character is not quite what the phrase ‘forensic psychiatrist’ suggests – which I take to be someone like the old film actor Richard Wattis: severe, horn-rimmed. Exley wears floral ties and a corduroy jacket; he smokes roll-up cigarettes; he looks like a slightly left-wing publisher.

‘Are you worried about what other people may have said about you?’ he said.

I guessed this was preliminary question one in the Paranoia Profile, so I just shrugged.

In the course of one of our sessions he had to leave the room for about five minutes, and I read some of the papers in his folder. The one on top was this:

R v Engleby. Witness Statement. James Stellings, Partner, Litigation Department, Oswald Payne, 75 Finsbury Pavement, London EC4 7JB.

Is this thing working? Testing . . . Testing. Right. OK.

I suppose the first er the first word you’d use if you were describing Mike is that you’d say he was a loner. He . . . er . . . at college he was always on his own, he never seemed to be with other people. In the dining hall for instance he’d quite often sit apart. He’d get his tray if it was the self-service thing and go to the end of the table and if it was formal dinner, when it was laid and you sort of had to sit next to someone, then he’d sort of take his place. But he wouldn’t try to engage anyone in conversation.

He . . . he didn’t really seem to have any friends that I was aware of either in college or out. Though I know that he used to go out quite a bit in the evening but I don’t know where he went to.

I first met him I think probably on the very first day we were there. I just happened to find myself sitting next to him at er at dinner and I thought it was friendly to introduce myself and we had a chat and I wouldn’t say it was a very easy conversation, I mean, he wasn’t er . . . the sort of person who was very at ease in company at all. He was awkward, he was physically awkward, and he was er, er . . . ill at ease, it wasn’t, he wasn’t a man who appeared to be well in his own skin as it were.

But . . . er, he was, he had opinions, he had views, and he had extremely strong views in fact [laughs] on pretty well everything. I mean, I think if you had to sum up Mike you’d say he was an interesting man but he just wasn’t much fun to be with. I mean, unlike a lot of people where completely the reverse is true. They haven’t got anything interesting or worthwhile to say, but they’re actually quite easy or amusing to be with.

Of course one of the first things you notice about Mike is his appearance. Um . . . you know, he’s incredibly badly dressed and I remember him coming to dinner once at our house in London and turning up in some sort of bootlace cowboy tie and hideous sort of caramel-coloured slacks. I mean, you know, just the whole thing was . . . appalling. And his hair which was sort of wiry and always needed cutting but it wasn’t long in the sort of student style, it just looked as if it hadn’t been cut. And his thick glasses which were defiantly . . . Everyone in those days wore John Lennon-style round glasses but Mike had these er . . . thick sort of I suppose horn-rimmed at the top then rimless at the bottom. And physically he was he was pretty, to be crude, he was pretty unprepossessing. He was . . . Quite short, he wore these horrible clothes, I mean I seem to remember he’d occasionally have on a tee shirt of . . . with something rather inappropriate on the front of it. That was about his only concession to, you know, fashion at all. He grunted quite a lot, he made a lot of noise breathing.

And of course he was also . . . physically very strong. He had heavy shoulders and this big chest. I mean . . . He could have been a fantastic rower. He was a bit short I suppose, but er you know, he was, he gave the impression that, of being a very powerful young man, though as I say I don’t know if he actually took any exercise.

God, what else can you say? I kept in touch with him because I felt that . . . I . . . I saw something in him that I quite liked – but also I suppose out of a sense of kindness. He . . . er, I felt this was a guy who perhaps needed the odd friend. He certainly didn’t have any other friends, so far as I knew.

As far as Jennifer Arkland is concerned, er I think I knew that Mike had met her because he sort of er . . . gatecrashed one summer when they were making a film in Ireland, I remember him telling me about it at the beginning of it must have been our last year I think. Mike just sort of invited himself along and then . . . um, made himself useful. So I knew that he would have met her then and he did mention her to me I think once. He said something about that she was a friend of his. He didn’t say that it was anything more than that and I certainly never saw them together.

I knew almost nothing about his family. I knew that his father had died when he was young and that he’d . . . and that his mother went out to work but I couldn’t tell you, I haven’t the faintest idea what she did. Was there
a sister? Did he have a sister or a younger brother? Er... I knew also that Mike came from a er... pretty er... simple background. He, you know, made no bones about that. He had quite a marked accent from wherever it was he came from... Reading, I think. Er... He didn’t make any attempt to sort of make himself sound more posh or anything like that as I think quite a lot of boys and girls did when they first went to university.

I don’t think he ever mentioned where he’d been to school. I assumed he’d been to the local grammar school. I mean that’s what, that’s where most people had been. There’s a sort of misconception that all the undergraduates are terribly posh and drink champagne, but it wasn’t like that at all. Most of them were from grammar schools. A lot of them were teetotal scientists who just scurried from their rooms to the lecture hall and back again.

What else? The other thing is that he was very clever. But again, so what? So were most of the young men and women there, and I’ve really no idea whether Mike had a higher IQ, more firepower intellectually than anyone else. But he certainly had a phenomenal memory. I mean, if you, if he, if you wanted to, you could test him on dates and lists and you know which record had been in the top ten when, but you know to his credit [laughs] he didn’t show off that too much but he certainly had a superior memory.

When I hear this you know, this... development, the trouble that Mike’s now in I’m... I’m surprised. Because I knew that Mike was a bit of an oddball, as I say – but I am surprised that anything... On the other hand, er, you have to say there was kind of concealed violence in a lot of his conversation, in the extreme positions he took on even little things, like music... And er politics and all sorts of things... He was extremely critical, I mean brutally critical of a lot of political thought and political belief. So there was a kind of maybe undischarged anger in the way that he saw the world.

The truth is I guess now I think about it, that you know that maybe I didn’t really know him at all. People are always mysterious, aren’t they? You know you find out that one of your best friends has been having an affair for years and you never knew anything about it. And I suppose in that way nothing should ever really surprise us because people are like icebergs, you only see the little bit on top.

On the particular questions that you... you mentioned in your letter, the particular points. Did Mike appear remote, unengaged, distant from others? Yes, I think I would say that. Next, did he have a ‘loner’ view of life? Yes, I’d definitely say yes to that, in fact it was the first word I used about him. Did he avoid social situations?

Yes, I suppose probably he did. Perhaps because he was shy, but also perhaps because he thought he’d be bored, I think. Did he have low sexual desire? I know absolutely nothing about his sexual life at all. What’s the next one? ‘Interpersonal skills’, whatever that means. Yeah, they were poor, I mean really [laughs]... poor old Mike, I think of him at that dinner party, I mean, it was, it was very funny in a way, in a cruel way, watching him floundering and trying to talk to these people, but yeah he wasn’t able to handle that.

Next. His response to praise and criticism. Was he unresponsive? Yes. Indeed. I would say he was unresponsive to praise. For instance he did very well in the first-year exams and I said, ‘Well done, Mike, that’s fantastic,’ and he then had a very good reason for why anyone could do it, and it wasn’t any sort of achievement at all on his part. And that’s when he acquired the nickname of Groucho as in Groucho Marx who said I wouldn’t want to belong to any club that would have me as a member.

Now, ‘difficulty in expressing anger’... That’s also tricky. Yes and no. Um. I suppose it was bottled up, as I said earlier on, I certainly never saw him express anger. So... Of those six points I suppose I am answering in the affirmative to pretty well all of them. Sexual desire – except that one. I can’t really say.

What else can I say about Mike? Well of course, he was a terrible pedant. He was always correcting you if you said ‘between you and I’. And what was the other one that used to drive him up the wall? I forget. ‘Internece’ maybe. Yes, I think I heard him go off on quite a rant about that. You know when people think it’s just a posh word for ‘internal’? I forget what it really does mean now. Better ask Mike.

But of course none of these things made him very popular. People don’t like being ticked off for their grammar especially when they’re just trying to be friendly and thinking maybe Mike could have used a friend.

I did like him, though. Why am I talking in the past, as though he’s dead? I’d like to end by saying that I did like him, though I may have sounded a bit lukewarm in this tape. And I will stick by him even if it turns out for the worst.

So what do I like about him? Mike... God. [laughs] Not his clothes, that’s for sure. I liked his manner. I think. Although it was awkward, direct, embarrassing... It was embarrassing, it was painful to be around sometimes. But there was something deeply er... uncompromising about him. He told it exactly how he saw it. It made me laugh. Mike made me laugh a lot, though I often thought he didn’t really get the joke himself. Yes, that’s weird now I come to think of it. He could be very funny, but he hardly ever laughed. He very seldom laughed or showed any emotion at all.
I’ll definitely keep in touch. I’ve certainly never met anyone else quite like him. I’ll send him cards or go and see him. I think that’s all. I’m going to stop this thing now.

I confirm that this is a true and accurate transcript of the tape I made. Signed: James Stellings, 24 July, 1988

Who would have thought old Stellings to have quite such pedestrian thought processes? And to be quite so radically inarticulate? I’d always thought of him with his Montrachet and his Rodgers and Hammerstein as rather debonair. But then as he himself remarked – with such shining originality – perhaps you never really know people.

Oh well.

Yesterday, Dr Exley – deliberately, I think – left some more papers on the table in the room where we do our interviews while he went out to talk to one of the officers. I wasn’t sure whether the scrawly notes were intended to go to the lawyers or to his fellow defence shrink. Or perhaps they were just a memo to himself. Anyway, he was gone for ten minutes, so I read them.

Dr Julian Exley MD, FRCPsych

Preparatory notes for report on patient M. Engleby in case of

R v Engleby.

(Philippa: please leave or fill gaps where indicated. I shall have to redraft in more formal way later. More typing . . . Sorry! J) I recommend a plea of guilty to manslaughter but not guilty to murder on the grounds of diminished responsibility. I expect that expert opinion for the prosecution will agree with the diagnosis and accept the plea. However, in view of the notoriety of the case, it’s possible that the judge will want to put it before a jury, so I have roughed out a report in more detail on the grounds that I may have to give evidence in person.

1. Michael Engleby is a 35-year-old male of Anglo-Saxon/Caucasian descent.

   He was brought up in a normal working-class family, he is unusually well educated (grammar school, public school, Cambridge University) and has a high IQ (see test results, to be appended). He has managed to retain a well paid and respectable job in journalism. He is financially solvent, has some savings and owns the leasehold (less outstanding mortgage) of a small flat in London.

   He has a mild cardiac arrhythmia, and lung function test results (using Youlten peak-flow meter) are slightly below average for his age. This may be caused by excessive smoking. He has a borderline alcohol dependency problem and has been a heavy drug user in the past. Neither condition appears to be acute, however. In prison, he has been prescribed ten mg diazepam twice daily and this seems to be all that is necessary.

   Throughout his life, however, he has had difficulty in forming even rudimentary attachments to others. He disliked his father, who, he says, abused him as a child by beating him regularly. His mother appears to have been the dominant figure at home, yet emotionally distant. He had little respect for her and minimal attachment. He claims to have been ‘close’ to a younger sister, but has hardly seen her in the last ten years. He had no close friends at school, university or work. He says that the resulting solitude has not bothered him, that in fact he prefers it.

   His preference has been for solitary activities, such as reading or listening to music. In journalism, he made it a condition of his joining the staff of a newspaper that he need not go to the office more than once or twice a week, thus maintaining his solitude. As he put it to me, ‘I’d rather be abandoned than engulfed.’

   He exhibits a degree of anhedonia – viz., he takes little pleasure in life, even in the activities that he chooses. He evinces little emotion of a positive or negative kind. He exhibits a consistent flatness of response. He responds little to the facial expressions of others.

   He declines to discuss his libido, but appears to have had only one sexual relationship of any kind. According to him, it was coming to an end at the time of his arrest. His partner/ex-partner has declined to be interviewed.

   He admits to having been indifferent to the praise or criticism of colleagues, teachers or friends at any stage in his life. He has admitted that this was because he did not value their opinions.

   Some of the defining symptoms of this disorder (e.g. anhedonia, flatness of affect) are associated with the so-called ‘negative’ symptoms of schizophrenia. However, the subject exhibits no positive symptoms of schizophrenia or psychosis in any form and I do not find that he is suffering from mental illness.
The subject has had a firm grasp of reality at most stages of his life. The exceptions are twofold. First, in the occurrence of occasional acute panic attacks, which are considered below. Second, there appears to have been occasional partial memory loss. These lapses in my view can be explained in simple psychological terms of defence mechanisms, stress and so on. It is ironic that they occur in someone whose memory is generally of an almost ‘savant’ or autistic order – but no more than ironic, and not in my view suggestive of psychotic illness or indeed of any neurological problem, such as local brain damage.

