

FOUR NEW
WORDS FOR
LOVE

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MICHAEL CANNON



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For Denise and Rachael – my girls

Michael Cannon was born and brought up in the West of Scotland and worked variously as an apprentice engineer, tax officer, various temporary occupations and oil worker before returning to higher education to study literature. He now works for the University of Strathclyde. His debut novel *The Borough* was published in 1995 and *A Conspiracy of Hope* followed in 1996, both published by Serpent's Tail. His novel *Lachlan's War* was published in 2006 by Viking to much acclaim. He lives on the south side of Glasgow with his wife and daughter.

“If equal affection cannot be/ Let the more loving one be me”

from ‘The More Loving One’ by W.H. Auden

PART 1



Nick didn't take long. Quick Nick. I lay back and thought of Eng... I've no particular reason for thinking about Nick at this particular time. I'm in the flat, with Lolly. She's rolling her third spliff. The air's layered with strata of smoke, turned rust coloured in the late light. You can puncture two layers just standing. I don't touch the stuff but people have become passive addicts just being around her. With Lolly there's always a danger of proximity.

Sometimes I feel I don't actually have thoughts in this place, I *encounter* them, suspended in this haze. But then that sounds like the kind of intellectual wank you hear from students on the top deck of buses, putting the non-matriculated world to rights with their annoyingly loud voices.

Lolly's got two speeds: dead-stop lethargy and high-octane hustle. Both infect people around her in some way. I'm the only one here to bear the effect of tonight's sloth. It takes me all the effort I can manage to stand up and walk to the window. It's getting on for the magic minute. I always stand here and watch it, weather permitting. The sun's cast an oblong of light on the opposite wall, catching Lolly in its passing. She keeps herself air-hostess orange. Her colour looks even more ridiculous in the bronze rectangle.

Either it's the passive dope or she's radiating some kind of inner light, like a catechism picture of the Holy Ghost, sweating piety. Maybe there's more to her than meets the eye. But that's rubbish. There's exactly as much to Lolly as meets the eye and she spends a lot of effort making sure men spend a lot of time taking the sight in. She's got hips to breed gladiators and breasts like missile silos. She's got a theory of fat women. Some women are dumpy fat, some gloomy fat, some shy fat, some aggressively fat and some, very few, are erotically fat. There's no mistaking Lolly's category. She aims her breasts at men and they surrender. I don't know if it's got to do with genes or attitude, but it hardly ever fails. Maybe her reputation adds to her attraction. I can't say I understand it. But in a way I do. If I'm depressed I'll rest my head against her chest, and it's got the same effect as wrapping yourself in a duvet that's been blown dry in the fresh air.

She's put the spliff to one side and turned her attention to the camera. I groan. She insists I sit on the sofa. Every time something happens, or doesn't, she takes a picture of us. She's got shoe boxes of those stamp-sized photos you get in booths, black and white graduating to what passes as colour of the two of us, faces squashed together or at the wrong height because the seat won't screw up or down, cataloguing our reckless Saturdays through boiling puberty and beyond. She's always saying we should pour them on the carpet and sort them out. I don't think so. I usually deflect her attention. It isn't hard. I'm thinking of history. She's talking nostalgia. If you don't know the difference it can be fatal. She doesn't know the difference. I don't have the energy to explain. She doesn't have the attention span to listen.

I get crushed as she sits beside me. She leans forward to put on the autotimer. I get the full heft of her breasts in my neck. She's got no sense of private space, and I'm not just talking about rubbing her tits into the back of strangers on the tube. When I started to cry in the cinema toilets it was Lolly who kicked the door in and

snatched the thing from my hand. We watched the line appear. ‘Try another,’ she ordered. You only get one in the pack. I sat crying on the pan while she left to get another and then she stood beside me, holding my hand, as I tried to accumulate enough pee for another try. And even then we got on one another’s nerves. She told me crying leaked out the liquid I was trying to muster. ‘Hardly,’ I said, ‘I don’t think your bladder works that way. You’ve got your biology all wrong.’ And she said, ‘No. You’ve got *your* biology all wrong.’ And even although she was annoyed, she was crying. And that’s when I had an unkind thought. Why me? Why me and not Lolly? When it comes to men she’s got no powers of discrimination that I can see. And I know her best. I know her better than she does. I knew who it was because there was no process of elimination. I spent all my time discriminating at the expense of the fucking obvious precaution. And the irony was that Quick Nick lived up to his reputation. I wouldn’t have minded so much if it had been more memorable, but it lasted as long as a jolt with a cattle prod, which was the same length of time it took him to work out his exit strategy. I only found out his nickname later. Lolly told me. She told me she’d named him. I was too depressed to ask. Biology or not, I tinkled out another pee. We waited. The result was the same. She squeezed my hand. She’s been near at every crisis in my life.

There are girls around here who use abortion as a form of contraception. I’m not religious and I’m not superstitious, but I’ve an image of those potential mothers, old women about to croak, going towards the white light when they realise there’s a little queue waiting for them in the tunnel, a line of foetuses in various stages of development, eyes, when they have them, deep black with reproach.

I wasn’t keen on telling Dad. Lolly’s idea was not to tell him and let the news seep in.

‘Are we talking about the same person?’

Dad’s ability to pick up a signal is as good as Lolly’s. His idea of

a hint is a boot in the balls. They both live in a world where they confront, or are confronted. Facts arrive, they aren't foreseen. The reason I wasn't keen on telling Dad is that he's built this little fantasy round me to separate me, in his own mind, from Mum. He calls me 'Princess'. This has more to do with him than me. I don't need any fantasies to separate me from Mum. But he's fragile enough. If it takes this little delusion to keep him standing I wouldn't deny it unless I had to – like giving him the news that I'm pregnant.

Rumour has it that Mum in her prime could give Lolly a run for her money in the fornication handicap. Maybe she still can. She left us eight years ago, when I found out how I got my name. Dad said it was because of his favourite film star. 'Your namesake,' he said, 'my little Gina.' Dad and Gina Lollobrigida. A cosmopolitan Italian beauty and a skinny alcoholic Glaswegian ex-plumber with nicotine stains, shakes and a volcanic cough that sometimes spots the furniture with glistenings of lung. Some fantasies are so fantastic they're sad. Dad and Gina Lollobrigida. As much chance of that pairing as walking into the living room and interrupting the Yeti doing sums. It turned out that Dad didn't name me at all – Mum did. It turns out that she got her inspiration from some third-generation Italian waiter she was granting favours to, ankles behind her ears on the gingham table cloths. He was the owner of a trattoria up town, with his fake wop accent and straw Chianti bottles with candles in them. At least that was Dad's description, that came out much later when he had a bronchial infection that obliged him to dry out for two weeks. Mum's bit of stuff said he was going to the Amalfi coast to set up a place of his own and he'd send for her. Turns out the place was closed down by Health and Safety after the seafood pasta turned half the customers into double ended squibs, that Carlo's real name was Frank, that he'd gone as far as Newcastle to contaminate the locals there and shag hopeless Geordie housewives.

'Typical fucking wop,' was Dad's pronouncement, in front

of Mum, although we all knew he was no more an Italian than any of us. Maybe it was aimed to hurt, because she hurt him so much. Maybe it was because Frank was tainted by association. He pretended to be Italian so he was a 'fucking wop'. I live in Glasgow, with people. Dad's surrounded by 'fucking wops, fucking spicks, fucking chinks, fucking darkies, fucking pakkis and fuck knows who else.' A short sally for his half dozen cans and we're told 'It's like Liquorice fucking Allsorts round here now.' It wasn't like that back then, the glory days of national pedigree, before the population became this mongrel, whenever that was. I pointed out that he wouldn't have had Asian shopkeepers servicing his habit at half past ten on a rainy Sunday night back then, but he was past reasoning a thousand bottles ago. He's fighting to keep the ethnic purity of him and his cronies, so they can all lie gurgling drunk on their various piss-stained mattresses across the city.

I don't know if her shagging drove him to drink or if he'd have got there on his own anyway, but she timed her departure to perfection – just after Kevin's. She left, Dad imploded, and any pretence of being a family disappeared with her.

He answered the door before I could put my keys in the lock. Lolly was holding my other hand. We couldn't get in with him barring the way. From my hesitation he knew something was coming. He's never fully sober but he wasn't drunk. 'My little Gina...' He touched my face. I could feel the beginnings of a tremble, like a washing machine that's about to go into spin.

'She's pregnant.'

He dropped his hand. For a moment nothing about him seemed to change and then, very slowly, he looked like one of those sea-side inflatables at the end of holiday that's leaked just so much air, still afloat but you wouldn't trust your weight to it. And then he turned round and walked back into the living room and turned up the telly. Lolly followed shouting explanations. 'She knows who he is! She's not like her mother!' I bundled her out, grateful and angry

at the same time.

I didn't see him for a week, but heard him come in in the early hours, coughing, flushing the toilet, shouting in his sleep, aggressive static caught up in whatever goes on in the jumble of that fucked-up imagination. I confronted him early afternoon mid-way from his bed to the toilet, hunched, vulnerable.

'Is this supposed to be role reversal?'

'This can wait till the morning.'

'You haven't seen the morning since Mum left. *I'm* the one who's pregnant. *I'm* the teenager – at least for the next couple of months. *I'm* supposed to be the one who misbehaves. *I'm* the one carrying the kid. *I* need support – not another passenger.'

He swayed a bit and sucked in some air. 'Gina, my Gina...' He touched my face. His eyes welled with tears and then he stood stock still, a thought struck him and the tears vanished, as if they'd been turned off at the tap.

'He's not a pakki is he?'

I didn't give him the satisfaction of an answer. He spends three days off the sauce and interviews me, looking like something that lives under a rock. It seems he's prepared to put the unknown ethnic background of his grandchild behind him. In itself this is no small thing as he tries to explain to me the change he's undergone. His liver must have gotten up at a count of nine while the booze was sent to a neutral corner. He says he has a calling to become a grandfather. We both know the fucked-up job he made of being a dad, although neither of us says so, and he sees this as a second chance.

'Well, Dad, here's a grenade in the guts: there's absolutely no fucking chance of me staying here with a kid to get the kind of upbringing I got – or didn't. I don't actually say it but it's the first thing I think. If I say it now the bottle will come out the neutral corner and knock seven shades of shite out his liver. If this fantasy will keep him going till he gets some kind of normality, whatever

that might mean, where's the harm? These are conversations I'm having with myself as he sketches out his plan, in fits and starts, over the next week. He's going to dry out. He's going back on the tools. We'll move – the city is no place for a young one. I get quietly angry. Why did none of this occur to him before? Why were Lolly and me allowed to smoke fags in decommissioned lift shafts when we should have been doing homework? Why did I have to bribe strangers to sign my report cards? Did he know anything about my whereabouts, never mind ambitions, between the ages of eleven and nineteen? Does he now? Any recrimination will crush this fantasy so I let it run on. As for moving from Glasgow, I know that Dad's internal geography consists of a series of drinking dens, linked by bus routes, with houses and the occasional shop between. Beyond this is an enormous, vague, threatening place called The Rest of the World, filled with famine, theme parks, unimaginable dangers, fucking wops, fucking spicks, fucking chinks, fucking darkies, fucking pakkis and fuck knows who else who, even if they spoke the same language, wouldn't understand his accent. It's a place you don't go but, according to Dad, we're going there with my baby. I think he's glimpsed bits and pieces from day-time telly and formed some image of a cottage with ivy, the friendly country parson, Mrs Miniver dropping in with warm scones. If there ever was such a place, and he went there, the residents' committee would have him turfed out before he could piss in the bus stop. Everyone has fantasies of some kind. Some can be achieved. Most can't, but it's the fact that they're just out of reach that tantalises and keeps you going. The distance of the gap in Dad's case startled me. I could imagine the sense of dislocation he must have felt, happily wandering round in his mind then opening his eyes. Out goes the cottage with the big-titted dairy maids, in comes the sofa with the burnt fag marks, the fridge sprouting algae and the final demands for the electric. I don't know if drink drove him to imagine something impossibly better, or the realisation of the distance drove him to drink. While

he ranted he was eating more or less regularly and I debated with myself the advantages of a staple diet versus the danger of letting the fantasy run. The decision wasn't mine.

'You're wanted at the Social,' Lolly said.

'What for?' he asked.

'Cause she's trying to get a place fixed up.'

'They're staying with me.'

'I'm only the messenger.'

'Actually, Lolly,' I said, 'you're a fucking newspaper.'

'Gina... My little Gina...'

He welled. Anybody crying in the same hemisphere sets her off. She spoke between pants. She was going for the big one.

'I've caused untold hurt.' She got that from the re-run of *Crown Court* on afternoon telly.

'Put a sock in it. The hurt isn't untold because I'm telling you about it. It's not difficult to see who's the brains in this outfit. Dad, you stop too. You were never going to leave here. You in the countryside? The only plumber in Brigadoon. When you're on the sauce you can't change a washer.' I spread my arms encompassing the sofa, the scarred table, the flat, the lock ups, the circle that enclosed all those piss-smelling pubs he lives in that burp out drunks at closing. 'This is all you know. I'm not going far. Me not being here doesn't mean you won't see your grandchild. You can come round. You're miserable sober. I'd rather my kid had a happy granddad who takes a drink than some gloomy sober bastard.'

He wiped his eyes. I pressed home the advantage 'And no, Dad, he's not a pakki.'

'Let's have a cup of tea,' Lolly said. After he'd gone she said she thought we should give him the benefit of the doubt about trying to dry out.

'We could give him a nudge. It might make a difference. We could look it up in the phone book and get him to go. One of those groups where all the dipsos get together and tremble, but don't say

what they drink?’

‘They do say they drink. That’s the whole point. If they admit it to the others then they’ve admitted it to themselves. That’s supposed to be the first step to getting them off the sauce.’

‘I thought the whole point was to keep it secret.’

‘Keep what secret?’

‘What they drink.’

‘It doesn’t matter what they drink. It could be anything. It’s the end point that’s the point.’

‘I thought it was anonymous.’

‘It’s the alcoholics that are anonymous, not the alcohol. How much stuff have you been smoking lately?’

