

THEY COULDN'T HAVE KNOWN

SANDEN GREVELLE



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PART ONE

CHAPTER ONE

I

Stunned by the impact, Gill lay on the damp grass looking at the stars in the void. She ran her tongue over her teeth to check for damage. As she spat out bits of grass, she realised she was also trying to spit out the taste of Allen's clumsy kiss. She felt she might never stop spitting.

Gill had been fleeing across the fields in the dark from Allen's shocking approaches when she had run full tilt into the side of a black cow standing at the edge of the new concrete runway. As she lifted her head she heard a ringing in her ears, which, though fading, set her heart pounding anew. *Was she hearing the bluebells ring, a sound that summons the fairies and bodes ill for human ears?*

Breathing deeply, Gill struggled with her thoughts. There were bluebells in the woods nearby, but she knew they were yet to flower in their heady scented profusion. She also knew that they weren't all bluebells – despite their similar appearance – and therefore not all headily scented, nor so empowered.

She tried to clear her head. *What was she thinking? Had she heard the bluebells ring? Nor so empowered?*

Gill was reassured by the fact that, as she was aware of

the madness of these thoughts, she must be coming to her senses. She rolled over and tried to focus on the ground, but was disorientated as she could still see stars from the impact. She recalled the Royal Air Force crews stationed at the airport telling how, when flying home on starlit nights during the wartime blackouts, they became disorientated when the towns below twinkled as cats were put out for the night.

As Gill lay there she could hear the cow, unperturbed by the collision, calmly munching the sweet-smelling grasses and herbs, about which Allen had been trying to teach her for as long as she could remember.

She tried to get up, but the excruciating pain in her foot made her gasp and she sank back to the ground. She looked around in desperation for help, but there was little hope anyone would pass by the runways in the dark. From her perspective on the ground she could just make out the low silhouette of a wall in the distance and slowly began to drag herself over the grass towards it. She cried out as she snagged her damaged foot on the rough ground, but there was no one to hear.

After what seemed like an age, she reached the ruins of an old greenhouse that the bulldozers had not completely flattened in their southward pincer movement, leaving the low brick wall standing amongst the collapsed superstructure and shattered glass. However, even in the short time since its destruction these remains were becoming engulfed in a scramble of wild plants and abandoned crops, especially the now half-wild tomatoes.

It had been a cold April up until then, with unseasonal snow and sleet, but despite the deepening cold under the clear sky, Gill broke out in a sweat from the pain and the effort. As the sweat cooled on her body she shivered and realised

she was at risk of exposure. At that point, as if by divine intervention, she found a large hotbed of still-fermenting, sweet compost at one end of the wall. Gently collapsing onto the warm, soft pile, she fell into a deep sleep.

II

Gill awoke with a start and was transfixed. The dark shape of a man surrounded by a rainbow-coloured aurora loomed on the early morning mist in front of her, shimmering like a vision. She had heard locals talk of the phenomenon, which, in their usual mystical way they had called a spectre, attributing great significance to it. An omen.

‘What on earth are you doing out here on your own at this time in the morning?’ a man’s voice from behind her asked.

Further startled, she turned her head to see a tall, lean, young man standing behind her with a bemused smile on his face. He was handsome with symmetrical features, high cheekbones, a square head and thick, wiry, dark hair combed straight back.

‘Thank goodness you’re not wearing a suit and bowler hat, and carrying a briefcase and rolled umbrella!’ she said before she could stop herself.

‘Why on earth should I be?’ he replied, puzzled.

‘No reason,’ said Gill, just stopping herself from explaining the locals’ unlikely belief in such a figure haunting the scenes of fatal crash landings.

As the young man moved in front of her, the spectre disappeared and she realised that the rising sun had cast his shadow, surrounded by a rainbow-coloured aurora, onto the dense mist in front of her. It had been no spectre, but she felt that it could still be an omen; of what she did not know.