In my view, he suffers from a personality disorder, which amounts to abnormality of mind for the purposes of Section 2 of the 1957 Homicide Act. If pressed to answer, I would say that this disorder substantially impaired his responsibility for his offence, although I am mindful that this is properly a question for the jury.

Personality disorder diagnoses can cause problems because in many cases the crime is the first evidence we have of serious abnormality. However, in the case of Engleby we have the extraordinary advantage of his own written account of the formative years of his life.

2.
The following is a list of some notes I made while reading the journal.

Chapter One. His vanity while being interviewed for a university place. Contempt for his superiors. Fetishistic attitude to brands of drink and cigarettes. Persistent alcohol abuse. Drug abuse. (It is interesting that the ‘blue ten-milligram pill’ he takes is almost certainly diazepam, or Valium, whose tranquillising effect may have been helpful in the long term, but may also have distorted the diagnostic picture by removing a degree of anxiety that might otherwise have been present.)

He ‘does not like to think’ about his younger sister. I believe this is not because he dislikes her, but because he has a fear of emotional closeness. Significantly, she is the only person he can feel sorry for (when she comes to visit him in London later) or empathise with at all.

Chapter Two. Explicit preferences for solitude, particularly in his student travelling. Note also his reluctance to name either his university or his college. Also, the pub he calls the Kestrel is clearly the Eagle. Etc. This may not be significant, but is consonant with a fear of being ‘engulfed’ by a social context which he found intimidating.

Chapter Three. Schooldays. One notes that he is abused and becomes an abuser. Systematic thieving. Disregard of social norms. Fantasises about killing his tormentor.

Chapter Four. Memory loss could be attributed to marijuana abuse, but more likely to the selective repression necessary in his building of a pathological defence system.

There is almost no sexual content in his descriptions of the girl Jennifer, very unusual in a man of 20/21 years old. He appears more concerned about whether she has sex with her boyfriend than whether she has sex with him.

Chapter Five. His only friend or acquaintance, James Stellings (see witness statement), does not look him up in the vacation. ‘Mercifully’ is how M.E. describes this omission.

Chapter Six. His only friend in London appears to be the shopkeeper, a refugee from Amin’s Uganda. His account of buying pornographic magazines shows little libido. He is more interested in the imagined lives of the models and the homeland of the shopkeeper. His attempt to meet women in a wine bar is halfhearted and inept; his account of it is misogynistic. Note: his account of his father’s abuse. Lacks detail. Detail suppressed? Or gravity of episode(s) exaggerated?

Chapter Seven. He recoils from Jeffrey Archer’s mistress, or perhaps from the thought of sex when confronted with physical presence of two lovers. Although he doubtless interviewed people for his newspaper, the stories of his meetings with famous people are not always convincing. Creative fantasy?

His admission here to periodic rages, on the other hand, is extremely compelling. I think it is significant that it comes at a time when he feels his life is generally ‘improving’. He feels more confident and is able to look at himself with detachment and recall these episodes.

Elsewhere he typically sees no problem with himself, only with others – the teachers, colleagues, would-be friends, acquaintances and even shopkeepers. This is characteristic of personality disorders.
Chapter Eight. His vagueness about how to proceed with Margaret suggests sexual inexperience, perhaps even virginity. His description of sex with her – ‘We took a room and had it off’ – is, even allowing for natural modesty, rather unconvincing.

Chapter Nine. He is unable to deal with the intimacy of living with Margaret and is moving back to his preferred state of solitude.

Narcissism is continually present in the Engleby journal. It is evident in all his accounts of the intellectual processes of others, which he views with contempt. Any failings of his own, on the other hand, are attributed to the poor judgement or misinterpretation of others. He is dismissive of all politicians, of all scientists, of playwrights, of almost all cinema and most music, with only bizarre and partial exceptions.

His own intellectual processes, by contrast, pass unchallenged. His social inadequacies and embarrassments are blamed on others. It never occurs to him that he is unattractive in any way or that his behaviour could be adjusted. His problems do not appear to him as problems because they are so deeply entrenched that they are ego-syntonic – i.e. they seem normal to him.

My belief is that he suffers from schizoid personality disorder (following criteria of DSM III-R) with elements of narcissism and antisocial personality disorder. This is a complicated picture for the court, however, and I note that in the latest figures we have from one Special Hospital (Broadmoor) only two per cent of personality disorder patients have schizoid PD as their primary diagnosis.

However, more than 80 per cent of these non-psychotics have psychopathic or unspecified PD as their main diagnosis. The worse the crime, the vaguer the diagnosis, on the latest figures; and I can therefore see no problem with Engleby being put in this looser category.

Although he has suggested otherwise, I am not convinced that the patient is responsible either for an assault on a schoolmate that may have led, indirectly, to his premature death many years later, or the murder of a German woman in London, in which case no forensic evidence survives, the victim’s body having been flown home and cremated.

I suspect that the patient believes that a diminished responsibility plea stands a better chance of succeeding if there is more than one crime.

(Philippa: this next bit is technical. You can leave it till later if you on’t have time now, as I may need to revise it anyway.)

Winnicott (1965) characterises extreme aggression as arising at the moment at which a ‘deprived’ character tries catastrophically to revert to the instant before deprivation led him to erect morbid defence systems. It is a moment of hope: of asserting that, despite entrenched patterns, he can still take something from his environment.

Well, there were six more pages of this baloney and I will spare you the details. Old Exley really liked to beef up his argument by referring to previous shrinks, mostly American, as though they gave his own amateur meanderings some heft and authority.

In the fog of his prose, there were just a few moments of light. (Even a stopped clock is right twice a day.) Here are the brighter bits.

Consensus in the literature is that rage is closely linked to fear of exposure, shame and damage to the narcissistic self. It is essentially defensive. The feared annihilator must be annihilated (Kohut, 1972); though it is not the object him/herself that is to be eliminated, but the danger he/she poses to the very existence of the fabricated self.

Violence in defence of a coherent sense of identity under intolerable threat must include gender and sexuality issues, most commonly fear of the exposure of sexual inadequacy (argued in US by Bromberg, Abrahamsen and others).

Perhaps also relevant is the notion of ‘dissociative murder’, which entails an altered state of consciousness in which there is no knowledge of motive. The murder in fact takes place at a moment of total ‘ego disintegration’.
This is a frightening and difficult concept to grasp. But Engleby gives us two or three previous descriptions of something similar happening when he is under extreme pressure, e.g. something like: ‘It is unusual to feel oneself come apart in such a molecular way.’

Engleby claims partial or ‘snapshot’ memory of the deed, which is consistent with dissociation. (Total amnesia is a highly suspect defence, unless there is evidence of brain damage or neurological deficits, which there is not in Engleby.)

The patient’s behaviour after the crime is also consistent with this kind of dissociation. He feels no remorse because his emotion of relief at having eliminated the threat to himself and thus being able to reorganise his defence systems is so great that it leaves no room for other emotions.

This goes right back to Freud’s ‘constancy principle’, which argues that the mind tends always to bring itself back to minimal stimulation by ridding itself of emotions that threaten its equilibrium. Great is the relief when stasis is restored – though remorse may follow.

The American psychologist Bromberg (1961) argues that explosive murders are usually connected to fears of being exposed as sexually inadequate. It is not hard to see how this may have been the catastrophic moment in Engleby’s narcissism. Arkland’s offer to ‘do what [Engleby] wanted’ may indirectly have cost her her life. It seems bizarre, but Ruotolo (1968) argued: ‘some personalised value was found to take precedence over the ultimate crime of murder . . . This unique image of oneself had to be maintained at any price.’

4. Conclusion

I don’t suppose that the detail above will be necessary, but court/counsel may need background on idea of personality disorders.

In lay terms, they arise as a result of an adverse reaction at the meeting place between, on the one hand, a child’s temperament and character and, on the other, its family and social environment.

This meeting brings us close to the key moment of human life: the moment at which a child becomes self-aware. The Adam and Eve myth dramatises it plainly. Few people find this extraordinary moment and all that it subsequently entails to be frictionless.

‘Temperament’ may be defined as a person’s innate disposition, and this has a biological substrate in the chemistry of the brain. Sensitivity to light or noise, for instance, ability to relate to others, even ‘adventurousness’ may well have a molecular and/or genetic base. (In his important work *The Mask of Sanity*, H. Cleckley (1976) even found a possible neurological site for basis of psychopathy in the temporal lobe.)

If ‘personality’ is then defined as the sum of attitudes, responses and behaviours acquired by the developing child as it struggles to adapt to its environment, then a disorder may result if the child’s temperament forces it to develop a ‘personality’ which, while successfully surviving in the short term, is chronically maladapted.

In adult life, there are then the further normal psychological pressures of life events on the individual which will affect his behaviour.

As I understand it, a plea of diminished responsibility can succeed only if the court takes the view that the accused is or was suffering from such abnormality of mind as substantially impaired his mental responsibility for his actions at the time of the killing (Section 2, Homicide Act, 1957).

The ‘abnormality’ must arise from arrested or retarded development (no); disease (e.g. schizophrenia; no); injury (no); or inherent causes. It’s this loose category that M.E. fits, and his own narrative shows us how.

The crux is that there seems little doubt on the basis of what he has told us that Engleby was indeed suffering from an extreme abnormality of mind, and that this abnormality did substantially impair his responsibility. If necessary, I can go further into the extent to which his personality disorder was shaped by biological factors it was beyond his reasonable capacity to modify.

I respectfully recommend that, if the defendant’s guilty plea is accepted, the court consider making a hospital order under Section 37 of the Mental Health Act 1983. A requirement of the Act is that hospital treatment is ‘likely to alleviate or prevent the deterioration of the condition’. Although medication and psychotherapy are generally of limited use with such patients, I believe M.E. could easily benefit from both, particularly the latter. I have communicated with the relevant authorities at Longdale hospital.

I put the sheaf of papers back on the desk.

‘Personality disorder’. I didn’t know whether to laugh or cry. If instead of ‘schizoid’ he’d gone for ‘borderline’ personality disorder as his main diagnosis but had been equally unsure about that one too, might he have ended up describing me as having borderline borderline personality disorder?
What a way to spend your life.

But then again, if the court can be made to see it Exley’s way I’ll get to pass my time being scrutinised in a hospital – albeit with razor wire and maximum security – rather than being banged up in a ‘normal’ prison.

I was also shocked to find so much Freud in his report (there was plenty more I’ve spared you). It was rather as if in a paper written by a Treasury economist you found continual reliance on Marxist economics.

Marx and Freud. Blimey. Say what you like about that pair of flat-earthers, they are nothing if not durable. Long after their train has gone, they are still kicking their heels in the station waiting room, grabbing the wrist of any poor traveller with half an ear to listen.

Freud dreamed up the Oedipus theory on the basis of not having seen his mother naked on one occasion as a child; and on further supposing that if he had, then he might have been aroused. And from that triple non-event, he extrapolated a universal ‘truth’. Ah . . . Where would we be without the hard men of science and their rigour?

‘I sometimes seem to myself to have been more of a short-story writer than a scientist,’ he wrote, as though warning his apostles that Anna and Emmy and Lucy and all the other ‘hysterical’ women were merely characters in a book. But he claimed his fictions were true – even when it became clear that there was no such thing as ‘hysteria’, or not as he understood it; even when it was shown that these famous girls whose cures were to form the basis of a human panacea had not been cured at all, but carried on their spastic clacking and paralyses – even when it was clear that they in fact had epilepsy or, in one shameful case, Tourette’s syndrome – named after a former colleague in Paris, a man he’d worked with!

On the other hand . . .

I suppose we don’t really believe that Jesus Christ was literally and actually the son of God. I mean, a few fundamentalists do, but no one else can seriously believe that he was God –‘son’, avatar or incarnation.

But that doesn’t mean his teaching is all worthless. Surely there’s wisdom in much of what he said; and surely we wouldn’t want to throw that ethical baby out with the superstitious bathwater.