One thing I lied about was getting a place near him. I’d intended getting as far from Bridgeton as I could. It turned out to be not very far. There’s a reason why housing is readily available round here. I went down to the Social and threw a crying jag, claiming Dad had turfed me and my unborn child out. He backed me up. I’d scripted it for him: shame on the family... bastard grandkid... no daughter of mine... Lolly went along to feed him the prompts. There was another reason too. She said it went badly from the start. The social worker was a woman, so pointing tits at her didn’t work. She seemed to think she was some kind of custodian to the slums she was in charge of, and she wasn’t impressed by a trembling drunk stammering badly rehearsed lines about the shame of it all. Nothing in Lolly’s armoury worked, and she did cause untold hurt by calling her a hatchet-faced cow who could stick her slum accommodation up her arse.

I went down next day and demanded to see the boss. He was a man. I *started* in tears. It was a blinding performance. I didn’t find it difficult. I’ve got a whole stock of sad things I can think about to turn it on at any time. If all else fails I think about Kevin.

It worked. But it turned out that either I’d overestimated my powers of persuasion or the range of available housing stock. I

imagined a balancing act: good flat in a crap area or crap flat in a good area – high ceilings versus good schools. I got a crap flat in a crap area with the disadvantage of being within stumbling distance of Dad. Write down this address on any employment questionnaire and watch your chances go down the toilet. Local shops have bars on the *inside*. There are attempts at what the local rag calls ‘encroaching gentility’. I live on the fourteenth floor. If I go on to the roof with a telescope I *might* be able to spot a delicatessen within visible radius. I don’t know what direction gentility is encroaching from, but it’s running as fast as fuck away from me, Dad, Lolly and everyone else *I* know.

Of all people it was Dad and his gargling cronies who came up trumps. Pool their resources and I thought all you’d get would be a collection of tumours, but, hats off, they came up with cutlery, a sofa, saucepans, a radio, a telly and loads of other stuff. The cutlery had GCC stamped on it. Glasgow City Corporation went out of existence before I was born. That was the oldest of the knocked-off stuff. The sofa gave off cartoon noises when you sat or stood, and unless you knew about it there was a crevasse just off-centre that could lead to sudden intimacy, or spillage. I got to know its quirks and didn’t mind using it till Lolly said I might have been conceived there. *I* can scarcely imagine, and that’s saying something, that collision. I get as far as the two of them approaching one another through a pea-super of mutual fag smoke, then there’s an image of Dad’s hand, with its crescents of nicotine, vibrating like a tuning fork, touching Mum’s face and the image derails in a hot flush of horror.

Patrick, one of Dad’s cronies with the same grog-blossom nose that seems to be the badge of the gang, turned up one afternoon with towels, still damp and with a stray sock in one of the folds. He told me it might not be a good idea to visit the laundrette for a couple of weeks. There was no need because the next day Dad, Patrick and another of the gang I don’t know, turned up with a

washing machine. The third man was introduced as Tam, and he made Dad look healthy. It's obvious they didn't catch a lot of daylight. They stood squinting in the afternoon sun, Tam looking like Nosferatu turned vegan, coughing up some kind of resin. Looking down on them from the fourteenth floor unloading the thing he seemed to have surrounded the washing machine with pats of shining frog spawn. The lift, miraculously, worked that day. Perhaps there is a God. Lolly and me manhandled the machine in and out. The fittings were there. Lolly got on all fours and plumbed it in while they unashamedly studied her arse, standing around like redundant porters. I produced a can each of the cheap stuff I kept for Dad and they opened them in frothy plumes. They all agreed that the beer was too warm. Lolly straightened and said they should see about getting me a fridge then. They did that too. On first opening, the washing machine gave up a sock. It would have been too much to hope for it being the mate of the one delivered with Patrick's towels. Perhaps there isn't a God.

The only thing I can guarantee was bought was the Lladro shepherdess, complete with Bo Peep outfit and a bona fide receipt, that Dad delivered in a box. It was hideous. He was so proud of it he didn't trust himself to take it out the tissue. God knows I could have used the money instead, but I trotted it out with the lager and the custard creams whenever he came round.

So Lolly and I saw in my twentieth birthday in a council high-rise on a burst sofa surrounded by a load of dodgy gear. I didn't look pregnant, although I'd had the doctor confirm the cinema toilet result. It was too much to expect empathy, but what I wasn't prepared for was Lolly's non-stop use of the flat. Until then indoor sex depended on someone's parents being out, although in summer any dry flat surface will do and she's got a genius for erotic improvisation. But I felt resentment rise as night after night I could hear her gymnastic climaxes from the next room. The inside walls feel as if they're made of compressed egg boxes. It doesn't leave much

to the imagination. My temper snapped when a big show-down I was waiting for in *Coronation Street* was blotted out by another supersonic shriek. I banged the wall and shouted to her that I had to see her *now*. I didn't have long to wait. She normally packs them off as soon as they've served their purpose: post-coital fag, slam of a door, gone. I don't even know if the same one reappeared or it was a succession of new ones. They all looked the same anyway.

'I'm not running a fucking knocking shop. Here's me, abandoned. That'll be the baby's nursery. You're desecrating it.'

'Listen to yourself. Abandoned? Who by? Does he even know? Have you tried to tell him? The truth is that you don't like depending on anyone except the Social and only then because it's not a person. You like the idea of being some lonely heroine in a tower even if it's a fucking dump with a broken lift. It makes you feel different. And what's so different? You're up the stick and unmarried. Look around! Even if you had someone who'd stick around, he'd probably slap you about a bit every time his team lost, like half the poor fucking cows around here. "Abandoned"? "Nursery"? "Desecrating"? I must've stumbled into 1940. Let me know when the all clear sounds.'

I didn't deserve that. I think she'd been bottling something up too, although God knows it wasn't sexual frustration. She wasn't right about everything but she was right about a lot of it. She knows me better than anyone. She's not bright, but she's got the sharpest instinct I've ever come across. After that tsunami her big orange chest was heaving up and down. I could see the half inch roots of her parting, and it suddenly occurred to me that if she'd only stop barbecuing herself on sun beds, and saturating her head with chemicals, she'd be the pale, pleasantly-plump grown up evolving from school photos, not this tangerine caricature in shag-me shoes. And somehow, looking at her just then, I saw all the increments she'd grown out of, like an insect shedding skins, each stage captured by the countless photos we'd taken together:

the skinny kid, the pale pubescent, the top-heavy teenager, the chip shop sex bomb, and now this. I'd fallen into her fatal habit of nostalgia. But I'd seen all of her stages and I loved them all.

'I love you,' I said, and burst into tears. My hormones were all over the place.

'I love you too.' Her sobs are volcanic. When I'm with her I understand what the phrase to fall into someone's arms means.

'It's a pity we're not lesbos. It would make life a lot simpler.'

'I like cock too much,' she said. We both burst out laughing, uncontrollably, till it was near hysteria. I looked down. The bump was visible. It might have been the tears but I swear my ankles looked swollen. I faced a vista of support tights drying over radiators on loveless nights.

'I'll never find anyone now,' I said and burst into tears again. That set her off. We were just two heads, four arms, four breasts and two bodies convulsing. Looking over her shoulder I could see the whippet-thin specimen that she hadn't yet kicked out, standing in the hall. He was swaying from foot to foot, looking frightened. His instinct was to run, but I think he still thought it worth hanging around in case another go on the swings was still on the cards. His eyes were on stalks at the mention of lesbians. I think he thought all his Christmases might have come at once. He coughed to let her know that he was still there. She made an irritated flick behind her back, without turning round, waving him to bugger off. He looked punctured and closed the door behind him. I stopped crying. So did she.

'Why do you always go for them?'

'Why do you think?'

'No I mean *them*, the under-nourished specimens.'

'I don't know. Staying power? I didn't think there was a type.'

But there was, and I don't think their selection had anything to do with stamina. They were all the colour of sticking plaster gone through the wash. They all looked like illegal immigrants. There

was something of the panting fugitive in every one. I thought of them as bowling pins, knocked over by her orgasmic onslaught, once seen easily forgotten, interchangeable, dispensable. She did too. I've a theory their selection was unconscious, a genetic thing she doesn't understand, Lolly's slob fat genes screaming out for slob skinny genes to make a normal slob, and those deluxe ovaries of hers destined to be thwarted by the barrage of precautions she took.

The truth was that I was jealous and not just for the company. My libido see-sawed wildly with my mood swings, and I needed something to stop my plunging self-confidence. I felt I couldn't be less attractive and I made the mistake of telling her. She moved towards the door.

'What are you doing?'

'Calling him back.'

'*Even* if I did find him attractive, I draw the line at your cast-offs.'

'Please yourself. Get changed and then we'll go out and get two more.'

But I don't get changed, the way Lolly does, have a shower and put some slap on and leave your whole history behind you with the pubes in the plug hole. I'm not going to trawl myself round town pouring drink down my neck and stunt my baby just to forget why I got here. I don't undergo Friday night transformations. I'm the sum of my past, the way Lolly isn't.

She took the hint, not just about that night but about my situation. She only ever brought men back when she'd run out of all other possibilities, and she was as quiet as someone with no interior life, and the bedroom manners of the Hulk with a hard-on can be. I spent a lot of nights in. Sometimes, if it was late and I was already in bed, I would hear the key scrape in the lock and then she'd be in my kitchen, by the sound of it banging together the only two pots I owned, although God alone knows why because she can't

cook a thing. And if I suddenly felt more lonely, more unattractive than I normally felt, that uncanny instinct of hers would smell it, the clattering would stop and I'd hear her have a quick pee and a quicker brush of her teeth, and then she'd climb in beside me and say 'budge up', while the weight of her bulk had already pushed me onto the cold bit, and she'd put her arms around me and I'd say something like: 'I hope his intentions were honourable. And by the way, can you at least bring your own fucking toothbrush next time.' And she'd say something like: 'If you ever hear me sounding as old as you, feel free to kill me in my sleep. Please.'

At that time I'd a part-time job in town working as a window dresser, cash in hand to avoid the Social. Thinking back, it shows the kind of blunt stupidity I'd normally credit Lolly with. Who's more likely to be seen by a benefit spy than someone who spends part of their time on display? I wasn't a natural. All my artistic flair was taken up by the flat. I use an upturned crate as a coffee table. I have my own style – fucking skint urban rustic. It's a minimalist approach that has to do with minimal money and the need to hide everything at short notice from the police. I did what I was told in the shop. One afternoon I was half-way up a ladder when suddenly I knew that something wasn't right.

I walked home, which was stupid. I called Lolly, which wasn't any cleverer. Her medical expertise is all used up by remembering to take the pill. She called the doctor. Even before she arrived I'd started to bleed. She called an ambulance. Lolly came with me. All of a sudden I wasn't pregnant any more.

They kept me in for three days. They were very nice. They told me it wasn't as uncommon as I might think. I didn't think – the frequency of miscarriages hadn't occurred to me at all. They told me that as far as they could tell 'It wouldn't compromise your chances of conceiving again'. When you're single and twenty and broke, that isn't really the consolation it's meant to be. They said that none of the complications that can result had occurred.

‘Everything,’ they said, ‘had come away cleanly.’ ‘Everything.’ None of this was said unkindly. I thought: a discharge without complications then. I didn’t feel anything, except a sense of dread that the vacuum was about to be filled by something worse than a sense of emptiness. There were four of us in the room, Lolly’s hand welded to mine, and I didn’t want to give way in front of strangers. One day you’re pregnant and the next day you’re not. A discharge without complications. All the complications have been removed. So they discharged me.

‘Everything’ hadn’t come away. ‘Everything’ was the half of it. I started crying on the landing before I got to the door. Lolly fumbled the keys because she couldn’t see the lock. She bundled me in as if trying to barricade all the accumulated grief on the outside. Everything made me cry. Everything. I don’t mean kid’s stuff because at least I’d had the common sense not to buy anything till nearer the time, when I would have been surer of the outcome. The things a dead child leaves behind must be the saddest furniture in the world. Imagine moving a sofa and finding a dusty bear, haemorrhaging stuffing. It would kill you stone-fucking dead on the spot. Or even worse – it wouldn’t.

I didn’t have that to put up with. I didn’t need it. The excuse for tears was all around: the spatula stuck in the cold fat of the frying pan that I’d intended cleaning after work; the balled-up tights thrown in the direction of the washing basket; the toothpaste Lolly had squeezed from the middle although I always tell her not to; the discarded cap with the hard crust. These were all mementos of a past life three days ago when I had a baby inside. The fridge magnets made me cry. The Hoover made me cry. Lolly had actually gone out and bought food of some description. She hasn’t a penny. The generosity of all that ready-made tat, stacked like bricks in the fridge, made me cry. I wasn’t crying for the life that wouldn’t be, the Disney scenarios that Dad dreamed up. I wasn’t crying at being thwarted because I thought I’d some vocation as a mum. It was

some kind of purge. When I wasn't crying out loud I was crying silently. Lolly said I cried in my sleep. When I got out the bath it was deeper. Dad came round and stared at the crap carpet, being all silent and strong. He's got a face like a roadmap anyway but the lines had formed themselves into a mask of complete misery. He didn't say a single thing until he felt himself about to cave in, so he got up and left. Except that he turned round at the front door and said, 'Was it a boy?'

'I don't know.'

'That's what I had hoped for, a boy. I wanted you to call him Kevin.' Which wasn't deliberate but was just about the worst possible thing to say to me just then. He's not selfish but I've never met an alcoholic who isn't the centre of their own needy world.

After that I cried all through afternoon telly. Lolly joined in. The sofa became a blancmange. I fell asleep at *Countdown* and woke up during the late news. We were sitting on an atoll ringed with paper hankies, an ankle-deep reef of tears and crisping snotters. I'd been crying for a week. I took stock.

'Enough's enough,' I said.

'Do you want to get changed and go out then?'

'You got over that quick enough!'

'I think you'll find half of those fucking hankies are mine!'

But I didn't want to go out just then, or the day after that, or the day after that, or the number of days it took me to reach some kind of balance. So Lolly went out to get some fish suppers because the pre-prepared crap in the fridge didn't appeal, and I bagged the hankies and, among the debris, found the remote that had somehow got lost during that lost week. I ate at her nagging and flicked the channels. I didn't have the attention for anything. Her patience lasted a whole minute.

'For fuck's sake let's watch something! I don't care if it's *Gardeners' World* but let's watch something!'

'Lolly.'

‘What?’

‘Thanks.’