Her first reaction was to ensure that her hair was covering her ears, and her second was a feeling of relief that she was wearing baggy Women's Land Army, trousers rather than a dress or skirt. Puzzled by the increasing interest she was arousing in men, she always tried to dress down so as not to attract attention, despite the ending of clothes rationing. Although not one herself, Gill had known the Land Army girls well during the war. They had spoiled her a treat. If they hadn't been so watchful when she was around, she might have learnt something about sex, which had been their main topic of conversation.

Gill also went to huge lengths to avoid going anywhere near the two temporary camps near the new airport, where the men working on the runways, mainly Irish, were housed in the wooden huts of 'Timber town' and the modified corrugated iron Nissen huts of 'Tin town'.

'Well, what on earth are you doing out here on your own at this time in the morning?' the man repeated.

'What on earth are you doing out here on *your* own at this time in the morning?' retorted Gill warily.

The stranger grinned. 'I'm at work. Are you all right?'

'I think I may have broken my foot last night. And I only just managed to crawl over here,' continued Gill, reassured by his reaction.

'You were lucky you found this compost heap. You might not have survived the night otherwise.'

'Yes I know. But it's a hotbed not a compost heap. By the way, did you hear the bluebells ring?' Gill asked, despite herself.

'What?'

'Sorry, nothing. I must still be a bit dazed.'

'Let's have a look. My name's Piotr, by the way. What's

yours?’

‘Gill. Yours is unusual. Where are you from?’

‘Poland originally. I reckon I only got my job so people could make jokes about it.’

‘Why? What do you do?’

‘Basically, I hold a pole up vertically all day and people say: “Don’t they make a lovely couple” or something like that, which gets annoying after a while.’

‘I’m sure it does,’ said Gill, not wanting to be annoying in turn by asking what sort of job involved holding a pole up vertically all day.

Piotr bent down and gently examined Gill’s foot and ankle. She was surprised and somewhat ashamed by her reaction to his gentle touch, and felt even more relieved that she wasn’t wearing a dress or skirt of any description.

Piotr also trembled slightly as he tentatively touched her ankle. It was the first time as a young man that he had ever touched a young woman and he desperately wished she had been wearing a dress or skirt of some description.

Gill’s foot and ankle were tightly swollen – an angry, florid mixture of scarlet and blue – and the initial pleasure of his touch was lost in the pain. She fell back, exhausted.

‘Where do you live?’ Piotr asked, trying not to notice the sensuous curves of her body as she lay on the hot bed.

‘About a mile away, in the last old farmhouse.’

‘I know it,’ replied Piotr, flushing slightly and shifting awkwardly on his feet; signs of vulnerability that puzzled but reassured Gill.

‘I’ll try to get you home,’ he said, lifting her from the ground.

‘Careful! You’re shaking. Put me down if I’m too heavy.’

‘No, it’s OK.’

They were both equally embarrassed by the intimacy of the situation, as it was the first time either had been so physically close to a member of the opposite sex since adolescence. Piotr was becoming aroused as he smelt her hair, felt her arms around his neck, found his left hand perilously close to her left breast and felt her firm thighs on his right arm.

In the temporary air traffic control tower on the north side of the new airport, an air traffic controller – an RAF man, like most of the flight staff posted to the new airport – was surveying the scene. As the silhouette of Piotr carrying Gill rose through the low morning mist, he imagined he was seeing a man rescuing a woman from drowning in a silvery sea; the illusion reinforced by the antlers of a young buck appearing to float like driftwood before disappearing beneath the waves when it lowered its head to graze.

Taking many stops along the way, Piotr eventually managed to carry Gill to the farmhouse. By this time he was no longer aroused and looked as tired and dishevelled as Gill, giving the impression that they had spent the night together out in the fields.

Gill's mother recoiled in surprise and horror when she opened the door.

'Gill! Where have you been all night? I've had the police out. What happened to you?'

'Good morning, ma'am,' said Piotr.

'Who are you? Put my daughter down at once!'

'Certainly, ma'am, if you would just show me where.'

'Why? What's the matter with her?'

'I am here, Mother,' said Gill, mortified at their reception.

'Well, what's wrong with you?'

'I've hurt my foot and can't walk, which is why Piotr here had to carry me home.'

‘Piotr! What sort of name is that?’