And so with Freud. The edifice may have a foundation of guesswork and opportunism; but over the years, as he practised, the old short-story writer – the O. Henry of medicine – may have had moments of psychological insight, may he not? I mean, he was quite a clever man and he spent many years in practice.

And in the search for human happiness, are we really so well off and so pure that we can afford to ignore any such offerings, however tainted their parentage?

Especially if, as now, they seem to be working to my advantage by steering me towards a semi-civilised hospital with ‘medication’, therapy and craft rooms – rather than a Category A, round-the-clock fisting.

Or so I argued as I lay in my cell last night; so I reasoned – so I weaselled with myself.
My name is Mike Engleby and I’m in my eighteenth year at an ancient institution. Ring a bell? This one isn’t a university, though; this one is Longdale Special Hospital (formerly Asylum for the Criminally Insane), in the village of Upper Rookley.

It’s 7 March, 2006 and I understand that a film about gay cowboys has just won an Oscar. I’m only 52, but I feel a bit cut off from the world, as you would if you’d spent so much time in here.

But although I feel detached, I think that recently there’s been an improvement in my memory of the past. With this in mind, I think it’s time to bring my account of events up to date. I don’t have access to what I wrote earlier, though I know it’s kept on file here and is frequently referred to by the people who ‘treat’ me. I daresay I could have a look at it if I asked nicely, but I don’t really need to since I can remember everything in it.

My improved recall is frankly a mixed blessing. But the fact is that, after a few hazy years, probably affected by ‘medication’, my memory has not only recovered its encyclopaedic range, it now has fewer gaps and a really tight focus on detail.

Take the day I arrived here, seventeen years ago.

The irritating thing was that I could see very little of Upper Rookley from the back of the van in which I was being driven. When you’re going to be placed in an institution for an ‘indefinite’ length of time, one of the things you must worry about is the view. Odd, this, because I’d never thought of myself as visually alert, but I’d grown mighty tired of the sight of my prison cell during nine months on remand and I was desperate for some longer vista.

The van had a window, but I could only see out if I stood up, and the two prison officers with me were uneasy about that. Nevertheless, I could sense the topography as we turned into the high street, and through the barred, one-way glass of the window I caught a glimpse of the front of the cigarette shop whose backyard had supplied me with goods for Spaso Topley to ship onwards via the Jackson Rears.

I was reassured to see it. I don’t know why.

Another odd thing was that in the five years I’d spent at Chatfield, with all the Monday morning siren practices and ‘sir, sir, Bograt’s escaped’, I’d never had a clear idea of where Longdale actually was. There were no signs to it from the village, and the teenage boy seldom lifts his eyes from the pavement. If Raquel Welch and John Lennon had moved into the cubicles on either side of mine in Collingham, I would have greeted the news with little more than a grunt as I toiled off to Mug Benson’s double French. This is how most people live: alive, but not conscious; conscious but not aware; aware, but intermittently.

What was I thinking in those days? What was I thinking? Most of my life has been like that, like a woodlouse under a stone – while, as Newton put it, the great ocean of truth lay all undiscovered before me.

The van swung left not far from the back gates into Chatfield and began to climb. I was feeling carsick, as you do with no view out, and had vomited twice into a bucket, which the screws had stopped the van to empty by the road. Carsickness is one of the most underrated of trivial ailments; you’d rather die than have it carry on. So when the van finally stopped, the door opened and I was deposited outside my indefinite future home, a maximum security institution with thirty-feet-high walls crowned with twists of barbed wire, I viewed it with intense relief.

The handover from prison to hospital was a category shift (in the Ryle not the Home Office sense of category). Longdale itself was like Chatfield with higher walls: Victorian brickwork drenched with institutional indifference, its towers and windows of abandoned hope; but at the front there was a bright new block, something like a go-ahead primary school. This was the reception area, into which I was led by the prison officers, to one of whom I was still handcuffed. Two ordinary-looking women sat behind a long whitewood counter on bright red office chairs.

Forms were filled. I waited, wondering when I would next see any room like this, something that passed for normal.

Eventually, I was taken forward to a glass door. The screw removed my handcuffs. My shoulder was taken by a hospital employee, a burly young man with a beard, accompanied by an older man in spectacles, who smiled at me.

I was led into a glassed-in area where I was scanned by metal detectors and body-searched. Then they took me to a cubicle where I had to strip. The young man peered beneath my lifted scrotum, then asked me to bend over while he shone a torch up me. Then he peered into my mouth, pointing the light beneath my tongue, and I tried not to breathe on him, having not drunk even water since I’d vomited. They gave me a blanket to wrap round me while my clothes were passed through an airport scanner before being returned. Dressed again, I went through a short glass corridor under closed-circuit cameras that twitched their necks like birds.

After three more doors, one electronic, two worked by keys, I found myself in open air.
I glanced back through the modern transit building to see if I could still make out the prison officers on the other side; but I couldn’t. They were gone, they hadn’t said goodbye.

But I was no longer a prisoner or a criminal; they’d taken off my handcuffs; I was a patient now. My identity was changed, from an object of vilest hatred to something broken that must be cured. The transformation was too much for me to take in; it literally took my breath away, and I gasped.

I asked the men with me if we could stop for a moment. They let go of my arms.

I looked all round me at the English sky. It was a grey March afternoon: cold, cloudy, any day.

The large asylum buildings loomed in front of me, with their battered doors and original cast iron drainpipes still in place from 1855.

Here was my indeterminate future, my home, and it was no more or less than I deserved: it was merely inevitable and familiar.

I put my head back and sniffed the wind.

I thought I could smell rain.

To begin with, I was pleased to be there. I was no longer ‘Egghead Jen’s Crazed Killer’. They couldn’t call me the ‘Fen Beast’ or ‘schizo Scribbler’ any more.

No. I was an object of concern and care; I was to be scrutinised, medicated, cured – released!

I was compliant with all this up to a point. I was put in a new building, where I had a room of my own with a bed, chair, table and so on. The window, however, was too high to see through. It was barred and sealed. If I stood on the chair I could see a bit of distant green and some buildings, but it wasn’t up to much. I was locked in, and the door of my room, which was made of steel, had a low-level square of reinforced glass through which they could shine a torch at night. It had a rectangular slit through which they could pass newspapers, books, a plastic mug and ‘medication’ without opening the door.

So in fact it was like a cell, and at the start, while I was being ‘stabilised’, I was locked up for long periods of the day. This was ‘for my own safety’ and was a ‘temporary measure’. Eventually, I was given to understand that, if all went well, I would spend the day in various occupational therapy and day rooms, moving about with a degree of freedom. I would then graduate to a dormitory.

They gave me drugs, though I think only because it made them feel they were doing something medical. Some of these drugs made my tongue swell up. Some gave me blurred vision and a shaking hand. Most of them made me feel disorientated and afraid. All of them made me feel thirsty.

Inside my room, I was allowed newspapers, books and a radio. After a good deal of paperwork and letters to my bank, I had access to money of my own with which to buy these things. In general, the experience was better than being on remand in prison, because I did get to leave the room for three or four hours a day; I could go to the toilet, use the showers, walk to the dining room and so on. The staff were not dressed as gaolers but as nurses, though I was told that for some reason they belonged to the Prison Officers’ Association. I didn’t get beaten up, though there were plenty of extremely unstable-looking men that I stayed clear of.

I didn’t like the dormitory (noises from the psychotics, smells, bad hygiene), but on balance I’d say Longdale was also better than Chatfield, down there in the valley. No Baynes, Wingate or Hood. The only thing that nagged at me, even at the start, was the question of how long I’d be there. While a prison term was daunting, it was finite; but the doctors at Longdale were free to review and renew my detention indefinitely.

They say that if we knew the hour and place of our death, we could not go on living. Not knowing when my release might be, if ever, posed similar questions. Or to be precise, just one question: Why bother to go on?

The trial, incidentally, was something of a triumph for my team. Because I’d pleaded guilty to manslaughter, there was no identification issue and the DNA match wasn’t questioned. Two shrinks for the defence and two for the Crown asserted that I was bonkers, but the judge, as Exley predicted, would not accept their opinion without putting it to a jury. Exley let me see the report of the prison medical officer, for the prosecution. It was written – scribbled, actually, in blue ballpoint – on a standard form available from Her Majesty’s Stationery Office. This is what it said.

1. **Information to establish a persistent disorder or disability of mind.** His father died young and abused him. He was abused at school and abused others. He is a long term drug user and thief.

2. **Information to establish that the disorder or disability of mind results in abnormally aggressive or seriously irresponsible conduct on the part of the patient.**

   He killed a young woman and claims to have killed a youth. He may have killed another woman. He shows no remorse and does not understand the seriousness of his actions.
3. Information to establish that the disorder or disability of mind requires or is susceptible to medical treatment.

He is a loner and introvert, cannot establish relationships with females and has contempt for other males in an antisocial and rather dangerous way. There is a likelihood he may respond to therapy in a structured situation.

4. Reasons for the conclusion that the disorder or disability of mind is of a nature or degree which warrants the detention of the patient in hospital for medical treatment.

He suffers from personality disorder and does not express remorse about his offences. In my view he is a potentially dangerous man and I shall recommend a Restriction Order under the Mental Health Act be ordered by the court.

That’s it! Exley told me that many of them are even shorter. As for the pathetic circularity of the argument – he’s mad because he sinned, he may get better because he’s mad – that too, Julian told me, is standard.

Ah, what a piece of work is a Man . . . The glory that was Engleby, the incomparable complexity of the human mind in all its glittering and bewildering beauty reduced to half a dozen non sequiturs in blue Bic on an HMSO form . . .

The trial itself, on the other hand, was entirely thrilling.

Although the prosecution made much of the fact that I’d lived a ‘normal’ life and had managed to function in a well-paid job, Harvey called an embarrassing number of witnesses to attest to how weird I was. He also put me on the stand and made me go through what had happened. I didn’t try to appear deranged, but it was difficult to make the truth sound less than odd.

When his turn came, Julian Exley fluently outlined his position under Harvey’s prompting, but didn’t take well to being bullied by the prosecution counsel, a nasty piece of work called Tindall. I sensed that what Tindall wanted to get over was that anything short of locking me up in Parkhurst sine die would show improper regard for the gravity of the crime and insufficient sympathy for Jennifer and her family. He made several references to something called ‘section 47’ – a sort of safety net that means the prisoner can later be transferred from prison to hospital if the shrinks so decide. He offered this as an ideal solution: show your revulsion for the crime by refusing the plea and get him sent to Parkhurst; don’t get bogged down in dodgy psychiatry, just let the experts sort it out later. This, I think, was what they did with Sutcliffe, and it looked like a worryingly attractive compromise.

The technicality of the plea, however, meant that for the most part Tindall was obliged to attack Exley’s evidence, which he did on two flanks: both that the diagnosis itself was woolly nonsense (one saw his point) and, second, that even if – which was not admitted – there was something to it, then it still would not have substantially (he liked that word) diminished my responsibility.

We all agreed that the key issue was the degree to which my judgement had been impaired by my mental condition. Tindall argued that the measure of this was as much moral as medical and that psychiatrists had no special expertise here – any more than his lordship or the jury. It was a matter of common sense and ‘gut’ feeling. Exley ceded some ground but maintained his profession had ‘a contribution’ to make.

Harvey counter-attacked with a tremendous quote he’d dug up from the Court of Appeal where the senior judge had spoken of ‘a state of mind so different from that of ordinary human beings that the reasonable man would term it abnormal . . . [affecting] the ability to exercise willpower to control physical acts, in accordance with rational judgement’. He made great play of the jury being ‘reasonable men and women’; though of course this was essentially a completely non-technical point of the old circular variety: he must have been out of his mind to have done such a thing.

But it went well for him. His style was collegiate and constructive; he enlisted the assistance of his lordship and the jury – and me – as though solving a tricky cryptic crossword, all help gratefully received.

But Tindall was not finished. He returned to attack the whole ‘personality disorder’ category. Schizophrenics are mad all the time; but people not suffering from mental illness – e.g. me – only get into Special Hospitals if they do something terrible. The murder is the thing that allows admission to take place. Then he found his logic leading to something really terrifying: if psychopathy was really a mental abnormality, why were there no psychopaths being treated in normal NHS hospitals?

There was a nasty silence while we all let this sink in. ‘Well, Dr Exley, I put it to you. How many psychopaths receive treatment before they commit a crime? Is psychopathy in effect no more than a fancy term for wickedness?’