‘Any time. Give us the remote.’

So she stayed, again and again. And I did go out in a series of excursions, to the corner shop, the cinema, the radius widening with each trip. And although Lolly’s dope smoke makes impartial thought almost impossible I do think, standing here by the window, that I’ve reached some kind of balance. Unless I’m here the minute will pass with no one to appreciate it and all that beauty will go to waste.

She’s fussing with the camera’s self timer, balancing it on the crate, and there’s a lot of breathing and swearing. She insists I sit on the sofa. The flash goes off as she turns towards me. Her arse has filled the foreground and that’s all she’s succeeded in taking a picture of. She turns back. There’s more fussing and swearing. She touches the button and throws herself on the sofa. It lets out a groan as I’m levered off the cushion. There must be two clear inches of daylight between my arse and the fabric when the flash goes and captures me levitated, Lolly’s arm halfway round my neck.

‘Try and remember the maths next time. Fat girl jumps on sofa equals skinny girl airborne.’ But she’s not listening. She’ll spend ages setting up a photo and lose interest the instant it’s taken. I go to the window and step out onto the balcony. The minute has arrived. The smell of warm tar and cut grass rises up from the street below with the sound of kids playing football. The high-rise across the way has turned crimson, the windows flashing like sequins. The bend of the river is a molten curve. The whole landscape looks as if it’s been dipped in honey, hiding, for the length of the illusion, the litter, the syringes, the half-submerged trolleys. ‘Come and look,’ I say, but when I glance across at her she has this underwater look, as the last sucked-down lungful hits. I turn back for the last heart-breaking thirty seconds, standing on this platform in the saffron air. The ball below hits a car, setting off the alarm. An adult shouts.

The kids scatter. The spell breaks. The colours fade.

‘It’s the only free show in town.’ I say, to no one.

* * *

I’d never been in the flat before without being pregnant. I wasn’t sure if my subsidy depended on it, but I decided not to tell the Social anyway. Lolly said I was very wise. I still spent too much time watching day-time telly. I’m sure there’s a link between that and mental deterioration. I took stock. I reasoned that it doesn’t have to be like this. I’ve said before to Lolly that I’m the brains of the gang, but that’s being damned by faint praise. Miss Proctor, who wrote that ‘Lorraine suffers from a chronic inability to understand, or to want to understand, anything that does not interest her’ was the same woman who sent me home with a letter to my parents telling them I was squandering my gifts. I used to forge Lolly’s mum’s signature on her report card. Because she couldn’t do joined-up writing Lolly wasn’t able to return the favour. Dad couldn’t do joined-up writing either but for other reasons. I used to stick the report card in front of him and he’d sign, without reading, in a series of spastic jerks that looked as if he’d done it on top of a spin dryer. Other parents might have taken the hint at the mention of squandered gifts. I didn’t expect my homework to become a family enterprise but, looking back, it wouldn’t have been unreasonable to expect the telly to have gone off for half an hour.

It’s too easy blaming someone else. At some point the statute of limitations runs out on your childhood. No doubt I’d have made more of a go of school if either Mum or Dad had shown an atom of interest, but the truth is I didn’t want to make more of a go of it. I knew how crap my education was, but I went on sitting in front of day-time telly getting stupider. I had to break the cycle.

I went back to the shop and asked if I could work further back from the pavement. I didn’t want some window-shopper from the

Social seeing me. I spent a fortnight in the stock room. Their system was obsolete. Understanding it was both boring and difficult. I replaced it, kept less stock and moved it quicker. The woman I'd filled in for came back from holiday to find her week's work could be done by Monday afternoon.

'What does this mean?' she said.

'It means you can get on with doing other things.'

Up till then she'd always put on an air of superiority and had let it generally be known that she only worked for pin money, as a break from the women's guild or whatever. But when I said she could do something more she came out with language you don't hear on the BBC. 'Careful,' I said, 'one doesn't want this getting back to Philippah on the badminton committee.' By mid-afternoon she was two steps up a ladder in the front window, complaining heights made her dizzy and trying to work up a case for constructive dismissal.

They asked me to work full time. I told them to make me legit and then told the Social I'd just found a job. The fact that I wasn't pregnant came out in the exchange. They let me stay in the flat minus the subsidy. I earned a pittance. Tax hadn't occurred to me. It's never touched anyone I know. The first official wage packet listed the deductions. I felt no better off than before, except that I was one of the faceless drones paying for the likes of Lolly and Dad.

My social life still stretched no further than the cinema. I was working myself up to a quiet night down the pub. Lolly appointed herself social convener. A quiet night is a failed night by her reckoning. At that time there was still a liner of sorts anchored in the Clyde, used as a floating casino and dance club. *HMS Fornication*, a rust bucket of emergency fucks kept afloat by sheer exuberance and a life belt of spent condoms. The licensing laws allowed all-night drinking. A whole social stratum of Glasgow was banged into existence against the cracked port holes on that boat. Young girls tripped up the gang plank in slingbacks, hearts

full of high hopes, handbags full of illicit drink, and lurched down four hours later, stomachs full of Bacardi, uteruses full of cooling spunk, the future single-parent families of the city. To the right-minded city fathers and the hard-line religious types, it was Sodom and Gomorrah on the quayside. It was either going to sink or get closed down. The breaker's yard beckoned. The boat's days were numbered. Word got around. The final weeks were frantic. Girls wearing outfits that wouldn't keep them warm in Tenerife stood at the dockside in a wind that would cut cardboard, trying to talk their way past the bouncers.

'I've got tickets for the boat on Saturday.'

'I thought we were taking it easy, going to a quiet local pub.'

'There aren't any quiet local pubs round here. And even if there were, they'll still be here when the boat isn't.'

She turned up on Saturday to help me get ready. She'd topped up her tan and squeezed herself into some corset arrangement that squeezed everything up and out like a market garden display. I felt like the desperate sister they let out the attic when the gentleman caller comes round. Lolly went through my wardrobe full of 'this won't do's and 'is this a sack?' and 'too dull for Mrs Menopause' and 'this is sexual kryptonite' and that sort of thing. Her compromise solution was for me to keep on what I was already wearing and leave most of the buttons undone. But I didn't spill out strategically the way she did, and I didn't want to either. She insisted on a photo. I look like a maiden aunt who's run out the burning house without stopping to get properly dressed.

We had to wait on the quayside even though we'd tickets. The wind funnelling up the Clyde estuary was vicious. The buttons didn't stay undone. I'd had the presence of mind to put on a coat. Even though I'd three times more clothes on than Lolly, I was freezing. She wasn't. It wasn't just natural insulation, she's got some kind of hormone that kicks in when drink, fun and men are involved that makes her immune to cold, exhaustion, embarrassment, subtlety

or any of the other things that inhibit the rest of the world. My hands were plunged into my coat pockets. When she handed me my ticket I was shocked at how cold her hand was.

‘Sometimes you’ve just got to teach your body who’s boss.’

The bouncer looked at the heft of her bag. ‘Full,’ she said, ‘like your balls.’ He smiled and waved us up the gangplank. We walked into a wall of noise. Music spilled out from the dance floor, flaking rust, and pulsed its way into the casino where Chinese waiters were going frantic round the tables. Lolly ordered two glasses of tap water from the bar. The guy put them down with a bang. This didn’t cover the overheads. We went into the toilet and Lolly fished out the gin and mixers from her handbag. The place was crowded out with girls doing the same. Dope smoke was rising out two separate cubicles like talking smoke signals, adding another layer to the smell of hairspray and cheap perfume. Girls were renewing their lippy or mascara already. The noise was tremendous, with about fifteen simultaneous conversations and disembodied shouting from the booths. You could get drunk on this alone, and I watched Lolly take a giant breath and joyfully expand. She was in her element in that bouquet of ripe, ready women. It affected me too. I felt light headed as we walked back towards the music and looked around. Lolly leaned against a pillar and watched me looking, a half ironic look on her face. She has technique she usually employs, like one of those angler fish you see in telly documentaries, down miles deep, where there’s no light, suspending her bait. Once a victim gets too close to see what’s flashing it’s too late. But she wasn’t doing that yet.

‘He’s not here yet,’ she said.

‘I don’t know what you mean.’

‘You’re not a very good liar.’

‘I think I must be too old for this place. I don’t see the attraction any more.’

‘Here it is coming.’

I turned to her and we both managed a quick refill, pouring from her handbag like a goatskin, before I turned back and pretended to look anywhere but in his direction, as he weaved his way through the bodies towards us. He staked his claim without a word. That annoyed me. I let him stand for a long time before pretending to notice.

‘So you’re back in circulation.’

‘I’m not a corpuscle, Nick.’ Lolly’s nodding approval behind his back, because this is one we haven’t rehearsed.

‘Want a drink?’

‘I’ve got a drink.’

‘Want to dance?’

‘That’s why I brought my handbag.’

‘Want some fresh air?’

‘You’re fresh enough.’ Lolly gives me the thumbs up.

‘I only heard about it afterwards. Gina, I’m so sorry...’ He lets his voice tail off with his falling gaze, puts his drink on a nearby table and pretends to study the floor for about twenty seconds. Of course it’s complete fucking rubbish. You’d have to live in a submarine at the bottom of the Clyde not to hear about anything that goes on round here. Nick’s emotional range is about as deep as his intelligence. He has a series of poses he strikes, like something out a mediaeval tapestry, that are supposed to represent sadness, reproach, regret or whatever. I don’t know if he’s actually capable of feeling anything. He tries to match his appearance that he’s always aware of to what he thinks other people think he should be feeling, groping his way towards a combination, like a colour-blind electrician. At least he does that as long as he’s trying to get something, like sex or promotion. The rest of the time he doesn’t give a fuck. This attempt looked like constipation.

‘You know me, Gina. I don’t walk away from my responsibilities. If only I’d known.’

I’m distracted by Lolly sticking her fingers down her throat and

miming a hurl. 'Three's company,' I say, across his shoulder. She leans towards me in a conspiring sort of a way. I'm assuming it's a joke at Quick Nick's expense, some dig at his spurt problem, but it's just to give me another refill. I've been drinking in big nervous gulps since pretending not to see him. He waits till she goes before coming out with a real fucking howler.

'Somehow, Gina, I think whatever comes out of you and me being together can't be bad.'

Is he talking about the act of him making his deposit or the end product? Does he even know what he's talking about? You can't assume Nick's words mean anything because it's almost impossible to overestimate his superficiality. But I know what to say to him right then and there: 'Well, that's all right then. You wouldn't have minded my varicose veins and heartburn and piles and tiredness and clothes always drying over the radiator and you doing two nights and a Saturday to make ends meet and my cracked nipples and the teething and the sleepless nights and the resentment that there's someone that isn't you monopolising my tits and the realisation that if you're any kind of a parent at all you've got someone depending on you for the rest of your life.' But I didn't say any of that. I felt dowdy, surrounded by all these multi-coloured, high-octane girls. He's very handsome. Wherever we went he was the focus of attention, girls always looking at him and now girls looking at us, obviously wondering what he saw in me. Because it was me he'd crossed the room of all those glances to talk to, and not just for old times' sake. And I stood basking in his gaze, wanting to believe in its sincerity, because for the length of time it was focused on me it didn't seem to matter that I looked as if my clothes were held together with safety pins. I wanted to be wanted, and he wanted me, and although these ambitions weren't a perfect fit I was prepared to live with the overlap because, like the song says, he made me feel like a natural woman.

'Friends,' he said, offering his hand. I took it. I'd never shaken

his hand before. I'd held it. Touching it again I felt a surge of hormones at the memory of his handling me that made me want to lean into him.

'Friends,' I said.

'Live and let live,' he said.

'Forgive and forget,' I said.

'Let the good times roll,' he said.

So we let them roll in the back of his work's van, parked fifty yards from the gangplank, suspiciously furnished with a roll-out carpet, and in my flat, his parents' house, the cinema, on top of the after-hours fabrication bench at his work and anywhere else that the mood took us. Once you got the first one out the way he developed the staying power that didn't deserve his nickname. When he looked into my eyes I wanted to believe what I saw, although I knew he was only watching me watching him. When I think back I believe that people were only real to him to the extent that they reflected him to himself.

And we did forgive and forget. I once forgave him six times in a single night. I forgave him standing against the wall till the radiator burnt my arse, on top of the Ikea bureau that threatened collapse, in the shower, on the floor and I can't remember where else. And in all that forgiveness, although I thought I was diligent on forcing reluctant condoms, there was something that gave, or I simply forgot. Lolly was in the flat when I came out the toilet with the reading. I told her not to say anything. Within two days everyone who was anyone knew.

And then Nick forgot me.

Lolly said that although I might be the brains of the outfit, when it came to men I didn't have the sense of a dog. I began an inventory of her past men characterised by the only thing that distinguished them from one another: bad feet, bad teeth, bad hair, bad breath, socially bad, psychotically bad. She stopped me with one of her flat-footed pronouncements: 'All I ever do is fuck

them.’ And I realised the depth of my stupidity. She saw people for what they were and didn’t care. I wanted to invent Nick to justify to myself I wasn’t just a fuck, when deep down I knew he wasn’t even likeable.

I’d done enough crying for the rest of my life. I was calm. I’m only twenty, I told myself, and I’m in this for the long haul. I went to the shop and found out that given the length of my official employment, rather than the time I’d worked there, my ‘statutory rights’ as the manager called them amounted to fuck all. Then there was another meeting with the Social, which I immediately escalated by demanding to see a man, not the hatchet-faced cow from the last time. I didn’t throw a crying jag, I was all silent tears, Madonna-like suffering, patience of a monument, the full nine yards. It worked.

I left Nick a voice message saying now was the time to prove he didn’t walk away from his mistakes, and to make me an offer. I left another message in case he didn’t understand the first. I said I didn’t expect a white wedding, or any kind of wedding at all, or even for him to stick around, but that he had to provide some kind of financial support for his kid. Lolly was for the pre-emptive strike, ‘calling in the authorities’ as she put it. She’s got a total disregard for all authority until she needs it. I wanted to give him the chance. But it turned out that Nick had evaporated, left home, moved job, maybe had plastic surgery and was now a woman with big tits in Rio de Janeiro as far as getting hold of him was concerned. Lolly said that if he had a pay packet the bastard could be tracked down. When my wellbeing was at stake she was fierce – all bets were off. I told her he could go and fester. He’d emigrated to that limbo land of no responsibility beneath notice or worth caring about. He might bump into Mum. Dad’s reaction was predictable.