‘Mother!’

Go and get the doctor right now,’ she said, giving Piotr a long, hard look as she closed the door in his face.

‘Who was that? You weren’t with him all night were you? Where does he come from? He looked a bit foreign to me. He must be foreign with a name like that. Is he foreign?’ Gill’s mother continued as she settled Gill and made her as comfortable as possible. Suddenly, with a look of horror on her face, she said: ‘He’s not *German* is he?’ *As far as Gill’s mother was concerned, the only good German was a dead German.*

It took all of Gill’s patience to answer her mother’s anxious questions and put her mind partially at rest. She understood that her parents were under great stress as they awaited eviction and the destruction of their farm, which had been in her father’s family for generations.

After the doctor’s visit the pain subsided a little and Gill began to reflect on the turmoil of the previous twenty-four hours. *What had Allen been thinking when he tried it on with her?* She had never thought of him in that way. *How could two friends have such different views about their friendship?*

She knew Allen loved her in his simple, childlike way, but she hadn’t thought it was anything more than that. He still seemed so young in many ways, whereas in her own innocence she was confused by the dramatic changes she was undergoing. She felt like a complete mess mentally and physically. And now there was Piotr. *How on earth should she behave with him? Allen was the only boy she had ever been close to.*

III

She had met Allen at primary school and they had immediately

become friends as a result of their shared activities: running wild over the beautiful countryside, climbing trees, fishing, paddling and even swimming in the Pits: ancient lakes extended over the centuries by diggings to supply sand and gravel for roads and construction, and more recently the airport's concrete runways. They had grown up together: fit, fast, strong, tireless, lean and bright as buttons with barely a day's illness between them, or at least nothing that ever stopped them for very long.

They were closer to the wild creatures than they were to their contemporaries, who hung around cursing, mocking and throwing stones, usually at Allen. As a result, they were never drawn to the public swimming baths and cinemas where, to the terror of their parents, the nightmare of polio lay in wait for its young, susceptible victims.

During the war – which they had helped to win by eating their dinners, as they were constantly warned they wouldn't if they didn't – they had combined their adventures with earning money foraging for herbs; gathering potatoes; scaring birds from the crops with whistles and rattles; picking slugs, snails and caterpillars from the cabbages and sprouts; and, in the winter, running through the orchards with burning torches, shouting to discourage evil spirits.

More than anything, though, they had run for fun. They ran full tilt over the fields without putting a foot wrong, even across the exhilarating switchback undulations of ancient ridge and furrow work, usually singing along to their favourite verse:

*The hare is running races in her mirth
And with her feet from the plashy earth
Raises a mist that, glittering in the sun,
Runs with her all the way, wherever she doth run.*

After the war, on the occasion of the annual village fete, she and Allen regularly entered the three-mile foot race through the village, which was open to all. On these occasions, Gill and Allen never bothered to warm up. Living in the fields as they did, they were permanently warmed up. Gill used to get quite nervous, but Allen never suffered pre-race nerves as such because he suffered from nerves all the time, which once a year occurred, appropriately, moments before the race. Gill was faster over less than a furrow's length, but Allen had speed and stamina and always won.

Gill always got very angry when spectators, most of them drunk, used to sing the song "Run Rabbit Run" when Allen went by. She was particularly annoyed when they also shouted, 'Come on Wilfred', as this was a reference to her favourite book as a child. Wilfred was a rabbit adopted by a penguin that had escaped from the zoo and a stray dog; all of them outcasts.

As a result of the huge odds offered against anyone other than Allen winning, some challengers sought every advantage they could: drinking beetroot juice for stamina; nibbling on puff balls against cramp and willow bark against the pain. As a result, quite a few challengers always retired with stomach trouble.

Some even risked nibbling fairy ring fungi to enable them to 'dance' over the ground, like the elves and fairies within the fairy rings in the meadows, but they suffered such hallucinations they couldn't find the start. Once a challenger had arrived so crazed on herbal potions and festooned in vegetation to promote speed and stamina that the villagers were terrified the Green Man was upon them and he ran off in the wrong direction.