Exley didn’t have the figures, naturally enough, for non-criminal psychopaths in the civil NHS (bugger all, one suspected) and he floundered for a bit.

The judge, however, seemed to be of the view that this line of questioning had come too late in the day; we had
moved on from categories into degree of impairment. Harvey made some more commonsense appeals to the ‘reasonable’ man and recalled Exley, who had recovered sufficiently to marshal his arguments in such a way as to suggest that they were too subtle for Tindall to understand, but were well within the grasp of the jury and of his lordship. He was good; after a wobble, he was really good. So was Harvey, who was very alert – a bulky man fast on his feet – and quick to see which way the judge was leaning. Exley offered to go into the biochemistry of personality formation, including genetics, but the judge looked appalled at the idea. He’d had enough. And where he directed, the jury followed.

I was shocked by how quickly I adapted to the institution. I learned to build my day round small highlights. The cup of tea at seven: strong, hot and fresh because my dormitory was near the kitchen block. If I drank it quickly and timed my call properly, the auxiliary would stop on her way out and refill my cup. The sense of triumph lasted most of the morning. Or the Nescafé at nine. I used to be fussy about espresso and filter and cappuccino and all that. But the single spoon of standard Nescafé from a catering tin dissolved in hot-ish water was something for which I began to salivate from eight-thirty onwards.

The food, unfortunately, smelt of death and madness, that hospital reek I remembered from breakfast at Park Prewett. NHS hospitals are perhaps the last places in England where they think people eat boiled carrots, gravy and steamed pudding every day for lunch. Tinned pears with custard? Where do they even find this stuff? Perhaps the menu was set down by Mr Beveridge in 1948 and has yet to be reviewed. Luckily you can buy other things from the food shop; together with the pills, they made me put on weight. I gained almost two stone in my first year.

I was under the charge of a bluff psychiatrist called Braithwaite, who’d been to visit me in prison to see whether I’d be ‘suitable’ for transfer to Longdale. He believed in active intervention in his patients’ lives. He didn’t want a legion of the lost – of pale, violent men adrift in time; he wanted to make them better and move them on, preferably back into the world in which they had transgressed.

This was a laudable aim, I thought, consistent with the function of a hospital. In practice, what it meant was trying lots of different drugs – pink pills, blue pills, white pills – even for patients like me whose condition responded little to chemicals.

It also meant, about once a week, talking to Braithwaite or one of his assistants, generally a woman called Turner, about how I felt.

Not that great, usually: suffering from the side effects of the ‘medication’. I wish they wouldn’t rely on that genteel term, incidentally; I wish they’d call them drugs or pills.

Generally, I must say, they didn’t go in for euphemism. Dr Turner (first name Jennifer, alas) was typical. She didn’t blush or blink when she used the word ‘murder’ to me in our private consultations. There was something of the schoolmarm in her that made me feel as though I’d been caught for nothing more than smoking in the bushes; she was also quite pretty, though when I asked about her husband and/or home life I received a severely frosty response. She was going to treat me, but she didn’t want or have to like me, that was what she implied, and I thought that that was fair enough.

I really did like her, though. She was an excellent person, so direct and practical. It’s just a pity that the instruments she had at her disposal – drugs and chat – were so blunt. What Dr Turner needed was a way of reshaping the geography of my mind. She needed to shift the tectonic plates, reform the rifts and flood the valley. To do this, she needed to master time so that she and I could move about in it, not be the slaves of the homo sap delusion that it runs in a straight line.

She couldn’t do this, unfortunately, so we were left with pills and talk and occupational therapy – viz., gardening, ‘crafts’ and painting. There were other things to do, but I wasn’t ‘ready’ for them yet.

I was also sent to see psychologists, and this was preferable because one wasn’t always being brought up against the evidence of how pointless it all was. Your psychologist likes nothing more than a ‘test’, and in the early days I was forever answering questions, ticking boxes, Y or N, or on a scale of one to . . .

One day I was asked to sit in a chair with an electrode attached to me for a test called ‘penile plethysmography’. A nervous young woman in a white coat, possibly a student or trainee, then showed me photographs of women with no clothes on from various top-shelf magazines. The idea was to measure the degree of arousal and from that deduce . . . Deduce what? Whether I preferred blondes to brunettes, white girls to black, Men Only to Mayfair? They could have just asked.

I was anxious not to give the wrong impression, not to feel a flicker for the wrong picture – a flicker maybe delayed from a previous one. I didn’t want to find myself paired up at some grim hospital social with Lizzie ‘The Hatchet’ Rockwell from the women’s wing because I’d inadvertently twitched at the picture that most resembled her.

From what I know, it’s true to say that in real life people frequently desire and have vigorous affairs with
someone who is not at all their usual type. And what does a psychologist deduce from that?

In the event, the presence of the young woman in the white coat with the clipboard was so inhibiting that I pretty much flatlined.

In those early days, sex was very far from my mind. I think that lust is to some extent an expression of optimism: breed because life’s good, let’s have more of it.

That was really not my attitude when I first came inside Longdale. After seventeen years, I have regained a certain spark and pugnacity, I think. But it took me time, and I must admit that I felt pretty low for the first . . . Well, perhaps two or three years.

To be confronted with what sane society made of me: it took some digesting. I dragged it off to my lair and tried to swallow it, slowly, over a long period. (My lair eventually became a private room, rather than a dormitory, a little like my cubicle at Chatfield. I also in due course acquired what was called a ‘parole card’, which allowed me to wander pretty much where I wanted in the grounds.)

I was helped in the digestion process by a couple of the other patients. Gerry was about twenty years older than I was and came from a farming family in Somerset. He had cropped whiteish hair and a practical, muscular air to the way he went about his business. I didn’t in any way think of him as a ‘father’ figure, but I saw that he had managed to make a reasonable life for himself in this place (he’d been here for ten years already) by treating it as normal, something like school or national service – which he had in fact done, fighting briefly in Korea. Gerry was well informed about British history, albeit in a patchy, autodidactic way. Every morning he read the *Daily Telegraph* right through, smoothing each page out neatly on the table. He was good with his hands and made intricate though useless gadgets (pipe racks and so on) in the woodwork room. He sought me out quite early on and it was only after a bit that I understood, slightly to my embarrassment, that he was hoping to learn from me. He had been at the local grammar school, but he hadn’t been to university after national service because he was needed on the farm. We began each day by discussing what was in the papers over a cigarette in the day room, and I began to know what kind of thing made him laugh and to search it out.

Mark was younger and not, on the surface, as well sorted out as Gerry. He wore clothes that were a little too smart, and his hair was always neat. His intelligence was tightly wound and his views were expressed in syntactically flawless sentences (which is not, whatever Enoch Powell may have thought, the same thing as being eloquent). Mark was handsome, I’d suppose you’d say, and his clear brown eyes seldom blinked. What I grew to like about him (and it took time) was that he viewed life as a colossal, cosmic joke. Although he had periods of depression which took him out of circulation for a while, he made me laugh more than anyone I’ve ever known, more than Stellings or Jen or Julie or Ralph Richardson or Jeffrey Archer. I pined for Mark when he was off the ward in a black-dog spell and I think I helped him when he came back.

I knew what Mark had ‘done’ out there, why he was in Longdale, because he told me. It was serious and inexplicable, but not barbaric. I never knew what crime Gerry had committed and it didn’t seem to be important to our friendship. Does that sound pious? Maybe. I admit that I was not above a little frisson when I sat next to a celebrated disemboweller. I’m only human.

People think that men like me can only be released by the Home Secretary. In fact, the power resides with a mental health tribunal, which reviews my case every three years, or every year if I ask it to. The politicians can’t legally overrule the tribunal.

In spring 2001, with the backing of Dr Turner, I applied for a conditional discharge. It was thought that with some support, I could, without endangering others, live a reasonably normal life in what is termed ‘the community’ – i.e. non-community, or world at large.

What windy joy, as Milton might have put it, had I that day conceived, hopeful of my delivery . . .

The judge at the tribunal looked set to give me the green light until at the last minute the Home Office expert witness came up with some particularly compelling and ghoulish evidence in my case, backed by some general statistics about reoffending. The judge, visibly appalled, decided that discretion was the better part . . .

Jennifer Turner had the difficult task of breaking the news to me.

‘They aren’t required to go into the detail behind the decision, Michael.’

‘But we know what the reasons are.’

‘Believe me, I find this as vexing – almost as vexing as you do.’

‘I’m a patient in a hospital who is better but can’t go home because the public wouldn’t like it.’

‘Public opinion may well be a factor. It was a famous case.’

‘I know. I remember.’

‘I’m sorry.’
‘But,’ I said, ‘it looks as though the Home Office is now arguing that a hospital shall be deemed a prison. Why did we go through all that diminished responsibility nonsense?’

Dr Turner looked as though she might explode. Then she did. ‘Dear God, how do you think it makes me feel?’

I ended up consoling her, like Carlyle with Mill. ‘It’s all right, Jennifer, I know it’s not your fault . . .’

But the whole experience set me back a bit. They put me on a high dose of antidepressants and I gained a lot more weight. For the best part of two years I didn’t really get out of my room. I just sat there watching a small television that Stellings had sent me. Thank God for television, for *Countdown* and the regional news.

Julie came to see me once when I was in prison on remand. She told me how our mother had died of cancer.

We were in the prison visiting room, either side of a table, under the eyes of the warders and a couple of social workers.

‘She said to send you her love, Mike.’

‘Thanks. Was it painful at the end?’

‘Not too bad. She had the drugs. She was in the Sunset Room in the end. In the hospital.’

I nodded. ‘Do you feel all right, Jules? Do you feel lonely?’

‘I’m all right.’

‘It’s just you and me now. Of the old gang. And since they may never let me out, it’s really just you.’

Julie looked down at her hands, which she was clenching on the table.

‘Did Mum know I was pleading guilty?’

‘Yes.’

‘And what did she think?’

‘She said she didn’t know you any more. She said that once she felt you were a part of her. When you were a baby and that. That you were her own flesh and blood. Like you know, really, her own flesh, like—’

‘I know what she meant.’

‘But she said she thought that little boy had died, or got lost somewhere on the way.’

I was holding the edge of the table.

‘She said if she was to meet you now she wouldn’t know you.’

I swallowed. ‘I understand. She’s right, of course. She’s right in more ways than she could understand.’

‘I’m sorry, Mike.’

‘You’re not to blame.’

I thought for a bit. ‘Julie, I don’t think you should come and see me any more, wherever they send me. Send me a card on my birthday, that’s all. For the rest of the time, you should put me out of your mind.’

I hoped she wouldn’t remember the card. A kitty in a basket every April from here to the crack of doom. God. She was biting her lip, still looking down.

I smiled. ‘Got a boyfriend, Jules?’

‘Yup.’

‘Marry him. Be happy. Have babies.’

She kept nodding, dumbly.

‘You’ll be all right, Julie.’

‘Oh, Mike.’

After I’d got over the disappointment of not being released, I felt that I’d gained a new perspective on my life and its events. Having not written a word in the 1990s, I began to pick up my pen again and jot down the odd thought. I found that I had a certain clarity.

Baynes, for instance. I had clear recall and a consistent point of view on all that. I didn’t plan to kill him, but I did plan to hurt him badly; I wanted to break his legs. I knew he spent hours practising his goal-kicking on a distant pitch. In his final term he had no lesson to rush back to (he had a ‘private study’ period) so could carry on till it was dark. I simply doubled back from the food shop where I’d gone after my own rugby game and waited for him. The bridge over the stream that divided two large areas of playing fields was concrete with scaffolding poles for handrails. Nearby, I’d noticed lumps of loose concrete, roughly mixed, full of pebbles, and a length of rusted broken pole. I hid beneath the bridge until I heard his studs clattering towards me. I caught him from behind with the pole and he went down. I lifted the pole and brought it down with all my might across his tibia. I heard it crack. I dragged him to the edge of the bridge and rubbed the wound on the back of his head into the rough edge of the concrete. Then I chucked the weapons into the stream and jogged back to the main school. He was groaning as I left and I knew it wouldn’t be long till he was found. Dr Benbow would have examined him in his usual perfunctory manner when he was brought in, implying that he was wasting everyone’s time. The leg was cleanly broken and he was well
enough to take his Oxford exams a few weeks later. What I didn’t know at the time was how hard I had hit his head. In fact, I hit it more than once, and it gave me pleasure to do so. I didn’t mention it at the time in what Dr Exley called my ‘journal/narrative’ in case it was seen by someone.