‘He’s not a pakki is he?’

‘No, Dad. He’s the same useless bastard as last time.’

And then he said something so unexpected it threw me.

‘Are you thinking of telling your mother?’

‘Firstly, I’ve no idea how to go about it, and even if I had, why would I allow someone time with my kid when they haven’t shown a shred of interest in me for eight years?’

‘She might want to give something.’

I could imagine what ‘something’ might be. One of those giant furry animals you see miserable kids walking round zoos with, in tow with the absent dad, making up for all those lost moments with some big unsuitable gesture and too many sweets.

‘I don’t want her chucking conscience money at my kid to excuse all the things she didn’t do for me.’ It was brutal and true and it shut him up. If she was still alive she’d be the type of person who gives a gift and wants instant and disproportionate thanks, and when she doesn’t get it, sulks. ‘We don’t need anything given grudgingly.’ That was the first time I’d said ‘we’. Early as it was I already felt a sense of ‘we’ that I hadn’t the first time round. We against the world. People come and go. We’d get by.

And all the things I’d predicted in that mental list I should have delivered to Nick, did happen. I got piles, heartburn, hot flushes, everything God designed to make pregnant woman unattractive. Sometimes I’d get into my dressing gown for an early night by half past three, and it was catching myself in the mirror, in that merciless mid-afternoon slanting light, that I had one of those stop-your-heart moments and realised the difference between love and romance. Romance is flowers and chocolates and sex on tap and the novelty of another body you’re not used to. Romance isn’t compromise because you haven’t had time yet to find out all the things you don’t like about the other person. Romance is thrilling because you know it isn’t real, and you know it’s more intense because it’s temporary. Love is in it for the long haul and staying because of, not despite, all the irritating things about the other person because the good things outweigh the bad. Six months ago my fantasy would have been Nick with intelligence. Now it would

be a man whose face I can't quite imagine because he's defined by what he does, not what he looks like. He gets me the stuff when my heartburn comes on. He isn't irritated by my clumsiness, my size, my instant tiredness, my banished libido. We lie like spoons in a drawer and he tells me things. Stupid little things. The amalgam of nothings that add up to the day. Do men like that exist? I've grown up around people who think sensitive men are really women. Any man with those credentials around here hid them till they died. Or if they didn't they were treated like you might imagine. And that last thought cut me in half, because I realised that finding the kind of man round here I thought I deserved was as likely as dad and Gina Lollobrigida.

Lolly came with me to the antenatal classes. I nominated her my birth partner. She turned squeamish at the explanation of childbirth, which I thought a bit thick, considering all the traffic she'd seen in the other direction. The men who turned up with their partners were a mixed bunch. There was a vegan couple who looked as healthy as Dad except they looked as if they'd knitted their own clothes with egg noodles. There was a rich-looking couple in their mid-twenties who both looked very, very clean. He looked like an oversize preppy American schoolboy and I'd have given hard cash to see his face when the fun really started. There were two normal guys, Tom and Duncan, who turned up with their partners and obviously found the whole thing embarrassing, especially being lumped with the vegans. They linked up and stood outside, smoking and farting and talking about football as a relief from the Zen music and aromatherapy birth plans. I know this because Lolly went outside to join them and tell them we weren't lesbians. I looked up from the half-hearted pummelling she was giving in back rub classes, to catch her trying to give Duncan the glad eye in the mirror. Her reasoning was straightforward – the nearer the time the more grateful he'd be for a bit on the side. 'Have some morals,' I said. 'Put yourself in her position. She's got

enough to contend with without finding her man's playing away from home.'

But she wasn't capable of thinking herself into someone else's position, and it didn't matter anyway. He didn't respond. Either he was frightened or had more morals than she gave him credit for. Personally I think he was one of those men who refused to see the attraction in a fat orange Amazon. Someone with taste. For whatever reason he made it clear that she left him cold, and the more he ignored her the more she wanted him.

'Wouldn't it be nice to have someone faithful like that? Not like Nick and all those other bastards. Someone you could settle down with.'

'So why are you trying to sabotage his marriage when it looks as if that's what he's already got? Are you jealous?'

'Of that boiler? Have you seen her?'

'And if you had him at her expense then he wouldn't be the kind of person you're pretending to look for. You'd lose interest in him quicker than Nick did me.'

'I suppose.'

My time came closer. My belly was like a drum. When I got tired it was like turning the light out. I peed in spoonfuls. Lolly said that if your waters break in Marks and Spencers you get a fifty pound voucher, or a hamper, or something. I told her it wasn't enough of an incentive to hang around and get fallen arches. We were watching *Emmerdale* when my waters did break. I already had the bag packed and told Lolly to call a taxi. She turned all fingers and thumbs and I had to take the phone from her.

'This is the easy bit. I'm going to need you to hold it together a bit better than this. Check the lift's not broken and hold it on the landing.'

They wouldn't let her stay overnight with me but promised to call the instant things started happening. For some mysterious reason, having closed off her mind to all the details, she now thought

the whole thing couldn't happen without her. I didn't make any bones about it and told them I wanted every drug going. Rumour had it Mrs Vegan had opted for a home birth. I could imagine her, with the first mediaeval pain, realising that aromatherapy and her hand-knitted husband weren't going to be of much use when her vagina looks like a python eating a sheep – in reverse.

They called Lolly in the wee small hours. I knew from her instant arrival that she'd been smoking in the car park, chatting up the A & E porters. I'd been so uncomfortable I'd been persuaded to have a bath. I was sitting in the water like a convulsing egg, contractions coming thick and fast, when Lolly burst in brandishing her phone like a police badge.

'They said it's happening.' She looked disappointed at the lack of drama.

'No they didn't. They told you to come in. I was there when they called. Turn off your phone.'

I lumbered back in my paper dressing gown. There was some complication that delayed the pain intervention and I heard myself making inhuman noises, until I was swept up by a blissful wave. I looked down, between my thighs, and saw Lolly staring, wearing a look of paralysed horror. The doctor arrived, all business, brushes her aside and draws an imaginary equator across my stomach. 'I work from here down,' he said to her, 'you stay up north.' He's young, assertive, reasonable looking and he must earn a mint.

'We're not lesbians you know. I'm just her birthing partner.'

He completely ignores her. I have no idea how much time passes. I'm soaked in sweat and the paper gown is stuck in patches. The doctor says something I don't hear and leaves.

'We're going for a ventuse delivery,' the midwife explains.

'Where's he gone?' Lolly shouts, beating me to it. There's an edge of panic in her voice that starts my heart hammering.

'To get his boots on – for traction.'

He reappeared between my legs like he'd sprung up out a

trapdoor. A whole new cast has appeared with him. Suddenly, from it being just me, Lolly, the doctor and the midwife, there are now two female paediatricians wheeling a machine and someone else too – I’ve no idea who. Aside from the paediatricians they’re all wearing different coloured uniforms. It’s like panto. Lolly’s peeking south and what comes after I get from hysterical description that grew with each telling.

Evidently I’ve some kind of tarpaulin stretching from my arse to the floor. The doctor returns with what looked like a sink-plunger, which he pushes into me followed by, according to Lolly’s account, two feet of handle. I understand the need for the boots when he begins a tug of war with my organs. A small head appears between my legs. The doctor detaches the sucker. Lolly told me the next bit. I made her take out the embroidery. The little face is looking down the slipway of the tarpaulin. The eyes open and eerily look at the new world. One of the paediatricians intervenes and sticks a tiny tube up the new nostrils and mouth to suck out all the stuff. I’m panting and pushing. The doctor gets some kind of grip and, also according to Lolly, the baby comes out like an artillery shell, smeared in blue grease and without making a sound. The doctor gives the baby to the two paediatricians who take it over to the machine, shielding the action with their backs. I don’t remember crying for my baby but Lolly said I was howling, shouting and sobbing like an accordion that’s fallen down a flight of stairs.

They turn back and hand the blue bundle to me, tell me I have a beautiful baby girl. The exhaustion vanishes. The universe contracts to this little face no bigger than the ‘O’ I can form joining my forefinger and thumb. They’ve been cosmetic in their use of the blanket. When it slides back I can see the sucker ring on the top of her head, like a monk’s bald spot. Lolly said the doctor was still at it, elbow deep, like a vet in a safari park. He hands a large bloody pancake to the midwife. He apologises to me for having had to do an episiotomy. I’m so happy and pain-free I wave this away.

Having no idea what her perineum is called, Lolly takes a look. I'm not convinced that what followed was spontaneous because she manages to miss the tarpaulin and any sharp edges and fall on top of him.

* * *

It's strange, all kinds of skills are monitored and tested. You need a licence to drive a car. I'm sure you have to have some kind of certificate to teach swimming. You're not a real plumber unless you're registered with some body or other that can vouch for you. But you don't need to pass any kind of test to be a parent. Look at mine.

No one really teaches you anything about having a child. It's not negligence, it's just that nothing really prepares you. You can read about the tiredness and the stretch marks and the soreness, but they're all surface things. One night, when Millie wouldn't sleep or feed and cried right through for seven non-stop hours, Lolly said you could understand how parents could become child-beaters, couldn't you? And I said no – you couldn't. Don't get me wrong – much of looking after a baby is sheer boredom. There were times I craved adult conversation so much I tried to drag out the midnight exchange at the corner shop, making idle chit-chat through the bars as he checked the camera to make sure I wasn't casing the place, before sliding across the Sudocrem. And it's not as if you get a lot back at first – all you are is a mobile feeding station. And no one can seriously say they *like* changing nappies. If you're half-way normal you can admit that you find your own kid's shit less objectionable than you thought you were going to, but any other kid's as revolting as you imagined. And I can't stand those *professional* mothers, not mothers with professions but those ones who can't wait till they're *outside* to breast feed, brandishing nipples like periscopes, changing their kids' nappies on park benches, who

make a virtue of letting themselves go because it's wholesome to look like a sow with ten kids, breasts like tubers, sitting smiling in a hurricane of noise and snotters.

What none of those books or classes tells you, because they can't tell you, is that if you're any kind of a parent at all you not only love your child, you fall in love with her. Big things fit into small things. I gushed with more love than I thought the universe could hold and she just drank it all up. I've never forgiven Mum because I never really tried to understand her. What kid does? But all I have to do is to stare at Millie for five seconds and her leaving us is even less understandable. When I told Lolly I couldn't understand child-beating I was deadly serious. Dad's as good a grandfather as someone of his habits can be, better than he was a father. But he didn't hesitate to raise his hand to me when I was a kid. I don't know anyone treated differently. Maybe it was a generational thing. But there's being hit, and there's being hit. Not all beaten kids grow up to be child-beaters. No one's *ever* hitting Millie.

I wouldn't say life was easy, but I didn't have it as hard as most of the single mothers round here. I was a veteran for a start. Seventeen is the average. There are thirty-year-old grandmothers in this block, who dress the same way as their daughters. And I didn't try and do the same thing as some of the seventeen-year-olds, trying to lead *exactly* the same life as a year ago except with a kid in tow. I'd been on the receiving end of that arrangement. Dad asked me what I needed his cronies to steal. At first he turned up every second night with the shakes, because he'd spent the day drying out expecting to see her. I let him hold her for about a minute at a time, Lolly and me either side, propping him up like human scaffolding, my hands inches from Millie. The strain of staying off the sauce every other day was telling on both of us. I told him to drink more and come round less. The next week he looked radiant, swaying over her cot with this smile on his face I don't ever remember being directed at me. The only thing I really minded was his new habit of bursting

into tears at the sight of her, setting Millie off.

I breast-fed for nine months and stayed with her practically every minute of that time. Lolly was a star. She kept offering me nights out. I told her our ideas of a good night out were different. I said my idea of a night out had nothing to do with men. She lost interest in the detail at that point and offered her services as a baby sitter. I accepted. I was expressing milk when she arrived. I was excited about the prospect of getting dressed up, even though it was only a girls' night. Lolly squirted some of the milk in her mouth.

'Have you tasted this stuff? It's disgusting.'

Then we had the five minute talk, starting with my mobile number, written headline-size beside the phone, moving on to Millie's sleeping routine, and household hazards and how to avoid them. She was wearing a scarf she pretended to hang herself with, sticking out her tongue and rolling her eyes. Millie was asleep by the time I left. Standing waiting for the lift I heard the creak as Lolly prised the letter box open.

'Put the bleach down!'

I refused to give her the satisfaction of seeing me smile. I was meeting Moira and Ruth. They'd been at school with Lolly and me, and sometimes we'd make up a foursome till other things got in the way. Of the two, Moira is the one everyone remembers, which is funny because she's half the size. She never exercises and keeps her shape by starving herself. She tans herself to light coffee-coloured, to stand out against all the pale people – like Ruth. Most people describe Ruth by all the things that she isn't.

Moira can't imagine life without a man, but not the way Lolly does. They both use men for different reasons. They're polar opposites. Moira's spent her life plotting how to get out of Bridgeton, but none of it involves self-improvement, or sacrifice on her part. She's *always* had boyfriends, as far as I know she's been faithful as long as it's lasted, she's *always* chucked *them* and

moved on, without ever breaking her stride or looking back, and she's *always* had the next one lined up. I don't know if there was ever an overlap but you wouldn't get a chink of light between. She's demanded a higher spec at each move, like some social-climbing sales rep choosing a car. I think of her various boyfriends as relay horses. She's ridden a dozen nags with her eyes on a thoroughbred – a mason with a good trade, who can install her in a house with a patio. She gets her status, even in her own eyes, from the boyfriend she's with at the time. And she obviously thinks a woman without a man, like me or Lolly, since Lolly's men are accessories, has no status at all.

Ruth's quiet. I'd call her homely. Lolly says that in Ruth's case 'homely' means she's the type of girl most boys only want to fuck at home so they don't have to meet their friends with her. Lolly says that's the way men think. Lolly says that if a man ever asks you to describe a friend, and you say she's got a lovely personality, then you might as well say she's a farmyard animal for all the chance the poor girl's got. Lolly says men are merciless.