Safe in their virtue, simplicity and youth, Allen's relatively

benighted state had yet to enter Gill's mind. As they parted at the end of each day and made for home like rabbits scurrying to their burrows, they would shout to each other: 'Do you still love me?' To which the answers would come: 'Still,' reassuring them both that nothing had happened in those last few seconds to change their hearts and minds.

Gill, however, had learned from her parents' disapproving reaction not to speak about the fun she had with Allen. Her parents had done all they could to keep her away from him. Their lovely daughter was too good for that strange boy. In their eyes, anybody was too good for him. Gill had said nothing and had carried on meeting Allen, but more secretly. They couldn't have known that they were each undergoing a metamorphosis, from which Gill would emerge perfectly formed and fly away, while Allen would emerge further damaged and beyond repair.

When Gill had recoiled in horror from his attempt to kiss her, Allen had also taken off running, not in pursuit of Gill, but, for the first time in their shared adventures, in the opposite direction, overwhelmed with shame.

Although he could follow a trail over the countryside with the quarry nowhere in sight, Allen couldn't have followed Gill even if, like Olwen of Celtic legend, she had left a trail of white clover behind her wherever she trod. He had lost Gill while she was in plain sight, and now, unlike Gill, what he was about to run into had no substance and would draw him in.

What had he been thinking? He had never kissed anybody in his life and should have known that it would be an inevitable disaster. But he had forgotten himself in that critical moment. They had been out together, roving the fields as usual, and had paused to rest. Looking at her lying next to him with her head on a cushion of soft moss, he had been overcome with

a new sensation and, as if under a spell, had leant forward to kiss her. But the glimpse of an unknown adult paradise he observed in Gill disappeared more quickly than it had appeared as a local warning burst into his consciousness: "Ware the hare, lest it kiss the lip," and he recalled girls in the village telling of nightmares about being kissed by the whiskery warmth of a nibbling hare.

After a painfully slow start to his life, Allen had grown to be thin, wiry and eventually tall enough for his age. He had hair that bleached yellow in the sun, but he wished was thicker, and green eyes he wished were set wider apart. But there was something elusive about his mouth that even the curious struggled to catch a good look at. It took a great deal of ingenuity and most of Allen's time to ensure that they didn't. Those that did catch a glimpse behaved as if he might not have noticed, despite it being in the middle of his own face. 'You should get that seen to,' they said. People were very helpful that way.

He had been getting it seen to for years, and the final bout of torture had been the last he could endure. Somebody with needle phobia would have considered him brave beyond belief that he preferred injections of what they called cocaine to the gas, when the stinking rubber mask enveloped his face and the terrifying humming filled his head. It certainly should have given him a sense of achievement over those who had known no real physical pain, no matter what the drama of their stories implied they might have suffered; especially over those who claimed the suffering of their ancestors as their own.

While still a young boy, Allen had learnt that something had been left too late and that as a result he was different and would be so forever more. Some in the village whispered

that it must have been a case of ‘mother-impression’, when his mother had startled a hare from its scrape when she was pregnant with him. As a result, he had always felt he was beneath contempt, which of course he wasn’t as it was always aimed very accurately at him.

As he had grown older he had gradually become aware of a vague sense of unease; a gradual rise in background anxiety that eventually emerged into his everyday awareness. It had crept up on him quietly and unexpectedly, giving no warning of the finality of its grip. He could clearly remember the point at which he could ignore it no longer. He had been looking out of the window at the garden of his childhood when there seemed to be more than just the glass between him and the view.

The stress of his prolonged fearful introspection caused by his unresolvable problem had intensified, until bewilderment and fear of the strange feelings and thoughts it brought had become as much a part of the suffering as his original problem.

He was surprised his reaction hadn’t been one of fear and panic, but only of slight bemusement. He couldn’t have known the impact it would have on the rest of his life and the lives of others. It was the relative calm before the storm.

IV

After his dramatic encounter with Gill, Piotr could not get her out of his mind. He had never felt like this before. Nothing else seemed to matter other than to see Gill again as soon as he could. Although he had lived through terrible things it took all his courage to overcome his nerves and return the next day to the farmhouse to try and see her.