The case of Gudrun Abendroth is more complicated. My time in Longdale has enabled me, as I said, to recall the Baynes incident clearly. I even feel a degree of remorse for his orphaned children, even though in my view they’re better off without him. Fräulein Abendroth, though, is a different matter.

To put it simply: I still don’t know if I killed her or not; and that single fact, that not-knowing, is what persuades me – more than Baynes, more even than Jen – that Longdale is the right place for me. I followed a woman who looked like her from a Graham Parker gig to a house in Tournay Road. That much I wrote at the time. I have subsequently remembered for sure that I went back there on at least one occasion. I followed her. She went to a pub called the Cock on North End Road and I lurked at the other end of the bar, watching her. But why would I want to kill her when I didn’t even know her?

If I did, I must be like Peter Sutcliffe or someone, but I don’t think I am. Or perhaps I did get to know her, albeit briefly. And in that space of time, perhaps she posed a threat to the ‘integrity’ of my ‘narcissistic self’ so great that violence was my only self-defence.

The Exley theory, however, can’t really be stretched to include amnesia on my part: he was rather strict on that point. ‘Snapshot’ memory, including partial forgetfulness, he could live with, but a complete blank he thought suspect. I suppose the only way Exley could be brought onside is if we beefed up the theory of ‘pathological defences’ so much that they annexed the memory function. It seems a bit far-fetched, though, doesn’t it?

So, I’m inclined to acquit myself.

On the other hand, it smells a bit. Who else might have killed her? And the killer had what the Roman plods of Fulham called a modus operandi similar to mine: several blows to cranium; no sexual interference; deep grave.

But if I did kill her, yet can’t remember doing so (compare Sutcliffe’s detailed recall of his victims in court), how many more might there be?

At this time, I just don’t know; and there are some things in the past that may have happened and some that may not have happened. But the reality of their happening or not happening then has no weight now.

Until we can navigate in time, I’m not sure that we can prove that what happened is real.

I remember that conversation with Stellings in the Indian restaurant in which he – insanely, I thought – predicted the imminent end of the Cold War, the sex war, apartheid and so on.

He was right, though, wasn’t he? He might have added architecture too, which was then embedded in a desperate impasse. Either you built ‘modern’ – witless rectangular towers with metal-framed windows in which people rushed to kill themselves – or you built mock-Palladian (itself a classical pastiche). The two camps detested one another with pitiless venom. Now I look in the papers and I see buildings of light and air, glass and steel and uncovered brick. They look really nice. (I wonder if I’ll ever be free to go inside one.)

Suggesting, back then, that using strong materials and good design might be a way forward would have earned you contempt from both the Legomen and the Pasticheurs. Like the way all British politicians are Social Democrats now, but back then holding such beliefs was derided as ‘having no policies’.

(Don’t you love politicians? I think what I like best is their sublimely self-serving insistence that their ‘private life’ is nothing whatever to do with their ‘public life’. So that the decision to shaft their secretary over the conference table five minutes before the cabinet meeting or to spend the night face down in a bathhouse cubicle taking on all comers is reached by a different person, or a different brain, from the one who, a few minutes later, decides to vote for family tax credits or the death penalty. God, if only!)

Anyway, these changes in society look all right to me, though of course in most ways things haven’t changed at all. I remember my student questions.


Stellings’s specific optimism was right, but so was my less hopeful overview.

And other things are worse than even I foresaw.

For instance: my country recently invaded another country.

That’s not something anyone could have foreseen. Invading other countries was what Hitler or Kaiser Wilhelm or the kamikaze Japanese did.

Not invading other countries: that was our thing. It more or less defined who we were. America likewise. Obviously there were those CIA things (Guatemala, Iran and so on) but they were unofficial: when we begged the
American government to join us in our European World War Two, prim Mr Roosevelt said No: the US has not been attacked, so it wouldn't be proper. Then the Japanese bombed them at Pearl Harbor and it was OK.

This Blair guy, though. My age, Oxford-educated, looks and sounds quite reasonable. You'd have thought that he'd understand his own country's recent past, wouldn't you? Apparently not. They sent inspectors to find weapons and the inspectors came back empty-handed; they sent spies, and the spies returned with nothing.

Never mind, said Mr Blair, I don’t care: if we can't find the weapons then he must be hiding them, and in half an hour or so he could attack us. We must get him first.

My old friend Peter Mandelson came on the radio. ‘Oh yes,’ he said, ‘saddam’s got a supermarket.’ He pronounced it ‘shoopermarket’. ‘saddam’s got a shoopermarket selling deadly weapons. We must invade.’ Peter had seemed rather a sophisticated man, I thought, when I’d met him during that General Election. Why was he now talking this crap about a giant Asda in Tikrit?

The funny thing was that almost no one outside Westminster believed it. For instance, no one in Longdale believed it. ‘Paranoid’ Pete Smith on my corridor never thought we'd find hidden weapons, yet Paranoid is someone who rolls an orange under his bed each night to check there's no one there.

Johnnie Johnston wouldn't give the time of day to that ‘intelligence’ dossier, and Johnnie is a man who believes his own thoughts are controlled by the BBC Radio 4 long-wave transmitter at Redruth.

Not much has happened in Longdale in the last seventeen years. There have been some improvements in the kitchen – twice a week you can hold it down – and in the gardens and the workshops.

I am no longer under the control of Dr Braithwaite (retired) or Dr Turner (moved on, alas). My ‘case officer’ (sounds like M16, but it isn’t) is now Dr Vidushi Sen, a severe young woman in her first senior appointment in the exciting world of Special Hospitals. She has more than her fair share of old lags like me, poor thing; the senior doctors bag the newer patients because there’s more hope of an outcome.

They stopped giving me drugs because everyone could see they did no good. Take drugs away from a patient and he may improve; at least he'll stop experiencing the side effects. But take drugs away from a shrink and all she has left is chat.

Dr Vidushi Sen is a very poor chatter. She sits opposite me with her shiny black hair tightly drawn back and pinned, in her pretty cotton shift worn over trousers that taper and button at the ankle. She blinks over her shallow black-framed glasses, clipboard in hand, and waits for me to spout.

I don’t think Dr Sen subscribes to the Exley theory of ‘personality disorder’. There’s a nasty mix there of nature and nurture, of a ‘biological substrate’ and plain bad behaviour. All a bit murky for her, I think. Am I meant to be mad or bad? The Exley answer, which essentially says ‘a bit of both’ is not to Dr Sen’s taste. And since I don’t really fit into any category of mental illness in either the American or European handbooks, of which there have been several new editions since I've been in Longdale, all of which she’s studied dutifully, Dr Sen is left with the conclusion that I am bad.

She thinks I am a very nasty man indeed and should really be banged up in Strangeways or Winson Green with the robbers and the ‘sane’ killers and the nonces. She believes I’m far too lucid, too well controlled and too reasonable to be mad. She’d like to say too well educated, too, but, in a way so convoluted one can barely follow it, that would be incorrect, politically.

Dr Sen would never actually say that I am bad. She’s very hot on ‘blame’ and ‘guilt’: absence of need for, destructive effects of.

Another thing she’s very hot on is me being gay. She hasn’t said as much, because it’s not her way to suggest things; but she’s always leaving the pink door ajar, hoping that one day I’ll sidle through. I’m dreading that in desperation she’ll order up another ‘penile seismograph’ or whatever the thing’s called, but instead of looking at some forlorn toms with their legs apart, I’ll be staring at Master Meat the Butcher’s Boy.

She’s a keen student of my journal and reveals a good deal about herself by the passages she chooses for our delectation. Those concerning Margaret and my relationship with her are of particular interest.

‘You called her “candid, optimistic and polite”.’

‘So?’

She says nothing, merely raises a shaped eyebrow. I know what she means: that these are the terms in which you might describe your chartered accountant, not your lover. I don’t say so; I just give her rather boring justifications of each adjective in turn.

She echoes Exley’s comment on my restrained description of the first time Margaret and I had it off together; I point out that I wasn’t writing to titillate. She also draws attention to my repeated references to sodomy and fisting in Her Majesty’s prisons, presumably wishing to imply that my obvious distaste is – oh, toiling paradox! – a
concealed desire. I hear her big feet coming from the next valley.

‘And this boy “Rough”, the one who became so good at squash because he had gay desires . . .’

‘What about him?’

Again the raised eyebrow. She is at the very least implying that his name, as in Trade, is another throttled longing on my part.

‘Dr Sen, as you probably know, there is a huge amount of homosexual activity in this hospital. Two men in my block are virtually married, with the blessing of the supervising psychiatrist. They share a room. They have a standing order for condoms and KY from the hospital shop. Their relationship is said to have helped them both to earthly joy and the prospect of an early release. What’s to hide? Being gay would only make things better for me.’

Dr Sen seldom pushes things. She’s young, maybe thirty-two, and it’s against her training to suggest. You must also remember that Longdale is a maximum-security institution. Although we have confidentiality for our tête-à-têtes, the door of the consulting room is unlockable and I sit nearer to it, so that if a rescue has to be made I am easy to get at. The wall behind me is half glass and gives onto the corridor where a male nurse patrols, never more than a few paces away. There can suddenly be an undertow of danger. I see her sense it. Sometimes I see fear in her wide dark eyes: the dilating black pupils almost cover the brown iris.

Her view – I know, because she is transparent, so much better at self-disclosure than I am – is that I am a furious misogynist whose hatred of women springs from a violently suppressed homosexuality.

She also thinks I am a racist, and this is delicate because even though she’s as English as I am, with a similar regional accent, her family is originally from southern India. (Her first name, Vidushi, incidentally, means ‘Learned’ in Hindi, which tells you about her pushy parents in Maidenhead. I looked it up in hinduism.about.com on the Internet on the heavily firewalled computer in the day room.)

When she asked me about a passage I wrote many years ago on immigration, I repeated that I merely felt pity for the West Indians who were given a false prospectus and found Britain cold and inhospitable, and sorry that for the many people from the Asian subcontinent who traded in their beautiful country for the grey rain of Catford and Lewisham.

She didn’t look convinced. She also brought up my description of Shireen Nazawi as ‘EFL-speaking’.

I conceded that it was ungallant – but true: English wasn’t Shireen’s first language, and she struggled with it, as, consequently, did the readers of her articles.

Dr Sen didn’t push too hard here, I must admit, because although racism was an important part of her view of Engleby as Utter Shit, it wasn’t central to her assessment of why I killed Jennifer Arkland.

For misogyny, she relied on my description of the wine bar in Knightsbridge, suggesting I implied that all women were basically prostitutes, and on my ‘fascination’ for the street tarts in Paddington.

Obviously, I had no difficulty batting those two away.

More difficult was a sort of experimental undergrad riff that went: ‘Anne, Molly and Jennifer are, like all women, weirdly obsessed by appearances – looks, colours, fashion, surfaces; they have no interest in ideas or deeper truths, only “style” and status and the rapacious purchase of goods to underline them. Their cordiality conceals a sense of bitter rivalry that they’ll carry to their death, without ever acknowledging it. They’re really machines for surviving in the competition for resources. Carrying the species in their wombs, they have to be.’

She didn’t remember the exact words, but I was able to fill her in.

I then explained, as in a Dr Gerald Stanley supervision, that context is all. This wasn’t necessarily ‘my’ view; it was a view that had been offered as a corrective to a romanticised depiction of the girl students’ lives that had preceded it. It was a squirt of lemon in the eye to defuse the charge of ‘sentimentality’.

Dr Sen did have one powerful argument for misogyny in my case, and we both knew what it was. To her credit, it was six months or more before, under provocation from me, she brought it up.

As I recall, I was irritated by her refusal ever to pass judgement on me for what I’d done. She never seemed able to express even so much as a mild disapproval.

‘You’re like Bill Clinton,’ I said, knowing the comparison would appal her. ‘He took the intern as his girlfriend, then denied it. He screwed her and he lied and lied and lied. But in the end when he coughed up he couldn’t say that he’d done wrong, he’d only say what he’d done was “inappropriate”.’

‘I don’t believe the idea of blame is helpful,’ said Dr Sen, as always.