Ruth was always on the edge of things, even in the playground. When there were sixteen simultaneous games played in the same space and it meant there wasn't a spare square inch, she always seemed to find herself a quiet bit, watching hopscotch. She's chronically shy. She never skipped ropes because she didn't want to draw attention to herself, while Lolly, although she hated it, skipped just to make her skirt fly up and give the boys a chance to see her knickers. Ruth was always going to be one of those picked last choosing netball sides. Choosing any sides. Everyone recognizes the type, especially themselves. She's a bit overweight. We're back to Lolly categories here, not erotic fat but sad fat. Lolly says Ruth has fat in the wrong bits. Lolly says flat chest and a big bum is the double dunt – you're fucked both ways. When I think back it was never really a foursome, it was me and Lolly and Moira with Ruth two paces behind. You often find good-looking girls

have plain girls in tow. Moria has Ruth. Moira uses Ruth. Ruth was the messenger. 'My pal fancies your pal...' stammered out in the playground, while she's looking at the pavement chalk and dying a death, because she likes the boyfriend's friend she's been asked to talk to, and as far as he's concerned Ruth's just a piece of talking furniture as he scans the bodies looking for Moira, wishing he was the one that Moira fancies. Women are merciless.

'Where's Lolly?' Moira asks. She never drinks locally and insists on meeting in a wine bar in town. They have wine bars near where we both live. They're bars that also sell wine, one kind that comes out a barrel and arrives in half-pint tumblers, and leaves people like Dad, with cast-iron livers, slumped across the table by noon. But that's not what Moira has in mind. She has the kind of place we're now sitting where people in those half-circle kid-on leather sofas actually pay money to drink foreign water. It's just after seven. The guys in suits have that Friday attitude. They're on to their second or third and are loosening ties. The music is cranking up and it's getting to the stage where you have trouble hearing the other person, unless you look at their lips at the same time.

'Looking after Millie.'

But she doesn't hear because she isn't interested. She's looking round and I can practically hear the calculation, like a Geiger counter as she catches the flash of an expensive watch, and it occurs to her that a mason and a porch might be selling herself short.

'That's lovely,' Ruth says. She's been looking at me so I turn my attention to her and it occurs to me, very unkindly, that the military don't need to spend all that money on camouflage. All they need to do is take tips from Ruth. It's astonishing how easily some people are overlooked, and it's got nothing to do with size. I start to talk to her about Millie, and after a couple of minutes of having hogged the conversation I feel vaguely ashamed. I've never really, in the true sense of the word, had a conversation with Ruth. And all I'm doing now is using her, the way Moira does, as something I can

pour all my pent-up conversation about my favourite subject into. She could be anyone. But then I tell myself she couldn't be Moira, who has a supernatural ability to divert any topic back to her. And as I look at Ruth I can see she's listening, really listening, and not just because I'm the only one in the place thinking she's not just a bundle of tired clothes. There's a seriousness to her that puts men off. That's Lolly's diagnosis. That and her voice and her clothes and her face and the fact that she's boring. But Lolly's not going to trawl for hidden depths. Most of the questions I'd had from friends focused on how Millie had changed my routine, not about Millie herself. You could see they were imagining themselves into the role, and coming up with a judgement of maybe in ten years' time, or never. But her questions weren't like that. They were about Millie. And looking at her again, I suddenly wondered why it was that I saw through the Day-Glo tan and the scaffolded tits to the real Lolly, and yet somehow I'd missed Ruth. And the next thing I thought was that if there's substance to Ruth, why does she hang about with a worthless social mountaineer like Moira?

'What are you talking about?' Moira says, over her shoulder.

'Millie,' I say.

'Who's Millie?'

'Gina's daughter.' Moira still hasn't turned round. She's directing her attention like a lighthouse beam into corners, looking for more glints of money. After a second sweep she turns back to us with a blank expression. It's our turn to talk to her because she's giving us her attention. Ruth suddenly dries up. With equal suddenness everything about Moira gets on my nerves. We were supposed to meet for a chat and because of her we've come to this place that's making talk difficult. I'm not in the mood to make it any easier for her so I turn my attention to Ruth, and speak pointedly about Millie for the next couple of minutes, the kind of rubbish that obsesses new parents and leaves everyone else completely cold. It defeats even Moira's talent for steering the topic back to her. 'Kids,'

she says, knowingly, takes two bird-like sips and again, 'kids.' This annoys me even more.

'I like kids,' Ruth says. Moira looks at her blankly then looks at me, as if wanting me to agree with whatever random thought has arrived.

'I suppose it's not beyond the realms of possibility,' Moira says, meaning that it's possible for her if she wants, but not for Ruth.

'Take my advice,' I say to Ruth, 'don't listen to a thing anyone says.'

'I thought everyone wants kids – eventually,' Ruth says.

'Or gets them whether they want them or not,' Moira says.

'Don't you want kids, Moira?' I pretend to be curious. 'Your mason might have his own ideas after a hard night at the lodge with only his apron for comfort.' She shoots an accusing glance at Ruth who shakes her head. 'Keep your knickers on. Ruth didn't say anything. We can all see them skulk into the hall with their little bags. Everyone knows who they are.'

'Putting out doesn't mean putting up with kids. Ask Lolly,' she retorts.

'It would seem kind of empty,' Ruth says, 'with your house and your husband and all your things if there weren't any children.'

'You planning on finding a husband then?' She's retaliating for the fact that Ruth's paid more attention to me than her. The calculation in the remark leaves Ruth staring hurt at the carpet. None of the boys Ruth ever liked ever paid her the slightest crumb of attention with Moira around and we all knew it. Moira turns away to scan new arrivals. 'Ruth with a husband and me with kids. Like I say, nothing's beyond the realms of possibility.'

'A child isn't an accessory.' There must have been something in my tone, or volume. She turns back. Other tables are staring across.

'So you're an expert?'

'You don't have to be to know a kid isn't for decoration.'

'I'll take your word for it. I don't know either way. Maybe you've

got the maternal instinct, or whatever it's called.' I can tell from her tone that this is an offer to make things up. But it's not just to keep me quiet. She loves attention, but not this kind.

'I knew it before Millie came.'

'I hope you're not going to become one of those professional mothers who bores the tits off everyone just because she's got a kid.'

A steam whistle went off in my head, while two locomotives collided to the backdrop of an atomic bomb detonating in an erupting volcano.

'Perhaps some people are just less suited to having kids than other people. Perhaps some people just have an aptitude...' Ruth tails off. She's been following the exchange like a tennis umpire. There's something pleading in her look. Moira must have seen it a hundred times and enjoyed ignoring it.

Moira says: 'Just because someone's life is ruled by a kid she chose to have, or didn't, there's no reason why it should rule everyone else's life. Folk get jealous of other folk's freedom. Lolly's got the right idea.'

I say: 'Even if you don't choose to get pregnant and do, you can choose to live up to your responsibilities. The reason Lolly isn't here is because she's looking after my daughter.'

'Good for her.' People are staring. Her mentioning Lolly annoyed me even more. She couldn't hold a candle to her.

'That's the same Lolly who turned her life upside down for a kid who isn't hers, the same Lolly who can't stand you.'

'Do you want to move on?' Ruth says into the gap between us.

'Lolly's a tart.'

'Only for the fun of it. She's not a career shagger like you.'

'What would you know about careers? Did you see one sailing past your single-parent high-rise?'

I turn to Ruth. 'I always gave her the benefit of the doubt. Lolly was right – if you don't like the look of someone there's probably something wrong with them. Only stupid people don't judge by

appearances. You've got more going for you than she has. Why are you hanging around with her? She only keeps you around because it suits. Once she's settled in her bungalow with her mason, you'll be lucky to get a call once a fortnight.'

There's nothing more insulting than being ignored. Ruth understands this better than anyone. She's toying with her drink and thinking furiously. It's a new experience for Moira to be spoken about as a third wheel. She looks as if she's been slapped. When I lean forward to stand Ruth mirrors my movements. 'Coming?' I ask, hopefully. She nods. We stand. The background noise has made this a mime by now. Everyone's watching. Moira's furious. She doesn't want to be a lone woman in here because that's the kind of thing Lolly does. For the first time Ruth, her safety net, is going out a door ahead of her. She brushes past to give the impression of having taken the initiative.

'And by the by,' I shout to the whole room, 'the reason we all know he's a mason isn't because he was spotted going into the lodge. He did a turn with Lolly last month. She put on his apron when he was asleep. Keep your eye on YouTube.'

The only response is the tension in her back. There are steps up to the pavement. We arrive moments behind her, but she's already gone. The air's thick with fumes of loitering double-deckers, waiting a change in the lights. They're all going in our direction. Moira's sandwiched herself in the canyon between two, trying to wave down taxis in the outside lane and ignoring the gestures of the driver in the rear bus. Just as he slides down his side window a taxi stops. She disappears into it. The lights change. With much grinding of gears the caravan moves on.

'Moira doesn't like public transport,' Ruth says.

'That says it all. Even if you'd never met her, that glimpse would be enough. It didn't matter to her that she was holding up a bus load of people. She's gambling on the driver having more patience than she did and not crushing her skinny arse flat. She's spent

her whole life gambling on the generosity of other people. Good fucking riddance.'

'She's not that bad.'

'Give me one instance of her generosity.' We stand for a minute in the dispersing fumes. People brush past. I don't know if she's stuck for an example or she's just gummed up again. 'Don't be a stupid cow all your life. Stop being loyal!' But she is loyal. She only sided with me because of the specific cruelty of tonight, and I can see that she's already prepared to forgive it. She's loyal the way Lolly's loyal, and I like her for it.

'Is that true about Lolly and the mason?'

'No. But he's a shit anyway. He tried to come on to me when I was three months gone because he thought I was desperate. Let her surf and stew. Maybe she'll have the strength of character actually to be on her own for a while. Maybe not. Maybe it's better if they stay. They deserve one another.' We fall in step. I look down at her shoes. 'I know I'm no one to talk but you really ought to do something about your appearance.'

'Moira doesn't mind.'

'I don't mind. *I'm* thinking of you. *Moira's* thinking of *Moira*. You know what a foil is?'

I don't know if she does but she stops and looks at me and I see a face that looks as if it's been pulled in with a drawstring. I know if I don't do something to keep the momentum going she's going to cry. I take her arm and begin walking again. 'We could let Lolly loose on you. No – ignore that. I'm just thinking aloud. Lolly could cheapen anything.'

'Lolly doesn't like me.'

'She can't stand Moira. She doesn't dislike you.'

'I've spent my life not being disliked. You have to stand out, even a little, to be disliked. Not being disliked isn't the same as being liked.'

I stop us and swivel her round to face me. 'Well stand out then.'

Even a little. Take a risk. I like you. Lolly loves me. She'll come round.'

* * *

'But she's boring.'

'She's nice.'

'But she's boring.'

'Not when you get to know her.'

'How would you know? It's half past fucking *ten*. I sent you out at seven. You haven't been round her for long enough to know how boring she could become. We grew up with her and she was boring then. Boringness is like having a stutter or something. It *clings*. And it's catching. Moira's a cow but at least she's not boring.'

'If it's catching then how come Moira didn't catch it? Because you're talking crap, that's why. By the way, I told Moira you couldn't stand her.'

She makes that irritated flicking gesture. She cares even less for Moira's opinion than she does for Moira.

'Why her? Why Moira? We've always known what a selfish cow she is. Your first night out in ages and you choose her.'

'I've been asking myself that since seven o'clock.'

'Half past fucking *ten*! Three and a half fucking hours! I wanted you to come back tomorrow morning, rogered senseless by Mr Right.'

'You don't find Mr Right in three and a half hours.'

'Mr Wrong then.'

'People have different ideas of what a good night is.'

'Something's happened. You caught the wrong bus, got contaminated by those old bingo trolls and came back sixty.'

'Until I started talking to you I actually thought the night had been okay, because of what I salvaged.'

'What?'

‘Ruth – of course.’

‘I swear to God if there was a poker round here I’d beat you to death with it.’

‘She said she would come round and babysit so that we can go out.’

‘If tonight’s anything to go by I don’t know if I can keep up.’

But I knew she was pleased at the thought of a night out. I think she thought it was going to be the way it used to be and I didn’t want to put her right – yet. Ruth was as good as her word. I thought she might go back to being one of Moira’s satellites, but she didn’t. She stopped being frightened of Lolly when she saw her with Millie. There’s nothing more irritating than someone who tries to worm their way in by being nice to other people’s kids, but Ruth took to Millie the way Lolly took to puberty.

My first night out with Lolly I go for a first pee at half past nine, and come back to find her with a man who wasn’t there two minutes ago. He’s stretching to put a casual arm round her waist.

‘This is Tam.’

‘At this rate I’ll be home even earlier than last time.’

‘Tam’s got pals.’

‘I’m sure he has.’ And looking round I could spot them. All hormones and bravado. But I couldn’t complain. She’d toned down her behaviour for long enough, and it suited me not to be within half a mile of the epicentre when Tam found one of her many G spots. She didn’t want to let me go home alone, and I didn’t want to spoil her night, so she hit on a compromise by pointing at one of Tam’s pals and telling him across the room to see me to the taxi rank. He looked like Tam, typical Lolly fodder. I didn’t know his name. What’s sadder, I didn’t want to find out. With the speed he jumped up he obviously thought him walking me to the taxi rank would have the same ending as Tam walking Lolly.

The rank was full of the usual hoi polloi you see everywhere: trogs wanting to fight; a hen party pumping out oestrogen like

nerve gas, the bride-to-be wearing L plates and hiccupping like a metronome; more students, still putting the non-matriculated world to rights; a posh bird on her mobile at a volume that even drowned out the students, who kept saying 'Ciao' till she silenced the phone with a poke, only to start all over again till I wanted to slap her.

The truth is that there wasn't anything wrong with the queue any more than normal. It was me. I never wanted what Lolly wanted and somehow tonight made me feel that although, with the exception of Millie, I didn't know what I wanted, I was further away from it than ever before. Tam's pal was leaning against me in an unnecessary way, talking about his car or job or something, some crap attempt to impress, when suddenly I thought if that girl says 'Ciao' one more time it'll take an archaeologist to retrieve my shoe from her arse. The taxi arrived just in time. I body-checked him, climbed in, called out the address and watched his disappointed face slide past. We crossed the river, the strung lights on the embankment mirrored wavily in the dark water. All over this city, under this dark sky, people are eating meals, or holding hands, or being ecstatic or just watching telly and being companionable. Maybe there's a given quota of happiness, like cinema seats or minerals, and it's all booked up or mined out at the moment. I don't know what I looked like when I got home, but Ruth took one look and said 'cry if you want to,' and with no intention of doing it – I did.