After dithering outside the door – much to Gill’s amusement, who was spying on him through the half-closed curtains – he finally managed to knock on the door.

‘What do you want?’ asked Gill’s mother when she opened it.

‘I’m terribly sorry to bother you, ma’am, but I would like to ask how Gill is. I’ve brought her some flowers,’ he said, handing over a posy of sweet violets he had gathered along the way.

Initially, Gill’s mother could make no sense of it, until she realised it was the young man who had carried Gill home after her accident. Now he looked very presentable, distinguished even, so against her instincts she invited him in. She was beginning to realise that, although he was foreign, he was a decent-looking young man with good manners, who spoke English with only the slightest accent. More importantly, he was a huge improvement on that dreadful, strange-looking Allen boy Gill had spent so much time with growing up, despite her best efforts to stop them meeting.

‘Gill says you’re from Poland,’ she blurted out.

‘Yes, that’s right, ma’am,’ he replied with a slight bow.

‘Why are there so many Polish people around here now?’

‘Well, we did help win the war,’ he said, unable to bring himself to add the word ‘you’.

‘Don’t be ridiculous. We saved you when we declared war on Hitler when he invaded Poland. There weren’t any Polish troops in the victory parade.’

‘That was because the Russians objected,’ said Piotr as calmly as he could in the face of this unexpected hostile reception. He was barely able to stop himself telling this ignorant woman that nearly a quarter of a million Polish armed forces had fought under the British. He managed to

check his anger when he remembered dismissing the West Indians and other Commonwealth countries' contribution to the Allied war efforts, which he now deeply regretted.

'Why would they do that?'

Piotr thought about answering, but gave up.

'Why, didn't you go home after the war?'

'Because Russia has taken over our country and they would kill us.'

'Don't be silly, they were on our side.'

There was a brief lull as Gill's mother took a deep breath and looked him up and down, before saying: 'Anyway, what church do you go to?'

'The Roman Catholic Church over in Fletham, madam. It's near where I live.'

A loud cough from Gill in another room interrupted her mother's terse, rude grilling.

'All right, you can see Gill, but I'll be nearby. Follow me.'

When Gill's mother moved out of the way and Piotr saw Gill sitting there, he could barely stifle a gasp. He had thought that he would never experience much emotion after everything he had been through, but he certainly did when he laid eyes on her. *Was this love at first sight, or at least at first proper sight?* He had heard about it and wondered whether he might actually be experiencing it. He was more acquainted with fear, loss, hunger, malaria and extreme privation than he was with girls.

'You look so different,' he stammered.

'That makes two of us, then,' replied Gill with a grin.

He had heard locally of Niamh of the flaxen hair, a Celtic goddess of nature, whose 'golden hair hung in tresses; of complexion as fair as a summer morning; her body slender and exquisite as a birch tree, the glory of all lands; the fairest

woman in the world, conjured out of blossoms’.

Well, here she was, sitting in front of him with her big purple foot up on a stool. The only additions to the description were that her eyes were emerald green and her smile lit up the room.

Gill had no idea that she was a Celtic goddess. She had no vanity. She had only ever envisaged herself in a negative light and was only slowly becoming aware of how attractive she was to men. Her first concern on meeting anybody was always whether her hair was covering her ears or not. She was acutely embarrassed by the fact that, like her mother, she had no earlobes. ‘Cagot ears,’ she had heard a doctor say. She had been surprised to see a Spanish worker at the airport – a refugee from the Civil War – with the same condition.

She imagined that everybody she met immediately noticed them, which of course they never did – except the Spaniard – until her fiddling drew attention to them.

‘You must forgive my mother. She doesn’t mean to be rude, but she’s under terrible stress with the eviction and the destruction of this place. Like we all are, of course.’

‘That’s terrible,’ said Piotr, studiously examining his bitten fingernails.

‘Yes, it’s very sad after so many years. My parents are at their wits’ end, but they’ve given up the struggle now that all the other farmhouses have gone.’

‘When did it all start?’ asked Piotr.