‘With no blame there’s no shame. A human society can’t exist without shame. Shame is like handedness or walking upright. It’s a central human attribute. In fact, it’s the first human quality ever recorded.’

‘Where?’

‘Genesis, Chapter Three. The covering of nakedness. The acquisition of shame was the first consequence of consciousness, of the speciating moment. Take shame from me and you are calling me pre-human.’

Dr Sen coughed and rearranged her notes. ‘I was merely thinking it might be worthwhile for you to think again
about your attitude to women.’

‘Why again? I’ve thought about it so many times. You seem to think that everything can be explained by it. You see significance even in the fact that I once stole a girl’s bike when I was at school. It wasn’t an insult to worldwide womanhood. It was because I needed transport for the gin and whisky I was stealing, so I could make money. It was about cash, not women. If there’d been a boy’s bike to hand, I’d have stolen that instead.’

She stopped looking down at her notes and met my exasperated gaze, quite calmly.

‘But you stole a woman’s bike again, in Cambridge, didn’t you?’

‘What have bicycles got to do with misogyny?’

‘That’s your word, not mine. I’ve never said you are misogynistic. But if anyone wanted to find evidence for that in your character, they needn’t look far, need they? After all, by your own admission, you violently killed a young woman.’

She’d gone too far, and she knew it. She blushed a little, which gave her cheek a most beautiful colour, of rose under gold.

And in her shame was her humanity.

I don’t think that’s a misogynistic remark.
I had a visit from Stellings today. Yes, you can have visits here. I told you: it’s a hospital.

Like you, I’d imagined iron-barred cells with famous Panthers and Rippers served food by armed yet windy guards through hatches using lengthy tongs while the men inside went more and more insane down the years, beating their brains against the damp brick walls.

In fact there are only a handful of people kept locked up and it’s mostly for their own safety. But all the famous guys – you can bump into them over the seed boxes in the garden stores, or doing some fiddly work with a bradawl in the carpentry shop.

I met Stellings in the overheated day room where Johnnie Johnston and a couple of others were watching Neighbours on television.

Stellings was dressed in what he imagines to be a non-homicidal-maniac-inciting outfit of blue jeans, stone windcheater and open-necked plaid shirt with a nasty little polo pony on the breast pocket.

He’s very butch about being normal and makes a thing of saying hello to anyone he remembers from previous visits. ‘Hi, Frank!’ he calls with a wave to creepy Frank Usborne, who, I told Stellings, had killed three rent boys and kept bits of them in the freezer compartment of his fridge.

This is completely untrue. I’ve no idea what crime Frank committed, but by far his worst offence inside is that he always gets to the Sudoku puzzle in the newspaper before anyone else and completes it before breakfast. If above the grid it gives the rating ‘Difficult’, Frank puts a little left-out sign and adds ‘Not Very’ in ballpoint next to it.

This is really annoying.

At the age of 52, Stellings has retired from Oswald Payne. He renounced his equity partnership to give some of the younger bloods a shot, but in fact he had little choice in the matter as fifty is considered the end of the line in his world.

‘Some of these young guys, they’re just animals, Mike. There’s a twenty-eight-year-old called Sean Busby I’m afraid I was responsible for hiring. Normally our partners work on a lockstep arrangement, but Busby wouldn’t stay unless he worked on an “eat what you kill” basis.’

‘Couldn’t you have done that in your day, Stellings?’

‘No. I was very much for lockstep, it’s more collegiate, it encourages people to pool their resources and work as a team. I’d hate to be on an eat-what-you-kill basis. That way, everyone’s just working for themselves.’ He puffed out his cheeks. ‘Though I suppose I wouldn’t have minded eating what Sean Busby killed.’

‘Or Frank Usborne.’

‘For Christ’s sake, Mike.’

I don’t think Stellings likes coming to Longdale with its barbed-wire walls and silly regulations. ‘Toiletries. Patients can only receive these if they are in plastic bottles. NOT glass or aerosols. Items should be new and in the original wrapping. Any seals must not be broken.’ Christ knows what Clarissa and her smart friends with their personal trainers make of his visits. He can’t bring food or sweets in case he’s tampered with them; he can’t even bring cigarettes for fear that he’s replaced the tobacco with a bit of Glynn Powers’s finest.

The only reason Stellings comes to see me is because entirely by chance, one evening almost thirty-five years ago, he found himself sitting next to me at dinner in a candlelit hall in our first week in college.

Everything else – every single thing in the intervening thirty-five years – is down to politeness.
child home she'd beat him more, and if there was a father (a bit unlikely) he too would hit him.

And that child would slowly ascend towards full awareness in a world whose sky was violence and whose horizons were fear. And however resourceful he was, however patient and fortunate in the events of his life that followed, he was like a creature in a nest of imprisoning boxes who could never really break free. That was his world and any attempt to persuade him that it was merely a ‘subjective’ or ‘individual’ experience could never convince him.

And all of us, I think, are like him. We may think as we grow older that we know more, but in truth no one has an overarching view, no one can see in the round. We are like cards in a pack, and the king of spades is a better thing to be than the two of diamonds; but none of us is a dealer or a player with free will and power to dispose; none of us can see or understand the value of the entire deck, let alone the rules of the game in which it’s employed. Even the best of us is no more than an inert piece of card with some markings.

All of us – Julie and Jennifer and me and creepy Frank Usborne and even Dr Turner – are like that child because we are so severely limited by the operation of our consciousness – the faculty that Unamuno called a ‘curse’, that made us lower than the jackass or the crab.

In much of my childhood and adolescence I never knew how unhappy I was. I accepted everything as being the norm because I knew no different. How could I? I had nothing with which to compare it, and all my impulses were towards normalisation on the ‘constancy principle’ (Freud surely did get that bit right). Only now can I see with a little more perspective how damaging that degree of misery was to me. Not because (and here the psychoanalysts are mistaken) I pressed into service the mysterious hypothetical mechanisms of ‘repression’ to put it to one side, away from the normal processes of mind, so that it festered and grew toxic until such time as it was ready to wreak havoc on my entire metabolism. No; but just because that much pure, continuing unhappiness is bad for you. It burns away your gentler impulses. It corrodes the soul.

When I look at Gerry and Mark and I think of poor Jennifer and all the people that I’ve met and talked about in these pages, they seem to me all in their way like that little boy in the Tesco aisle. They seem part of a great biological accident: viz., that the defining human faculty – that of self-awareness – is a faulty one, at best partial and frustrating, at worst utterly misleading.

It’s as though we discovered that hawks’ famous eyesight didn’t really work or that all hounds secretly have a duff sense of smell. The failure of any other faculty we could bear with patience, even with humour, but not the failure of the one that distinguished us from all previous species. That is beyond irony, beyond cruelty.

What I fear most of all is that when I die, my consciousness won’t be extinguished but will survive to be reborn in a small boy in a striplit supermarket; and I will have to go home with that exhausted violent mother, and will go through this struggle of life all again, caught in an eternal loop of return.

Scientists now believe that my sense of self is an illusion generated by the chemical activity of the brain; that there is no such thing as ‘mind’, that there is only matter, but that over the successful Homo sapiens years the idea of self has become a ‘necessary fiction’. We think that some small grey bits of brain, following a random inaccuracy in cell duplication many years ago, began in one individual and his offspring to generate an illusion of mind; and that, in history, the chance mutation that allowed them this chimera had side effects so helpful to the species that its possessors were naturally selected, to the extent that we are all now descended from them – mutants every one of us, whose key mutation is a fib.

If that current thinking is right and consequently there is no self, then my consciousness is so biochemically similar to that of the small boy in the supermarket as to be functionally indistinguishable. Therefore ‘I’, since I am not an individual entity, cannot cease to be, but am doomed to exist for ever – until or unless some new freak mutation finds favour with the powers of natural selection, and human consciousness, like the bat’s blind eye, falls back into disuse, deselected, along with the other hopeful monsters – back into the welcoming void whence it came.

Naturally, I try not to think about that too much.

There are things to do here that keep your mind off it. I used to go to ‘group therapy’, which was of limited use since many of the group were mad. Some of them were at least coherent and wanted to talk about their crimes; they wondered what had made them rape small children or set fire to their own houses. A lot of them sat staring straight ahead, stunned by drugs or anomie.

Few of them had the smallest interest in the remainder of the group, though I remember the otherwise silent Benny Frost perking up one day when it transpired that one of the others had cancer. Benny sat forward and took a close interest. Was this person going to die? What were his chances? Benny is very frightened of death, so frightened that he killed three men, very slowly, hoping to learn something self-protective from their experience of dying.

For a while, I used to go to church. There is a fine Victorian chapel, rather like the one in Jennifer’s old college
where Anne made her impassioned address from the pulpit. I liked the stories from the Bible, but the music was unendurable, particularly Frank Usborne on the tambourine. After some bell, book and candle ritual, the chapel briefly went interfaith to accommodate the Muslims, of whom we have a growing number. Now they have their own miniature mosque, a former punishment room outside which you sometimes see a row of laceless shoes. Inside, it’s done up like the carpet shop at Harrods.

There is no synagogue because Jews don’t do murder. What about Cain? you’re thinking. But he wasn’t a Jew because the Jews didn’t start till Abraham, and if the Garden of Eden was where we think it was, Cain, like his parents, was probably from Mesopotamia, which was on the site of modern Iraq. And on the sixth day, God created . . . an Iraqi. Of course, the children of Abraham did then do a lot of killing on their own account, but the modern British Jew doesn’t. When Jennifer Turner first told me this, it made my head spin for days. Nature-nurture, culture, religion, genes, schizo, psycho . . . In the end, I gave up; my thoughts seemed no more conclusive than those provoked by the ‘modern’ painting in Stellings’s drawing room all those years ago.

For years I also did a course in ‘social skills’. Much of this focussed on how to approach the opposite sex, and for this purpose we were allowed to mix with women patients. There was a good deal of ‘role play’, much of it taped on video for our later delight. Somewhere in the archive is a film of me pretending to be queuing outside a cinema and ‘striking up a conversation’ with Lizzie ‘the Hatchet’ Rockwell that culminates in me asking her if she would like to join me for a drink later. In the rushes I saw, it doesn’t, to be honest, look as though my heart is really in it.

And then of course there was teaching. There are paid instructors in any number of crafts and trades, from tinsmith to bookbinder, but some men also wanted to do school work. When I arrived, this was under the supervision of a patient with a degree from Oxford in Classics, though he always referred to it as ‘Greats’. Under prompting from Dr Turner, I eventually volunteered to help. I was paid for my work, and it secured my ownership of the envied parole card that gives me freedom to roam. I had a class of half a dozen for GCSE Maths and Physics, three for History and English, while one year I taught Geography A level by keeping one step ahead in the book. I didn’t give it much of a socialist slant, as my old moral tutor Dr Townsend might have done, but my candidate secured a B-grade in the exam and I believe it helped him get released back into the world. Such are the consolations we teachers cling to.

I stuck at the pedagoguery for several years, though not as long as Mug Benson, who, the Chatfield Year Book – yes, the bastards tracked me down again, or perhaps they just bicycle a copy up the slope – informs me is still grinding out irregular verbs in the valley. Our exam results kept on improving. Johnnie Johnston, who to my certain knowledge, couldn’t count from one to five without ten minutes’ hard digital labour, applied to do Maths GCSE one year. It was uphill work for him, me and the rest of the class, but he was adamant that the transmitter signals from Redruth were giving him the all-clear. In August, he brought me a piece of paper that reported he had scored an A-star. The thrill rather went out of it for me after that.

I don’t do much these days, but I find listening to music helps distract me. I’m allowed a radio and CD player in my room and I’ve been hearing one or two of the old records I used to like at university. What I’m looking for is songs that buy into the human illusion in a really simple way, but have just a touch of comfort in them. Old Dylan, for instance:

> It ain’t no use a-turnin’ on your light, babe,  
> The light I never knewed;  
> It ain’t no use turnin’ on your light, babe,  
> I’m on the dark side of the road.

He just tells the girl she wasted his ‘precious time’, but it doesn’t really matter, so, ‘Don’t think twice, it’s all right.’ That’s a good attitude, there’s something noble about it and outside its time; I guess that’s what’s good about folk music: when it’s good it can have an eternal ring.

‘Girl From the North Country’ makes me think of Jennifer, sitting in the firelit circle in Ireland.