I don't know if crying in front of Ruth was a watershed or not, but it seemed to work wonders for her confidence. Lolly noticed it and said I was responsible for turning her from a doormat to a lippy cow. The drawback was that they began to compete for my attention, and Millie's affection. I arrived with groceries to find them at either side of the sofa, Millie in the middle, both calling her name. She was watching the telly, ignoring them both, but that's not the point. I showed the wisdom of a Sunday-school Solomon

by dropping the bag, covering her ears, and telling them both to get the fuck out my flat. Bad temper has no more effect on Lolly than bad language. We've fallen out with one another three times a day since Primary One. But Ruth looked shocked. She went out, going back to that apologetic crouch she used when following Moira around. Lolly slammed the front door with a bang that rattled the letterbox. I could hear her rage on the landing, saying they should let that ungrateful cow stew in her own juice, and is this fucking lift *still* broke? When she paused for breath I could hear Ruth say she could see my point. Lolly started again as they walked down, a rant halted by stops for breath. I'd had a change of heart by the time they reached the fifth landing, but I wasn't about to tell them that. I took a peek from the balcony. By the time they'd reached the street *they* looked companionable.

Lolly came round the next day with a packet of chocolate digestives, which is code for an apology. We didn't mention last night. I didn't hear from Ruth for a week. She sent me a letter. I'd had bills but I'd never had a letter before. Lolly was more touched than I was, not by the prose but the effort. This represented a strain on the attention span she could only guess at. Lolly thinks punctuation is embroidery, and I could see that Ruth came from the same school of thought. The letter was one sentence long, which wasn't an attempt at style, and must have cost her as much effort as it would have done Lolly. She was sorry she hadn't been as good a baby-sitter as she should have been and she understood why I was angry and she hoped Millie wasn't upset and she hoped I could see my way to letting her try again and she could understand if I'd rather not and she hoped Lolly and me would make up because she didn't want to be the cause of a friendship that long ending and I was to kiss Millie and forgive Lolly for her and it limped on like that with an 'and' at the beginning and end of every line till it wheezed itself to a standstill. Lolly, who can't read without moving her lips, began reading it out loud till she got to the part about kissing Millie

and forgiving her. Her voice broke, she burst into tears and threw herself on the sofa to more catastrophic noises. I packed Millie in the pram while the purging waterworks continued. I come back to the living room to find Lolly brandishing the crumpled note.

‘I hope you’re satisfied. That poor – Where are you going?’

‘Ruth’s.’

‘Can I come?’

‘No.’

I left her consoling herself with the chocolate digestives. Ruth lived with her parents in a stone-built terrace in Cathcart, two miles as the crow flies, light years socially from the pre-fab high-rises most of us grew up in. It was eleven in the morning when I got there. The place had a pleasing solidity to it, not like mine, occupying a space that birds flew through thirty years ago and will again when the structural faults turn chronic. I stopped to drink it in, this perfume of leafy suburbia, when I noticed the upstairs curtains twitch. A woman, maybe sixty, looked down. She had an expression like she’d trod in dog shit and was obviously annoyed at being caught peeking. I was staring up at her staring down at me when the door opened and Ruth, whose face only ever seemed to hold back some secret worry, smiled like a sunflower and fell on Millie with an avalanche of kisses. I enjoyed watching it run its course.

‘So are you going to invite us in?’

I’m shown into the parlour, as I’ve heard they used to call them, with Millie, while Ruth disappears elsewhere. There are net curtains, flock wallpaper and the full nine yards. One minute you’re in Cathcart, the next you’re in the 1970s. God knows I’m no snob, couldn’t afford to be even if I wanted to, but I’m looking for string pictures and plaster ducks, symmetrically receding. I’m distracted by a movement from the hall and I see Ruth’s mum, with her back to me, put something in her housecoat pocket. She does the same thing again and stands aside. Ruth comes in carrying a

tea tray. There's a bowl of hot water to heat Millie's bottle, which is thoughtful, two mugs of milky tea and a *big* plate with *two* Bourbon Creams. *Two*. From her upstairs assessment the old woman has decided we aren't important enough to merit more. I feel inclined to walk out there and then but that would have defeated the purpose. Besides, walking out had already separated Ruth from Moira, and it's not as if Ruth has a social life to fall back on. Looking around I felt quite bad when I realised that depriving her of a distraction, even if it was Moira, had probably condemned her to spending more time in this museum. No wonder she was keen to babysit.

She noticed I'd noticed the miserable biscuit quota. She went red. I chatted to cover the embarrassment, studied the room some more, and looked out the back window that gave on to one of those narrow terrace-house gardens, a strip the same width as the house, that extended to the back brick wall. Half the garden seemed to have been given over to vegetables. A man in his sixties, in a comfortable looking cardigan, was tending some kind of furrowed crop with a hoe. Sensing he was being watched he looked up and smiled, one of those apologetic downward-looking smiles, till Ruth stood beside me and held up Millie. Then his face broke into the same sunflower grin we'd got minutes before on the doorstep. Like father like daughter. I defy any mother to dislike someone who shows genuine happiness at their child. A breeze lifted his comb-over like the flip lid on a sauce bottle. It's impossible to take someone with a comb-over seriously. I might have laughed. He licked his hand to slick it back and busied himself with the hoe to cover his embarrassment.

'Your dad's nice.'

The door opens and Mrs Miniver, fifty years on, enters. Either she was wearing the full regalia under the house coat or she's managed a remarkably quick change. 'What a delightful child,' she says. It looks to me like she's evaluating the pram rather than taking Millie in. I'm wondering if 'delightful' is a word often bandied

about in Cathcart, or it's one of the set pieces. There follows a couple of minutes of idle chit chat that involves some blushing on Ruth's part, and almost nothing on mine. The few questions she does ask are put in just for the sake of form. This is a one-way story. I learn in minutes that she's a grammar-school girl and that she met Dennis, the poor bastard with the hoe, at the Borough Hall dance. She makes it all sound like good Christian fun, but it's obvious she hasn't a Christian bone in her body. I'm nodding every ten seconds to show I'm listening; while trying to work out her age against Ruth's. If she married late it's possible she had to. She breaks off to go to the window and make some kind of secret gesture, because Dennis comes in and starts nodding faster than I am, like one of those toy dogs on the parcel shelf going over bumps. She starts talking about the garden, mentioning one or two plans. He's obviously been called in to do lots of agreeing. It's hard to reconcile her ambitions with the view from the window. She makes it sound like Hampton Court Palace, instead of the little suburban khaki strip, exactly the same as all its neighbours.

I'm astonished. Why does she feel the need to impress a single mother she's thought fit to allocate only one Bourbon Cream to? It could be that she's so starved of company that any chance to talk about herself is welcome. The more likely explanation is that it's automatic, a role she can't help herself adopt, like a comic-book hero in times of crisis. The doorbell rings, she slaps on the emergency make-up, and steps out of the house coat already in costume: Genteel Suburban Woman. Dennis and Ruth are exchanging sympathetic glances, and I can see the obvious affection there. There's an old car at the front door. The sofa, although ten times better than mine, is threadbare through the cap sleeves. The vegetables in the back garden aren't cosmetic. Whether she's intended to or not she's set out her stall: Dennis hasn't provided the lifestyle a grammar-school girl can reasonably expect, and Ruth's an obvious disappointment to her. Poor Ruth – small tits,

big bum, manic mum.

The Bourbon Creams are long finished and the plate stays unreplenished. I stand up while she's still in full flood and use Millie as the excuse to leave, which is feeble, because she's asleep. The mother looks momentarily hurt. It hasn't occurred to her that other people aren't riveted by the sad story of her life falling short of her aspirations. Welcome to the club. I came here to talk to Ruth, not to be at the receiving end of some middle-class lament. Dennis seizes the chance to return to his vegetables. Ruth gets her coat, promising to get us to the right bus. Without a potential audience Ruth's mum loses interest in me and my delightful child quicker than Nick did.

'Your dad's nice,' I repeat, once we're out of earshot of the front door. She pulls one of those rueful smiles which causes one of those tiny, mid-stride desolations in me. We both know what I mean, and suddenly I like her mother even less, because it occurs to me that that fucked-up overbearing old snob might have established some kind of prototype in Ruth's mind. Why else put up with Moira? I'm thinking as I'm walking, and looking at Millie's beautiful hands, everything in miniature, dimpled knuckles. Sometimes I just hold them up for the wonder of them. As usual Ruth's keeping quiet and I look up to see, not the bus stop but the vista of her future: an ageing virgin in Cathcart looking after two increasingly dodderly parents. A dad who will thank her with his eyes and a mum whose resentment will keep pace with her dependence. She isn't obviously pretty. What's good and attractive in her needs to be drawn out. She needs to circulate or she'll wither behind the twitching curtains. It's curious that I can see the panorama of other people's lives and yet, since Millie arrived, the view of my own future stops short at the next pair of shoes Millie will need.

'You know that Lolly's somehow managed to get a flat downstairs from me?'

'Yes.'

‘Well she thinks she can afford it but she can’t.’ We pause at the bus stop. She stays silent. At this rate the bus might come before she picks up the hint. ‘I’m gambling on the fact that you work shifts.’ Still no recognition. ‘For God’s sake, Ruth, I’m suggesting that you and Lolly might try sharing. Lolly plus no one equals eviction in three months. Lolly plus you together all day equals one of you being dead by the end of the week, and my money would be on Lolly surviving. Lolly and you keeping separate hours, and agreeing whose turn it is to do the dishes and buy toilet paper, just might work.’

‘I don’t know...’

‘It would be a trial period. You might not like it. She might not agree.’

‘I don’t know...’

The bus rounds the corner catching the low autumn sun in a string of flashing panes. I can feel Millie about to wake. This is it, I thought, a casual mid-morning exchange at a suburban bus stop, this is one of the pivotal moments in Ruth’s life, and if it isn’t settled by the time the bus arrives then the moment will have gone and she’ll go back and fossilise.

‘What else is there for you? That?’ I point to the terrace. ‘You’ll die in instalments.’ It’s brutal. The bus is imminent.

‘Yes,’ she breathes, and then covers her mouth as if catching herself speaking treason.

‘She might say no,’ I caution, picking up Millie and collapsing the pram in one motion.

* * *

‘No!’ It’s a bark that comes back before I’m finished the sentence.

‘You can’t do this on your own.’

‘You did.’

‘I had help from the Social, and a lot of nicked stuff, and you.’

‘I’ll get help from the Social.’

‘You need a kid, or one on the way, to qualify for the kind of help I got. You’re not their priority. I’ll help as much as I can, but I can’t spend the time on you that you did on me. I’ve got Millie. Look, I’m trying to put this as nicely as possible, but you’re not a whole person.’

‘Pardon me all over the place. What the fuck are you talking about?’

‘What I mean is that you’re not a whole person *yet*. You’re the fun side magnified, and you can only be that way because other people do for you the things you don’t want to do for yourself, things everyone eventually does for themselves. You think you’re independent, but you’re not. You eat at your parents. You eat here. You’ve never cooked anything in your life except pot noodles, and you don’t know what anything costs. I’m not saying you’re not generous – you’re *too* generous. You’re generous the way only a person who doesn’t look after themselves can afford to be. When you think I’m short of stuff you go out and buy things, and it’s a load of tat. Three dozen Jaffa Cakes isn’t a balanced diet.’

I can see tears well. They’re only partly genuine. She wants me to join in. This is all too close to home for comfort. I resist for her sake. I produce a pad and a pen and force her to sit and make up a list of her potential expenses. She always slumps at the prospect of writing, and her bottom lip shunts out like a cash register. It’s the same pose as the nine-year-old I’d to pass the arithmetic answers to. Watching her write is torture. I could *inscribe* faster. She finishes, slams the pen down and leans forward, head on crossed forearms resting on the table. She can dance, drink and fornicate till the cleaning staff arrive, but any kind of mental exercise exhausts her. I slide the paper out from under her.

‘What kind of employment do you imagine you’ll have to get to fund this?’

‘Dunno. Vet? I like animals?’

'You have to go to university to be a vet. And you have to pass exams to go to university. And you have to write fluently to pass exams.'

'Well, something else then.' To be fair to her she's not work shy.

'I'd say that's advisable. Lower your horizons a bit. And this list, holding it up, 'leaves a few things out.'

'Such as?'

'Such as furniture –'

'Your dad's pals can nick it for me.'

'Such as furniture, that can't all be nicked or why would I be lumbered with this rubbish? Such as food, and rent, and gas, and the electric. Do you want me to go on? We'll just insert a few figures there then shall we?' She studies the totalled accounts over my shoulder. 'Your business plan's right down the toilet, and I haven't even included anything for social activities. If you get a half-decent job that's wildly beyond your capabilities you might *just* make ends meet if you stay in every night.'

'As long as she understands and we follow my rules.'

'And what rules are they? Pay up, wash the dishes and leave the living room free in case you want a shag on the hearthrug?'

'Pretty much.'

'She's been put upon her whole life. I didn't suggest this just so she can become your unpaid domestic. She's not going to replace the other people who do all the things you don't want to, to let you stay the way you are. You'll have to change, both of you. Be nice.'

'We'll see.'

'I mean it.'

And I did mean it. It was a kinder calculation than either of them knew. Ruth alone would contract round a routine of rust that would last till she was eaten by her cats. Lolly alone would live the life of a porn movie in fast forward till she combusted. I thought they might complement one another. I also had hopes for Ruth. Not all the men Lolly comes in contact with are the usual

fodder. I'd an image in my mind of some quiet sidekick of Lolly's latest, drinking a solitary lager in the living room, while Lolly and his mate pummel the bedsprings next door. This lonely guy would be a satellite, like Ruth, and they'd meet and exchange shy 'hello's to a backdrop of Lolly's shrieking instructions, and Ruth would meticulously plate the chocolate digestives, to avoid eye contact, and they'd stammer out cringing small talk, and he'd strain every last sinew of his confidence to ask for her phone number, and they'd lay the groundwork for something meaningful and permanent, while Lolly comes like a factory steam whistle through the plywood partition. It's probably telling that most of my long term plans and kindest aspirations are for other people.