‘During the war, 1944. Even while the bombs were still dropping! Hadleyrow Hall was the first to go to make way for Runway One, which also obliterated the remains of Caesar’s Camp.’

‘Was it falling down anyway?’ asked Piotr.

‘What, Caesar’s Camp?’

‘No, Hadleyrow Hall!’ said Piotr, unable to suppress a grin,

despite the seriousness of the topic.

'No! It was a beautiful old building. There were tall bay windows either side of the front door and French windows that opened directly onto a springy camomile lawn. A huge Cedar of Lebanon shaded the front of the house on summer days. Opposite, there was a beautiful borrow pond, dug for the brick-earth that was used to make the bricks to build it.'

'That does sound beautiful.'

'By the way, did you know that Caesar's Camp predated Caesar by centuries?' asked Piotr, proud to have the chance to impress Gill with some of his local knowledge and to shift the conversation away from the present situation.

'Yes, and when that was discovered some of the villagers wondered how the ancient Britons had known Caesar was coming so much later,' said Gill with a grin.

'They couldn't have known,' said Piotr, before catching up. 'Ha! And I bet some of the villagers wondered how the ancient Britons knew an airport was coming when what looked like a three-mile-long runway was uncovered during the same excavations,' said Piotr.

'How do you know about that? Lizzie thinks it was a spiritual runway to the stars.'

'Lizzie? Isn't she that weird old woman everybody thinks is a witch?' asked Piotr.

'She's not weird, just old-fashioned, and she's the kindest person I know. Some people do think she's a witch, but only because they're stupid.'

'Well those old earthworks are all well and truly buried under the concrete runways now,' said Piotr, looking guilty again.

'At least they'll be preserved there,' said Gill, knowing that before the airport had even been thought of, the vicar of

the parish church across the main road had had the remains of Caesar's Camp almost ploughed flat for fear of its pagan associations, leaving only low, grassy banks marked out by bracken and gorse.

Gill was puzzled when Piotr visibly relaxed when she said this.

'By the way, do you know anything about that old cannon sticking out of the ground near where those earthworks were? I'm surprised people don't call it Caesar's Cannon,' continued Gill.

'That's William Roy's Cannon, marking one end of a line he surveyed in 1784 for the first accurate mapping of Britain,' said Piotr, amazed that his surveying knowledge was proving so useful during his first proper conversation with a beautiful girl.

'How do you know all this?' asked Gill.

Piotr flushed with embarrassment as he realised he had talked himself into a corner.

'Well, it's to do with my land surveying job,' he said, regretting having to reveal his connection with the airport development so soon.

'Oh! So you work for the airport, then?' asked Gill.

Piotr stiffened. His heart thumped. He had hoped to keep that quiet, at least until he got to know Gill better, if he was lucky enough to do so.

'I'm afraid so. What do you think?' he asked rather desperately, his mouth souring.

'Well, it's not your fault, and one way or another all of us younger people will end up working there if we don't move away.'

'What a relief! I thought you might see me as the enemy,' said Piotr, immediately panicking anew at the thought that

Gill might move away.

‘Not at all. Now tell me about your life in Poland.’

There was a long silence, during which Piotr’s heart continued to hammer in his chest.

‘Well, where I come from had a lot in common with this area. Before the war it was largely agricultural and people made a living like they do around here by growing fruit and vegetables and selling them in the city.’

‘Which city?’

‘Warsaw. We lived near Warsaw Airport, which got busier and busier, so the peace was increasingly disturbed. During the war it became a battleground when the Polish resistance fought the Germans. On the land though, not in the air like around here.’

‘Were you there then?’

Piotr paused before answering. ‘No. Look, I’d better go now, but could I see you again, while your ankle is getting better?’ he asked, trying and failing to appear casual.

‘Of course, although I’d have to ask Mother. I heard you winning her over with your impeccable manners, so it should be OK. Just you being a Christian would have pleased her, but she’ll think it’s almost too good to be true that you’re Roman Catholic. That might even make up for you being foreign,’ Gill answered with a grin.

V

By the time Allen reached the freight warehouse at the airport – where to his dismay, he had been working since losing his agricultural work as a result of the airport developments – he looked as if he had been running all night, which he had.