> If you go when snowflakes storm,  
> When rivers freeze and summer ends,  
> Please see she has a coat so warm  
> To keep her from the howling winds.

It’s the simplicity of the old folk tune he adapted overnight from ‘scarborough Fair’ that makes it almost intolerably poignant to listen to. That, and the use of ‘storm’ as an intransitive verb.

We’re not allowed to download anything from the Internet, so I have to get Stellings to send me CDs (‘Only
I had a consultation with little Dr Vidushi Sen this morning. I was feeling rather reflective and – though I tried to curb the feeling in myself – quite fond of her. She’s so young! She’s also a product of modern (i.e. post-trahison des clercs) British schooling, so has almost no general knowledge, and no familiarity with: grammar, foreign languages, myth, art and history – ancient or modern. Poor child, she has a job on her hands.

The consulting area is being redecorated, so we were in a small room in the old wing, which still has the Victorian shutters and bars from when it was a padded cell. Now it has piles of papers and folders and unread reports with daunting titles and two NHS ‘comfortable’ chairs, madmen for the use of, and a filing cabinet on which is a circular metal tray with unwashed coffee cups and an old carton of milk. A male nurse hovered outside.

I began the causerie, as is expected.
‘If you were God, why would you absent yourself from earth?’

No answer.
‘I mean, what is the point in divine terms of being not here? What purpose does that serve?’

Still no answer.
‘Traditionally,’ I went on, ‘it’s explained as a “test of faith”. But if God was evident, then you wouldn’t need faith, would you? So it’s a circular argument. It looks like it’s also an ex post facto one, doesn’t it?’

‘What do you think?’ said Dr Sen.
‘I don’t think that a wise God would conclude that the advantages of being absent outweigh those of being present.’

‘And?’

‘The consequence of being absent is that you place a heavy premium on blind “faith”. You leave belief open to human credulity. You make religion open to perversion by politics and fanaticism.’

‘So?’
‘Better to turn up, I would have thought.’

Silence.
‘I mean, if Woody Allen knew that ninety per cent of success comes from showing up, you’d think the Almighty could have figured it out too.’

Longer silence. By looking fierce yet staying silent, I tried to make her speak.
‘Do you have religious belief?’ she said eventually.
‘Does it sound like it? I see the people nodding their heads at the Wailing Wall and I think God needs us more than we need him. It’s all about absence, isn’t it?’

The eyebrow.
‘They say that someone is most intensely present just after they have left.’

‘Someone you love?’ said Dr Sen.
‘Not a word I use.’
‘Ever?’ Despite herself. ‘Have you never loved someone?’
‘From what I understand, love is something that ceases to exist if you stop feeling it.’

The eyebrow again.
‘“My love died.” You’ve heard people say that, haven’t you? With sincerity and self-regard. “Love” is a force or value by which most people would claim to regulate their lives. Yet if you stop feeling it, then it no longer exists.’

‘And?’
‘It’s like fear or envy. One day you feel jealous of someone else; another day, for no discernible reason, you just don’t. Sometimes you’re frightened in a car; other times with the same driver, you aren’t. “Love” is like that. You feel it, you don’t feel it. Nothing wrong with that. But surely that makes it too unstable to be given a privileged position in life – let alone used as a foundation.’

‘To what have you given a privileged position in your life?’
This was quite a good question.

‘Accuracy,’ I said.

‘What?’

‘Integrity of fact.’

‘Is that all?’

I smiled. ‘You’re thinking that sounds a little “cold”? Well, I certainly don’t think you could say in retrospect that my life has been . . . What’s a phrase you might enjoy? I know, I know. You couldn’t say that I’ve been “on the side of life”.’

Dr Sen didn’t answer.

‘No one would describe my story as “life-affirming”, would they?’

I laughed, but she didn’t.

‘No. And I suppose if I haven’t been on the “side of life” I must have been on the other side.’

‘And what’s that?’

The side of death, obviously. I didn’t say that, though, because I didn’t want to freak her out. But I thought about it after the consultation was over. I haven’t really been on any ‘side’ in my life, and maybe that’s part of the difficulty. Perhaps I should just pick a cause, as people pick a football team, not because it ‘is’ the best, but just because it gives them something to believe in, like a dummy or an idol.

On the other hand, to do such a thing knowingly, to admit to the self-deception, would be like giving up on any idea of integrity.

In the dining room, my heart lifted when I saw Mark sitting alone by the window. I grabbed a tray full of death-swill and went to join him.

‘Ah, Wilson,’ he said. ‘Pull up a chair.’

Mike, Toilet, Groucho, Irish Mike, Mike (!), Prufrock, Michèle, M.K. Watson . . . Wilson!

Mark has this fantasy in which the people in Longdale are characters from *Dad’s Army*, which often seems to be showing on television. Johnnie Johnston is dotty Corporal Jones. Dr Vidushi Sen is Private Pike (‘stupid boy . . .’) Creepy Frank Usborne is the vicar. Gerry, really just because he looks a bit like him, has to be Mr Mainwaring. Mark himself is the verger and is always annoying Frank Usborne by calling him ‘your reverence’. And Mark cast me, to my great delight, as fey, superior Sergeant Wilson.

It has been Mark’s obsession, brewed now for nine months or more, to contrive a set of circumstances in which Dr Sen (Pike) is compelled to refer to me as ‘Uncle Arthur’. He has gone so far as to write a one-act play for Christmas, currently being scrutinised by the ‘entertainments committee’ (sounds like Stalag Luft II, I know), in which the line is uttered. I’ve agreed to play ‘Arthur’ and he’s done everything he can to make it inevitable that the part of Lakshmi, the 32-year-old Indian heroine, can be taken only by Dr Sen.

We await the outcome of the committee’s deliberations with intense excitement.

One thing I ought perhaps to clear up. Am I in fact homosexual? I remember hearing the American sage Gore Vidal on the radio. In his humorous bass baritone he assured his listeners: ‘There are no such things as homosexual or heterosexual people, only homosexual or heterosexual acts.’

It sounded wise. By that criterion, I must be straight, since I’ve never known any homosexual ‘acts’. Though to be frank, I suppose I haven’t seen much girl action either.

And Jennifer? What was sexually going on there? There’s a belief you find in some biographers of the upmarket kind that knowing whether two people once spent the night together is the Rosetta Stone for understanding their ‘characters’. If Lytton Strachey’s semen once found its way onto Maynard Keynes’s waistcoat, their belief runs, then the stories of literature and economics are altered. I think not.

From the evidence of her diary, Jennifer was having some difficulty with Robin Wilson over what she called ‘sex, lack of’. My guess is that she had had a physical affair with him but was trying to move it on to more of a ‘good friends’ thing. Girls were always doing this at that age, because they found themselves out of their depth and wanted to get back to safety. Or perhaps she just went off him.

And who was this mysterious ‘simon’ from whom (‘sob’) there was no letter in her pigeonhole? We’ll never know, and my guess is that if Jen were alive today she might not even remember. And what of the boy from Downing and the boy from King’s quoted in the newspaper as having been her lovers? Maybe one did, perhaps both, maybe neither. Most likely is that the newspaper reporter made it up. Any quotation in any paper in which the speaker is not named is valueless (because it *could* be made up without legal repercussions); and in the tabloids these unattributed ‘quotes’ are generally just invented.

It certainly doesn’t matter whether Jennifer slept with one boy or many or none unless those actions had a
significant bearing on her life, development or happiness. Clearly they didn’t.

With the passage of time, all such actions or lack of them, appear less significant. And anyway, since the cells in our body die and are renewed, replaced by different ones, we do in a literal sense become different individuals. The connection I have to the boy I once was is now so fragile that it requires an act of conscious ‘faith’ to maintain that we are in any significant sense the same person.

At a certain remove, when passion and circumstance have died or altered beyond recall, our past selves are no more than characters in a fictional tale, like dead, half-forgotten Emmy and Anna and Lucy and all the other girls in Dr Freud’s short stories.

In that light you can now perhaps see how hard I’m struggling to keep Jennifer alive.

There are some days in Longdale when I see it as the reincarnation of the old men’s poorhouse that I used to see as a child in Reading – with its teatime gaslamps, stone corridors and dripping windows occasionally washed by the bending headlamps of passing Humbers and Wolseleys in the evening rain. I know that my infant foreboding has been fulfilled and that I will be housed forever in an English institution that has escaped the release of time passing or of death.

On other days, it is merely an extension of Chatfield, and I encounter McCain in the toilets, Batley in the gardens and Francis on his way to the assault course. Hello, Francis, you again. No, I never did escape, and I see that you didn’t either.

Yet if I try hard enough I can remember another institution, too: the old men’s almshouses by the stream. The men wore caps and collarless striped shirts with woollen waistcoats; they all had Woodbines stuck, unburning, to the lower lip. The flowerbeds were a fire of wallflowers and dahlias. When the men hoed them, the metal made a distinctive sound as it struck a stone or scraped over the dry earth. I remember one called Ted, a veteran of Passchendaele, who leaned on his hoe and talked to me. He smelt of tobacco and breadcrumbs and old man’s sweat. His face was crossed with small lines, deep in the brown skin, and many of his teeth were missing. He took me into his almshouse, the front room dark and cold despite the summer outside. His wireless was playing a Test Match commentary by Rex Alston and John Arlott, only names to me, but probably something more to him. He gave me lemon squash in a dirty glass and a Custard Cream biscuit. On the kitchen shelf he had rows of empty jam jars and topless fish tins in which were screws, nails and bits of cut string. He had a tabby cat called Susan who dozed in his chair beneath the antimacassar. The almshouses were single-storey brick with leaded windows and tile roofs. I remember thinking that there must be many places like this in England and I envied him his small house. I thought I’d like to be old, like Ted, and pass my days hoeing the beds, smoking Woodbine and listening to the cricket on the wireless. It was something to do with him and his past, that I felt we’d lost somewhere, when I was on the main street of Lymington all those years ago. Can you ever know what it’s like to be another man, what we’ve missed or what died with them?

Don’t feel sorry for me. Whatever you do, don’t feel sorry for me.

I don’t, so why should you?

I do not need your pity. I showed that girl none when I killed her.

Please, whatever you do, don’t ‘forgive’ me. Don’t ask for ‘closure’ or ‘release’ for me because it’s not really me you’d be asking for, but yourselves: granting me forgiveness would free you from your own anguish at what I did; it would be a way of putting me out of your mind.

And what would I do with such phoney gestures? What good would they do me?

Jen’s mother didn’t forgive me. On the contrary, she wrote to me in the harshest terms expressing a wish that I would ‘rot in hell’. Perhaps we’re already there – not just me, but all of us, stuck in this absurd existence with its non sequitur, shaggy-dog death ending.

These days I doubt whether I’m the creature Julian Exley described (though of course I remain grateful for the diagnosis that steered me to Longdale not Strangeways). For one thing, he said I had no empathy or feeling for other people, but that isn’t really true, is it? I tried to imagine the lives of those girls in their remote Victorian college, having tea. I took an interest in my father’s war and in Julie, rather less in Mum. And when I went to Jen’s house, I really worked at picturing the thoughts and feelings of her mother. And Margaret, Charlotte, Stellings, Dr Turner, Dr Sen a little bit, Gerry, Mark, Jeffrey Archer, Ralph Richardson, Julian Exley himself . . . I’ve felt something for all of them.

And even in the damaged person Exley described there was a consistency of character and behaviour that I failed to recognise. It wasn’t just that it wasn’t me; it was that it wasn’t feasibly human. It was an intricate and enjoyable piece of reasoning, like a Freudian case history, and about as scientific.

I enjoyed reading it. He nailed the moment I killed Jennifer and fully explained it. Defended narcissism in the face
of intolerable threat to the self. His explanation was logical, all right; its problem was that it wasn’t true.

My own diagnosis of my problem is a simpler one. It’s that I share 50 per cent of my genome with a banana and 98 per cent with a chimpanzee. Bananas don’t do psychological consistency. And the tiny part of us that’s different – the special Homo sapiens bit – is faulty. It doesn’t work. Sorry about that.

Last Friday I was given a quite exceptional treat, and one that, if news of it reached the newspapers, would cause an outrage. So don’t tell.

I was allowed out of the hospital grounds. Yes, Schizo Scribbler, Fen Beast was At Large. Two nurses, Tony, an elderly Lancastrian with spectacles, and a burly charge nurse called John, walked me down into the village of Upper Rookley.