The first week they had about four spats which consisted of Lolly storming upstairs, bursting in, waking Millie and saying things like 'You'll never guess what she's gone and fucking done *now!*' And I never did guess, because it was usually something as trivial as Ruth storing the brillo pad under the sink, which wasn't really the reason but the excuse, because something else, probably nothing to do with Ruth or the flat, had annoyed her, and all it took was one tiny, unpredictable trigger.

'You're a human being, Lolly, not a bear with furniture. She's the most accommodating person you're ever going to get. You'll have to learn to get on.'

At which point her allegiances would instantly reverse, and she'd storm downstairs to a dismayed Ruth, and I could practically hear, welling up through the gaps in the linoleum 'You'll never guess what she's gone and fucking told me to do *now!*'

The interruptions tailed off, and the two of them settled into a kind of quiet mistrust, that neither would admit grew into friendship. Lolly can't be alone for any length of time. Her reliance on me borders on unhealthy. I've always known. I've never minded and I've always coped for the two of us but now with Millie as a priority I needed some help. I was glad of Ruth, as much to divert

a bit of the attention. And there was another good consequence for me. I took advantage of the offers to babysit. I needed to work, and not just for the money. I needed something else beyond the round of toddler group, groceries, flat. Ruth worked mostly back shift. Lolly's attempts to find work hadn't yet paid off, probably because of her total lack of any qualifications. I organized a rota that allowed me to work part time.

I applied for a job offering loans over the phone. It was the kind of company that boasted how they got clients from all walks of life. Criminal records of potential customers didn't put *them* off them. Neither did the fact that the hapless bastards had been turned down by everyone else. The voice-over, on their telly advert, speeded up at the last part, like the commentator on the final furlong. It was the verbal equivalent of small print, the part that reveals the eye-watering interest rate, and the fact that your house *will* be taken away from you when you default. And the sad bastards always do. The guy who interviewed me looked about fifteen. From the job description it seemed to me that all it involved was assessing the gullibility of the poor morons who called, and distributing the leads to the sales people. The interview room was shabby, and that's the part they *let* you see.

'Can I see the workplace?'

He looked shocked, mumbled something, disappeared, came back and waved me to follow. It turned out the interview room is the garden spot of the place. The area was open plan. There was only one office, and that had glass walls so that the whip-cracker inside, a balding flat bloke with a crumpled shirt, could look out. Most of the people at the desks were on their feet. 'House rule,' says the teenager, 'you take the call standing so he,' nodding towards the fishbowl, 'can see who's working.'

I'm not claiming to be a saint but I'd some misgivings, even before I arrived, about selling expensive money to the people who can't afford it. The appearance of this place didn't dispel my doubts.

The woman on her feet nearest me had a kind of pleading look on her face, there's no other way to put it, and you just *knew* that if she didn't con some even sadder bastard and make her target she's out, just like you knew that the guy behind the glass would grope you in the stationery cupboard.

'No thanks.'

The next interview was a music shop in town. My idea of a music shop is a place pumping volcanic noise into the street with most of the customers my age or younger. I dressed accordingly, that is to say in the only kind of clothes I own. The place had thick carpets not flattened with chewing gum. I felt my clothes looked gaudy and cheap, probably because they were. There were two girls on the other side of the counter who looked as if they'd come straight from the gymkhana. They had that kind of money smell you just can't buy. But they smiled at me, the quiet lift I needed as I followed the guy leading me into the back office. They were using this as an interview room. There was a woman in her fifties, and a late twenties early thirties man sitting the other side of a small low table. The middle-aged man who'd shown me through waved me to a vacant chair with a posh 'please' before joining the others at the other side of the table.

'Reminds me of the children's panel.' This was met with a blank silence. The younger guy kept staring at my clothes. The older guy gathered himself.

'What do you know about music?'

'Nothing. At least nothing about what *you'd* call music. How much do you need to know? This isn't a mega store. I thought the punters browsing in here would have a good idea of what they're looking for. I didn't think anyone impulse shopped for a sonata.' It happens to me sometimes. I'm seized by nerves and can't stop, no safety net between brain and gob. 'No offence, but why do you need to know? You don't need to know about Mars Bars or lentils or whatever to sell *them*.'

‘But... there’s a qualitative difference...’ This from the older guy.

‘Maybe so. I don’t know anything about that and I imagine Zoë and Philippa don’t either.’ This is probably the nearest I’ll approach an out of body experience.

‘Who?’

‘The two girls out there – whatever they’re called. They’re not exactly hard on the eye. You’re not telling me *they* got the job because they know loads about classical music.’

They all look toward the older guy and so do I, and pick up the family resemblance. I now have nothing to lose. He clears his throat. ‘We’re not saying it’s essential but it wouldn’t be a handicap.’ He has a fruity BBC Royal Correspondent delivery.

‘I can’t sew to save myself but I sold more stuff in my last place than anyone else.’

‘I didn’t see that on your CV.’

‘I don’t have a CV. I wrote a letter. If I did have a CV it would have been shorter still.’

The younger guy clears his throat too. His pose mirrors the older guy’s. ‘We called her in on the strength of the letter.’ He hands this across and his finger taps the top corner, pointing at the Bridgeton address I’m guessing.

‘Reference?’ asks the woman.

‘If you phone Tommy I’m sure he’ll vouch for me. He might not be as quick to commit himself to paper. Most of it was on the black.’

‘Black?’

‘Black economy,’ the younger guy translates.

‘If you give me a chance I’ll do my best to punt shed-loads of that classical stuff. That’s really all I can say.’ And it was.

The woman smiled at me kindly. ‘We’ll let you know.’ The girls were equally kind on the way out. One of them looked at my top and said she couldn’t have gotten away with it. I think she was sincere.

I anticipated a letter, the kind that arrives on bonded paper and begins ‘We regret...’ I gave it a week. Still nothing. In my book that’s just plain rude. The following Tuesday I just *happened* to be passing with Millie and I wheeled her in. I wouldn’t normally take a pram into town, but I wanted to make a point. Precisely what point I’m not sure.

‘We expected you yesterday,’ one of the girls said.

‘You’re expected to turn up to get turned down?’

‘Simon offered you the job.’

‘First I heard.’

‘We tried to reach you on the number you put in your letter. We left a message and a text asking you to come in.’

My mobile is pay-as-you-talk, and I’ve been too broke to top it up. They offered to look after Millie while I went into the back to apologise. Simon turned out to be the younger guy. I think he didn’t commit the offer to paper because a text was his small revolt against their ancient procedures. He agreed I could start a week late.

* * *

I’d been in the shop for a fortnight before I realised the thing that distinguished most of our customers – beards. Perhaps you can’t really appreciate classical music without one, which is tough for women. I had a secret theory that a lot of them *pretended* to like it because they think it’s the right thing to do, like those wankers who pretend to like modern art. Having said that, most of them were nice. They weren’t the type I’ve met before who would try and grope you *and* shoplift at the same time. They were patient with my inexperience. They asked me my first name and didn’t forget it. They seemed disproportionately grateful when I returned the favour. They said my ‘frocks’ were ‘pretty’. They kind of patronised without realising they were doing it. In a completely disarming

moment, in relation to nothing at all, one showed me a picture of his grown-up daughter and asked me about Millie. I gushed. He nodded, holding on to the CD racks, and then he walked right out without a backward glance. Simon told me she'd died. I cried on the top deck the whole way home. After a month he still hadn't overcome his embarrassment enough to come in. I found his address from our mailing list and sent him a note, saying there was buy one get one free on Rachmaninoff. He came in, smiled sadly, and said he couldn't see the offer on display.

'I lied,' I said.

The worst were the jazz fans, or, as Simon called them, 'aficionados', who could sit in a booth for half an hour and listen to a noise that sounded like someone sawing a trombone in half. This, one explained, was an 'improvised set'. The soloist was a 'genius'. I agreed. Anyone who can lure hard cash for those emperor's new clothes isn't stupid. Even the jazz types weren't that bad. In fact I liked most of them too.

I laid out my stall to the girls on the first day. Gabrielle, shortened to Gabby, and Naomi, that couldn't really be shortened (it had to be names like that, when you come to think about it – no one with that kind of expensive teeth work is going to be called Agnes). 'Look, girls,' I said 'I'm not going to hold it against you just because you grew up with money and wield the right cutlery.' They took this in the spirit it was intended. It didn't take a genius to work out that neither of them was overburdened with brains. Daddy and Mummy probably spent the price of a car each year on their education. They were probably getting French verbs drummed into them while mum was getting fucked across sacks of polenta, and you have to go some, with that amount of coaching, to wind up in a shop you don't own – or at least manage. They both looked like toothpaste adverts. They both smoked and swore with poise. They had a style, bought early enough to look natural, and even if they were shit thick they knew enough to know that. And

although it sounds terrible, I got the impression that in the eyes of the customers they were interchangeable. Ask either and you're going to get the same well-pronounced useless reply.

It turned out that Gabby knew the owner. In fact it was her dad, the older guy at the interview. I never found out who the woman was. Naomi's dad was a friend of Gabby's dad. They probably went fly-fishing, or truffle-hunting, or some other posh thing together. Neither girl could sell a thing. They never knew where anything was. All their organisational skills were used up turning up on time with the teeth and the hair and the skin.

A point that's been brought to my attention more than once is that my intelligence is chronically underestimated by people who don't know me. If it's anyone's fault it must be mine more than theirs, because they change and the general opinion doesn't. It might be because I don't have any qualifications to speak of. Or it might be because I speak in a simpler way than I think. *Or* it might *possibly* be that I'm the feral product of an absent mum and an alcoholic dad, left to drag herself up in a council high-rise, with no idea of how to act or dress except what I've picked up on the hoof. New people take one look and usually underestimate me. But Simon took a look and he didn't underestimate me.

Within a few weeks of me starting Simon grew a beard – of sorts. I remember the physics teacher at school put up a picture of Einstein, the famous one with the electric hair. You'd need to be a bona-fide, twenty-four-carat genius to get away with hair like that. He did. His hair looked like a by-product of all that mental energy. It's the same with beards. Darwin could carry a beard. Simon couldn't. It wasn't even a proper Old Testament beard. It looked more like the kind they use to advertise facial trimmers, the type vain wankers grow to look cultivated. I might have kept my opinion to myself if he hadn't surprised me. I was doing a stock check, and sighing for something I could recognise as music, when I straightened and he was right *there*.

‘Fuck me, a musketeer. You must be pathos.’

He looked startled, touched his chin and disappeared as quietly as he’d arrived. On castors. The next day he’s clean shaven. ‘Suits you better.’ He went through the mime of pretending not to understand, as if my joke and his shave were a coincidence.

Gabby told me I got away with murder. Gabby had the hots for Simon. Anyone could see it, the way anyone with a shred of intelligence could see that nothing was going to come of it. He had an easy number, listening to music, dabbling with work and acting posh in the company of two big-bosomed lame-brains he could enjoy feeling superior to. He wasn’t about to risk all that for a poke at the boss’s daughter, or even the boss’s best pal’s daughter. Besides, there was something else about Simon. He chose his words *too* carefully, and he was careful to pronounce them all. Like I said, I speak in a simpler way than I think, but that’s not the impression I got from the girls. They employed their full vocabulary, and it wasn’t impressive. They made this noise when they didn’t know what to say, which was often, that sounded like a small engine idling. Or they could say ‘Yesssssss...’ for five fucking seconds. It’s the arrogance of people who assume you’ve got all the time in the world to listen to them form a thought. I didn’t get the impression there were any profound nuggets struggling to get out. They both did it, even to each other, and neither realised. He tried to be like them, but he was too clever and didn’t start early enough.

He wasn’t bad looking, and despite my lack of self-confidence he didn’t seem to think I was that hard on the eye either. All that attention that Gabby craved came my way. And we had reason to be together. I think the unspoken bargain with the ‘management’, in other words Gabby’s dad, was that the girls were the cosmetic lure. Once they’d attracted the punters they’d filled their part of the bargain. I wasn’t employed for my dress sense, and it suited me to work. I’m easily bored. I reorganised things the way I had in the last place, and he found every reason to stand near me. I

can't say I minded. It had been a long time since Quick Nick, and my confidence about my appearance was at a bit of a low ebb. He suggested I develop a taste for music 'with substance', and when I asked why he said it 'might better qualify' me to sell it. I bit back the obvious about the girls because I was flattered by his interest. My neglected ego, that abandoned car with the poked-in windows, coughed a few times and trundled itself off the waste ground. Lolly noticed it.

'Why the make up?'

'I'm going to work.'

'What's his name?'

'Why does it have to be a man?'

'Because you used to go to work looking like one of those women protestors living in a tent outside a missile base, and you're answering a question with a question.'

Simon pretended to educate me and I pretended to be impressed by his Sunday supplement sophistication. But there were certain things I couldn't let pass.

'Don't tell me you *like* jazz.'

'What's wrong with jazz?'

'No one *really* likes jazz. They only *pretend* to like jazz.'

'It can have its merits.'

'What kind of answer is that? Your arse must get sore.'

'How do you mean?'

'Sitting on that fence. Jazz is the emperor's new clothes. People *pretend* to like it because they're frightened of missing what other people *pretend* to appreciate.'

'There's not much room for doubt in your scheme of things, is there?'

'There's not enough time. I don't have the energy not to mean what I say.'

And so it went on like that for a couple of months. He found more reasons for being with me. He asked my opinion on the

smooth running of the shop, which was easy, and then went on to ask my opinion on anything else that happened to occupy his mind, which was nicer still. Given I was the only part-time employee, I had a disproportionate effect on the running of the place, and he seemed to think that because I was competent at this I'd be competent at other things too. He'd find me, hand across a mug of coffee I hadn't asked for, unfold *The Times* and point out – well, anything – from another crop failure in Africa to dwindling literacy rates in the Home Counties. And I'd have to abandon whatever I was doing and muster some half-baked opinion. And he'd look at me while I was talking, and I'd know he was listening, really listening, not focusing on my tits and taking inventory the way most men do when they pretend to listen. And it was as if he was always struggling with the problem of my appearance, this diamond in the rough.