To begin with, I was alarmed by the cars and the people. I held tight to Tony’s arm. He talked to me in a soothing way, ‘Don’t worry, Mike. We’ll make sure you come to no harm. Steady now.’

It was the first time I’d seen a pavement or a shop for more than eighteen years. I looked at the sane people going about their business like termites in a mound.

We went into a shop so that John could buy some cigarettes. I somehow expected that I’d know the man behind the counter, but he was a stranger and I wondered what he was doing there.

There were cars parked all along the side of the street as well as going up and down the road. Upper Rookley was slightly bigger than I remembered, but I suppose when I was fifteen I had only looked at the pavement. What was I thinking in those days? At what brute level of awareness was I functioning?

After a time, I became more confident and let go of Tony’s arm. I asked if I could walk ahead without them flanking me like gaolers, and Tony said yes. They knew me well enough.

I threw back my head and breathed in normal life: the chemist, the electrical goods shop, the gabled pub with a sort of white blackboard, if you see what I mean, advertising Thai food.

‘Are there many Thai families in Rookley nowadays?’ I asked Tony, and he explained, suppressing a smile, that it was just a pub fad.

We passed the back gate into Chatfield and walked on up the high street. We went past the tobacconist’s whose supplier’s van I used to rob and came to where I thought the record shop had been, where I had spent my saved or stolen money.

‘Was there a record shop here?’ I asked Tony.

‘Yes. It’s still here,’ he said. ‘Just a bit further on.’

And so it was. It still sold records, too, a few anyway, though mostly CDs, videos and computer games.

We went inside and I sniffed a bit, to reorientate myself after all these years. I turned by instinct to the side wall where the deep wooden bins had been, where I spent so many hours flipping through the sleeves, stopping now and then to pull one out and flick it over. A Song for Me by Family with Roger Chapman on vocals and John ‘Poli’ Palmer on vibes; Split by the Groundhogs; Stonedhenge by Ten Years After; Songs for a Tailor by Jack Bruce.

Time was pressing very hard on me. Things before my eyes were there and not there. I asked to leave.

We went to the top of the street and into a café, where they bought tea and cake. It was clear to me that Tony and John wanted to prolong their outing as long as possible. They chatted and smoked and drank tea in a natural, friendly way.

Eventually, I couldn’t stand it any more and I said, ‘Do you mind if we go back?’

Last night I lay in my room at the top of one of the old Victorian buildings. These days I have a good, long view down the hill and over the village to the school and the woods beyond. I can almost see the playing fields from which Baynes was returning late that afternoon.

In between, in the foreground as I look down, is the tall perimeter wall of Longdale with grey brick and rolled barbed wire.

And as I lie here in the dusk, I suppose that I am evidently (and I have chosen that word carefully, for its denotation, connotations and all the ripples in between) bonkers.

I have a world in my mind, in the inexhaustible repertoire of my memory. I can recall at will, note-perfect, from the reams I have stored there.

As the electrical self-deceit of human consciousness ebbs and fires at random through my brain, there are long hours when I don’t know if I’m alive or not.

Sometimes I see myself as one of those magi of the guitar – Rory Gallagher, D. Gilmour, Jeff Beck or Jan Akkerman. I stand in the spotlight and take a solo.

I improvise; I make the familiar seem new; I reinvent, recast and bring to life.
So where’s it coming from, this feeling, this funny low euphoria? A little bit from the town, I think. I do love the dirty brick of the miniature terraces and the mist from the river and the cold mornings, even now in May. And then the sudden huge vista of a great courtyard of King’s or Trin or Queens’, when everything that’s been pinched, and puritanical and cold and grudging and sixpence-in-the-gas-meter is suddenly swept away by the power and scale of those buildings, with their towers and crenellations and squandered empty spaces, built by men who knew that they’d calculated the mechanical laws of time and distance and there was therefore no need whatever to build small.

It’s teatime on Friday in November. The road is lit by the lamps of bicycles; cars pass at their peril, slowly, because the pedalling girls, some frizzy and stout, some slight and eager, the girls with their lights front and rear, are the queens of the highway.

Back from games, the girls areflushed; their faces are red from the Ural wind. Red Russian wind from communist mountains, from the giant Soviet factories. Jennifer is running down the corridor, lively with the sense of her good fortune. They’re having tea now in Anne’s room, which has a gas ring. Molly comes in with cake she bought in town: a sponge cake with cherries. They sit on chairs and floors and beds. There isn’t much room, but there’s music on Anne’s cheap record player: a balladeer, a minstrel, shock-haired with a guitar – afternoon songs for girls in jeans with coloured silk scarves knotted or held with silver woggles from Morocco.

There’s a tortoiseshell cat who lives opposite and he’s half adopted us. I pull back the curtain and see him on the roof, stretching in the thin early sun. I love the jumble of small slate roofs on the brick terraced cottages. I lie watching for a few minutes while an ‘inane disc jockey’ (Dad) babbles on the radio. Then I put on socks, slippers, sweater and coat and go down to the kitchen, and, while the kettle’s on, open the back door to the cat and call him in. He tumbles off the roof of the shed and comes shyly to the step where (if lucky) he gets a saucer of milk and a stroke.

Jennifer sat back against the wooden settle in a slightly defensive posture; she wore a floral print skirt. I could see her bare legs. She had a sharp patella that gave a fetching inverted-triangle shape to the knee. She was smoking a cigarette and trying not to laugh, but her eyes looked concerned and vulnerable as Robin’s low voice went urgently on.

She is alive, God damn it, she is alive. She looks so poised, with that womanly concern beginning to override the girlish humour. I will always remember that balanced woman/girl expression in her face. She was twenty-one.

They left. She was so absorbed by what Robin was saying that she forgot to say goodbye either to me or to her friend Malini who was at the other end of the room. She went through the door, hoisting her brown leather shoulder bag up, the hem of the skirt fluttering for a second as she tripped down the step onto the cobbles.

I cut down Pembroke Street and Silver Street and over the river and I think of all the people who’ve gone before me – the men in the Cavendish Labs and the Nobel prize-winners and Milton and Darwin and Wordsworth, of course, but mostly of the generations of young men and women who weren’t famous but were so relieved to be here at last and meet people like themselves, and didn’t mind the freezing cold and no money for the meter and the greasy college breakfast. I think of the men in their tweed jackets with the elbow patches and the bluestockinged women in their clunky shoes and I feel glad for them still. Feel v lucky and not that cold. Goodnight, Dad. Thank you for everything. Sleep well back in Lym. x

As Hannah came into the sodium light of the street lamp, I recognised the navy blue coat, a replica of Jen’s own that had presumably vanished with her. She also wore a grey sweater, the polo neck that wasn’t quite, blue flared jeans and boots.

She walked down the grey pavement, going away from us; her step was light and confident, and you felt all that Jenniferish excitement about being alive and it was her in all but fact: it was her again, you could smell her hair, her skin, and sense how much she was looking forward to the bump of the lit gas fire and the ski socks, as she quickened slightly in the cold, thinking of the cat tumbling from the roof in the morning and the day ahead.

She walked, this girl, with that slow stride suppressing gaiety, her love of living, the slight sway of her narrow hips as she moved onwards, away from us, turned right at the end of the street and vanished in the Fenland mist.

Well, maybe the love generated between people who behave well and kindly adds somehow to the available pool of existing good feeling in the world, and lives on after them. (Now sound like drippy hippy, but actually it’s true and easy to prove.) Without good example such as preserved in literature, there would be nothing to live up to, no sense of transcendence or of our lives beyond the Hobbesian. So these feelings do endure and I
believe they also survive through memory, orally and in families as much as in written word. So while living may have no meaning in any teleological sense, it does have practical purpose in the way that how we live can improve the experience of others alive and yet to be born; and thus, a bit more contentiously (because harder to define scale on which it’s measured), it also has value. This seems so obvious to me as to be almost axiomatic.

We knew nothing of drugs. I wondered how many of the bright-eyed boys – their parents’ treasures, the comets of their hope – were now in Fulbourn and Park Prewett, fat and trembling on the side effects of chlorpromazine: an entire life, fifty indistinguishable years, in the airless urine wards of mental institutions because one fine May morning in the high spirits and skinny health of their twentieth year they’d taken a pill they didn’t understand, for fun.

What will happen to all these people? Previous generations did great things in politics, diplomacy, medicine, industry, ‘the arts’ – became great and good as though by natural progression, birthright.

All people I know resolute that they will do no such thing. No one will have ‘nine to five’ job. Can’t imagine anyone I know here appearing on television in twenty years’ time to offer expert view on – anything. Just not cut out for it.

I wonder why. Drugs? Partly, but we’re not all out of it all the time. A generation thing, I suppose. We are a lost gen. (Rather than lost Jen, ha, ha.) Before us, the hippies; after us, perhaps keen people in suit and tie who will go straight to work in Con Party research and American banks. Poor us, lost souls.

She walked, this girl, with that slow stride suppressing gaiety, her love of living, the slight sway of her narrow hips as she moved onwards, away from us, turned right at the end of the street and vanished in the Fenland mist . . .

There are some things in the past that may have happened and some that may not have happened. But the reality of their happening or not happening then has no weight now.

Until we can navigate in time, I’m not sure we can prove that what happened is real.

Yes, up here in the spotlight, I can do anything. Anything at all. Listen.

16 FEBRUARY, 1974

Last night went to party at Pete and Vicky’s in Malcolm Street. Typical student bash, though in unusually nice house. Charlie from Emma there, a bit freaked out.

Danced a lot to good selection of records, mostly Tamla, and drank perhaps rather too freely of Pete’s Algerian red. Irish Mike turned up with two bottles, also v welcome.

Had intense conversation with Philippa from Newnham about historical perspectives and whether historiography necessarily political, naive to pretend otherwise etc. Slight sense that she trying to get things clear in her own mind before finals, esp re Foucault (And I’d always thought F was a physicist – rotation of earth etc . . .)

Also v amusing talk with Charlie about why men look so good in mascara! He amused that I find this annoying. ‘But, Jen, since women have abandoned make-up, why shouldn’t we use it? Someone has to.’ Did not let on that I was actually wearing pan-stick (nasty small spot on side of chin; ‘Harold’ due shortly) as well as artfully applied eyeshadow . . .

V good fun, though. Smoked some of Vicky’s Afghan black and felt pretty good though somewhat heavy in the feet and rather indiscriminately affectionate. Thought better to leave while still on top (if I was) and went out into b. freezing night, dreading long walk home sans bike. Bloody hell.

Then on Jesus Lane got lift from Mike. What piece of luck. Up Vic Rd, round one-way system and down to our house.

Felt I had to ask him in as it was still not very late and least I could do was offer him tea. Lit gas fire in sitting room and put on Bryter Later by Nick Drake.

Sat on floor by fire and let amazing melancholy music flood room. Mike visibly moved and rather poured out his heart to me about his home and family and so on.

I got more dope from my room and made some more tea. Nick was at Hannah’s, Molly had gone to her parents’ and no sign of Anne.

On doubtless very ill-advised whim, put my arm round Mike in sisterly way and he rested head on my bosom. Music played. All very innocent. Eventually wanted to go to bed. He said he now incapable of driving because stoned, and could he stay. I felt so full of warmth and dope that said all right, but no funny business and he swore not.
Kept on knickers and ski socks as well as old-lady nightie so hardly much of a lure, I imagine. Lent him tee shirt and after kiss on cheek, turned away for night. Duvet cover and sheet clean that morning. Fell asleep at once.

Somehow in course of night found ‘things’ happening. He v sweet and pleading. V cold outside. What could I do? Relented in magnanimous hippie way. Silly girl, but surely no harm done.

Woke up appalled. No hangover, but just appalled. Went down and made tea, brought it back to room. Mike asleep and snoring slightly with half-smile on his face. I felt an utter fool but couldn’t help laughing a little bit. Pulled back curtains. Pissing with rain. Couldn’t face bikeless trek to Sidgwick. Then remembered: Saturday anyway.

Closed curtains again. Finished tea. Put J. Mitchell *Ladies of the Canyon* very softly on my small record player, got into bed, put arm round Mike and fell asleep again at once, hearing the rain beat down outside.

For some reason dreamed of sparkling Greek sea, Aegean blue, with wooden boats, their white sails filled with love.
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