He never made the girls coffee or asked their opinion on anything. Gabby accepted defeat gracefully, and I was tempted to console her with the fact that there wasn't anything in it, we weren't going anywhere. If I didn't have Millie I might have thrown caution to the wind and asked him out, even though work relationships are a bad idea. A child in the picture changes everything. Nothing's ever really casual after that, unless you're a parent like one of mine. I was reconciled to it stagnating into friendly chit-chat, till he found someone else, when he asked me out. It caught me completely flat-footed.

'I'll have to arrange a sitter.' He looked blank. 'For Millie.'

'Millie?'

'My daughter.'

'Of... of course...' he looked confused, as if I'd just invented her as an excuse not to go out with him.'

'She's the person I talk about all the time. The reason I only work part-time.'

He looked relieved, as if she'd just been wheeled into the shop

like some court exhibit to prove a point.

‘Well of course you must find a sitter for Millie.’ And he smiled. And I had an image of him pushing a supermarket trolley with her in it while I chose posh biscuits from an aisle that stretched on for miles that didn’t sell anything else. And we all smile at my choice.

Lolly offered me the loan of any of her outfits. I’d have looked like a starved tart. Ruth said I could try any of hers. The most alluring thing she had looked like a tent with a drawstring. I went out and bought a classic short black dress. Ruth, God bless her, said I looked like Audrey Hepburn. I humoured her and said the resemblance was uncanny: Holly Golightly, except not quite as good looking, living as a single parent in a Bridgeton high-rise. I’d still been expressing milk for Millie on the days I worked. Most of my bras were maternity washed-out hammocks. Lolly can identify a cup size on a moving bus at a hundred yards. She arrived with a present. ‘It’s a front-loader, rounds them up and herds them out. You’ll actually have a cleavage. Spray some perfume in between so he can stick his face down there and draw up a lungful – works for me.’

They both arrived at five on Saturday evening, having struck a truce in the middle of one of their on-going arguments, to boost my confidence. I was already nervous, and the sight of this alliance for my sake made me worse. The three of us together gave the situation a seriousness it shouldn’t have had. If you hang around Lolly for any length of time some of her reputation rubs off. But despite what the rumour mill might have thrown up, I haven’t had many boyfriends. Two one-nighters. The only man I’ve had sex with more than once is Nick. Here was a chance maybe to start something with someone who might actually care for *me*. It was the only offer I’d had, beside the kind of bottom-feeders who see single mothers as an easy mark. The very worst thing I could do would be to let him know how much tonight meant to me. Maybe all the poor boy wanted was a meal in company. Lolly broke the silence with ‘It’s

only a date,' walking up to me and spraying perfume she'd found in the bathroom down my new cleavage. Ruth found something to occupy her at the window. She'd never been on a date and there wasn't one on the foreseeable horizon. I knew *exactly* what she was thinking: people are meeting people and no one's meeting me. I wanted to squeeze her hand and break a plate over Lolly. Millie stirred. I wiped off the perfume and gave her a last feed. Lolly left on 'only a date,' using up yet another of the finite meetings of this night. Ruth stood at the door, making small talk while I waited for the lift on the landing. It pinged on arrival. I told the surprised old lady inside to hold the door and rushed back to kiss her.

My heart was hammering on the bus. I got off two stops early to feel the air on my face and calm myself, walking through another metropolitan sunset, the sandstone buildings drinking in the last of the light. He was waiting at the bar. It was an Italian place, one wall covered by a kind of mediaeval painting that looked as if it had been done by Disney. They had a display of straw Chianti bottles that would have driven Dad berserk with rancour at the memory. He was perched on the edge of a stool, wearing clothes that looked as new as mine. His cologne hit me from about five feet, and I was heartened by the thought that he might be as nervous as I was. Our overlapping smells made a passing waiter blink. When I was about to sit on a stool he took my arm and steered me to one of the booths. He could have pointed. He didn't need to touch me. There was a good electricity. He sat with his back to the wall. I had a view of the mural. From the size of his pupils I could tell he'd already had a few. My spirits rose even more.

'Funny looking painting. Punch and Judy... or something...' I'd started talking about something I knew nothing about and I was aware my hands were moving too much, like at the interview. Short of sitting on them I didn't feel able to stop them.

'Pantalone. He's one of the stock characters of the *Commedia dell'arte*.'

‘Fancy.’

‘The soap of its day.’

‘*Emmerdale* for serfs.’

Gesturing at absolutely nothing, I managed to knock over the little glass vase with cut flowers in water. He tried to right it and made matters worse. Then there was twenty seconds of confusion, while we shouted apologies at one another, and the staff replaced the cloth and the water-logged breadsticks. I ordered a gin and sucked it down in one noisy gulp before the waiter had moved two paces.

‘Again, please.’

‘Do you want wine too?’ Simon asked, smiling.

‘What the hell – you choose.’

The waiter hovered to prevent further breakages, recited the specials and offered advice. I smiled non-committally. He took the hint and drifted away. I confided in Simon.

‘I can navigate round an Italian menu because my mum fucked off with an Italian waiter.’

‘I’ll have to manage best I can without those qualifications.’

When the wine arrived he sniffed the cork. You could tell they weren’t impressed, given it was one up from the house plonk. I think sniffing the cork is the equivalent of kicking the tyres in a garage – they’ll rub their hands and double the bill. This sophistication was wearing thinner by the minute, which made me feel even better. I ordered artichoke salad, followed by spaghetti and clams, and swallowed the wine in big thirsty gulps. He seemed to enjoy the sight. I don’t know if it was for the thing itself or for the fact that I didn’t pay any attention to etiquette. Ever since Mum and her fake Latin lover I can’t take Italian restaurants seriously.

‘Millie would like that,’ I said, nodding towards the mural.

‘It’s strange, I only ever see you arrive alone. I don’t think of you as a mother.’

‘But that’s the one thing I think of myself as, more than anything

else. First and foremost. I'm not *just* that...'

'I didn't mean to offend.'

'You didn't.'

'After all, you don't *look* like a mother.'

'How does a mother look?'

'Not like someone who could get away with that dress.'

I could feel a blush rise up from my new cleavage, and turned my attention to the dessert trolley. They actually had a trolley that they wheeled across. I attacked the tiramisu while he watched, and then I took the initiative and ordered us both espresso and grappa. They were pushed for tables and asked if we'd mind drinking at the bar, where they'd throw in another grappa. We went back to where he'd been standing and sat on high stools, knee to knee. I started tittering at nothing. The espresso would have woken the dead, and I felt my heart lurch when it hit my bloodstream. Then I knocked back the grappas. It was stupid really. I'd wanted to savour the minute and now I'd used up the reason for sitting there. He finished his and suggested we could go on elsewhere for another.

'I can't. Well I can't have any more to drink. I'm still feeding Millie. I've had too much already. I feel like an arse, saying all that stuff about first and foremost...'

Perhaps we'd given the impression we were leaving because they appeared with our jackets. I automatically took mine and we found ourselves out on the pavement by ten. Then there was that awful bit I always hate, when you both stand not knowing whether to risk an invitation. I stood it for three seconds, and was about to throw my hat into the ring when he beat me to it.

'Would you like to come back to mine?'

'I – I would. But I've got to think about Millie's next feed and the babysitter. Why don't we go back to mine?'

He smiled. My heart took another espresso lurch. He lifted his hand and conjured a cab from over my shoulder, like a coin from behind an ear. I gave the address and we crossed the river

again, back in the direction I'd come from, sitting forward to see the lights reflected in the water. It's another sight, like sunset, I never tire of. But as I kept looking out I noticed something I hadn't noticed before: the lighted window displays, and bars and restaurants growing scarcer as the spaces between buildings became the rule and not the exception, gaps filled with rubble and sprouting vegetation – broken teeth on the parade. And aside from the mosaic of lights from the high-rises, the only illumination is the sodium street lighting.

In the time it took me to eat a meal the lift had broken. I've hauled a pram up the stairs without seeing them the way I was seeing them now, with him beside me. And there was the strata of smells, fried food, stale piss and God knows what. Ruth was on her feet at the first sound of the key in the lock, standing in the hall as if intercepting a burglar. She went all shy, as I did the introductions, so I pointed him towards the living room. The kitchen's large enough for one person to stand in as long as you don't open the cutlery drawer at the same time. She followed me in as I searched the fridge for something for him to drink. She stood, almost touching me, vibrating with suspense.

'Isn't it stupid, I never bought anything for him to drink. I never saw him back here. But then I suppose I must have, unconsciously. Why else the good underwear I wouldn't mind being run over in?'

'Who are you talking to?'

'You. Me. *I* don't know.'

'What happened?'

'He's here. That's what happened. And he didn't allow me to pay for anything. Maybe he thinks the more he forks out the better the chance of getting his end away. I could have told him to save his money.'

'Why?'

'Why do you think? The last man who noticed me was Nick and it turned out he was only paying attention to himself. *He*, I

point through the wall, 'likes *me*.' I pointed at my cleavage. 'I'm taking every precaution science can devise, but it's going to take a fucking earthquake to stop sex happening in this flat tonight.'

'He might not want to have sex.'

'Lack of experience aside, and no offence intended, unless you crawled out of a flower, when have you ever head of a man not wanting to have sex?'

'You're shouting. He might hear.'

'I don't care. I'm home. He's here. I'm fed up being nervous and lonely. How was Millie? Hold on a minute.' Underneath half-rotted broccoli I found part of Dad's cache, three cans of cheap corner-shop lager. I wiped one clean, and delivered it with a spew of froth that swiped his groin. I absently wiped the mound of his tackle till I realised what I was doing, apologised and ran back to the kitchen. Once I'd heard Millie was fine I led Ruth to the door, picking up her stuff on the way.

'I hope it goes all right. Come down with Millie tomorrow and see me.'

I gave her the second impulsive kiss of the night through the closing door. If Lolly had asked me to come down she'd have demanded a blow-by-blow anatomical account of Simon's technique. Ruth meant it in a misty lens, flowers and chocolates kind of a way. I leaned my back against the closed door and thought for a second about how some people are too nice for this world, took a deep breath, plumped up my tits and strode into the living room. He was crouching over my music collection, that I play on my stolen stereo, trying to hide the wet stain in his trousers. I sat on the sofa, waiting for him, posing myself to look sophisticated. Realising I lacked a drink to complete the effect, I stood just as he sat down to yet more catastrophic noises from the upholstery. This sounded structural. Remembering I couldn't have another drink I put the kettle on. When I came back with a second beer I sat down as gently as I could. The sofa groaned again and gave up any

pretence of lumbar support. We lolled together in the saggy bit. 'Two frogs in a lily pad,' I said. He just smiled. 'Cosy,' I said. His smiled widened. 'Do you want me to open your beer?'

'No thanks. I can pour it over my testicles all by myself.'

He put his arm round me, taking advantage of the dynamics of the sofa, reaching over my shoulder and taking my breast in his right hand.

'I see you're employing the cinema technique tonight. A bit previous isn't it?'

'Are you complaining?'

'No. There's another one here too.'

'I noticed.'

I swivelled round to kiss him. With more skill than I'd have given him credit for he unclipped the front loader and slid his hands in. A few seconds later he slid them back out looking worried.

'Sorry,' I said. 'Leakage. I thought I'd given Millie enough but I seem to be producing more.' He looked at my breasts as if they were water cannon, pointing at him. I had the strangest feeling that the romance of the moment had been lost and I had to do something, decisive and tender, right now, to get it back. The wail from the bedroom started right on cue.

'Sorry,' I said again, heaving myself up from the synthetic pit. He stood too and I left him for a moment, contemplating the corpse of the sofa. Millie was lying with her eyes wide open. She latched on like a docking spacecraft. I gave her a few minutes and then moved her across to the other. The kettle rose to a slow boil. It's not electric. It's a whistler, something you could identify in the pitch dark a hundred years from now. I was hoping she'd finish before it became too insistent, but I had to move through to turn off the noise. He obviously had the same thought. He caught me in the hall. My dress was still undone, my front-loader open. Millie was sucking rhythmically and there was a pearl of milk on the other nipple. For some reason she jerked away. Perhaps he thought

that there was a single jet, a feeding syringe, not the sprinkler arrangement that showered the side of her face till she turned back and latched on with the same suddenness. He stopped dead and took all this in. I reached into the kitchen, shut off the noise, wiped her cheek and covered up. When I looked at him again he seemed morose, studying the patchy linoleum, a mosaic of off-cuts running back to the living room with its ridiculous furniture, and it was as if he was weighing up the pros and cons and calculating whether a fuck was worth the squalor and the consequences.

‘I – I’m sorry...’ he said. ‘I’m really sorry. This is all too much reality to take at one sitting.’

‘What do you want me to do, expose you in instalments? Maybe I could wheel the sofa into the shop and you could practice sitting on it a couple of times without the whole fucking ambience.’ The instant I swore I knew it was a mistake.

‘I’m sorry. It’s not just...’ and he gestured in a vague way to indicate the whole fucking ambience. ‘Then there’s the baby...’

‘But there’s always been the baby. You knew about the baby when you asked me out.’

‘Yes... but. There’s knowing and there’s *knowing*. I didn’t really...’

‘I shouldn’t have sworn. I’m sorry. She’ll settle in a minute and we can both have some tea.’

‘I’m sorry.’

‘You don’t have to keep apologising.’

‘I made a mistake. A mistake.’ He looked down, not wanting to meet my eye, and reached for his jacket at the same time.

‘Please. Don’t go. Not like this. If you still feel the same way in five minutes...’

It didn’t stop him. All that supposed passion, dwindling to the offer of a cup of tea and a plea not to be left alone. He wouldn’t look back and said sorry at least twice more. In his hurry to go he accidentally slammed the front door. It didn’t catch and ricocheted open. I stood at the entrance, listening to his feet on the stairs, till

I heard the bang of the lobby door echo up the stairwell. Millie fed throughout, her sucking amplified by the concrete acoustics.

She fell asleep still latched on. I put her down and went to pick up the dead cans from the living room. I looked at the sofa. With the exception of Millie, the only good thing to have happened to me, this broken ugly thing seemed to epitomise my life to date. I wouldn't let someone else's opinion of me form my view of myself, but I'm looking around and I saw what he saw. Someone I thought me and Millie might just have had a future with looked at me and my situation, totalled the sum of my parts and decided that I add up to the square root of fuck all. And right now I can't pretend to myself that it doesn't hurt.