He had to accept that things could never be the same

again with Gill, but he couldn't accept that her rejection of him meant that his love was of no consequence. He was convinced that, if anything counted, everything counted. True, he would never really know what he was missing, but he knew well enough for it to leave him with an aching hole in his chest.

He couldn't believe the sequence of events that had resulted in him working at the airport. He had tried fieldwork, but despite this being among the hardest of all jobs, it was mainly seen as women's work and the women had got rid of him as soon as they could. This wasn't as unfeeling as it might have appeared. Although he had inhibited their hilarious and bawdy conversations and songs, including one about 'The Bonny Black Hare', they were also trying to save him from himself. If he was seen doing 'women's work' for anything but a short-term emergency – when a crop had to be got in quickly, for example – they knew he would be even more ridiculed and isolated than he already was, if that were possible. However, he remained vulnerable as he continued to assist in chopping wood, which, though heavy labour, was also seen as women's work.

In fact, Allen had been relieved when he was edged out of the fieldwork, as it was so hard and the hours were so long that he hadn't been sure he could have stuck it anyway, women's work or not. Even the Land Army girls, who came from more privileged backgrounds than the local field girls, had soon toughened up, with some even living in temporary straw-bale houses thatched with nettles on the edge of the village.

The field girls worked in all weathers. Whatever the weather, they were totally swaddled in clothes, with headscarves that masked their faces to protect themselves from the ageing

effects of the weather. They were not worn out of modesty, religious or otherwise, as their conversation revealed. The voluminous folds of their dull coloured clothes – only a fast hussy would wear red and green was considered unlucky – protected them from the cold, heat and rain in equal measure, like Bedouin in the desert.

They worked on a variety of tasks in the most awkward positions, usually bent over sowing seeds, planting seedlings, and cutting and pulling crops of every description. Hoeing was about the only task in the open fields they could carry out standing up, albeit lopsidedly. The harvesting of root crops such as potatoes was semi-mechanised, but they still had to be gathered up from the mud or dust by hand. In good years, immigrant potato lifters from Ireland would be hired and the field girls were allocated to more skilful work such as picking soft fruit, which had to be carried out with great care for it to arrive at market in near-perfect condition early the next morning.

However, picking red, black and white currants from the under-planting in the orchards when it was raining was still a hard, miserable job. Even if there was a break in the rain water continued to drip from the top fruit of apples and plums above, and because the trees were earthed up there was a furrow between every row that filled with water, through which the picker had to slosh. They had half-bushel and peck straw baskets, on which they would perch in order to reach the under fruit. At times, the pickers were so tired they would slip off or into the basket fast asleep, only to be woken by the overseer firing his sporting gun at irregular intervals under the pretence of potting rabbits.

After the fieldwork, Allen had tried mucking out the turkey sheds. This was done when the turkeys had been slaughtered

and the doors were thrown open to the light and the air after several months. Inside, the compacted droppings, several feet thick, gave off an overpowering, eye-stinging smell of ammonia. Whenever he forked a 'fossilised' turkey that had died and been trampled flat like a sheet of cardboard in the muck up onto the cart, the manure carried on it showered back over him.

This was followed one bitter winter by a short stint on the brine tank in the bacon factory on the small industrial estate next to the airport. Here, even the brine, saltier than seawater, froze, adding its glitter and sparkle to the granite floor. Although he wore rubber gloves, the brine soon filled them and his florid, inflamed, salt-encrusted hands throbbed rhythmically in time with the machinery.

Allen had been surprised that nobody had told him he was luckier than a deck-hand on a North Sea trawler, battered by freezing winds and waves. To pre-empt this, Allen thought of suggesting to management that they have a wind and wave machine fitted on the brine tank. However, Allen realised only too well that among the damaged minds finding refuge in the bacon factory, there were broken survivors from some of the most horrific wartime experiences imaginable, to whom the brine tank job would be heaven on earth. So he got on with it.

Eventually he had accepted a temporary labouring job in the freight warehouse of a major American airline, despite his dislike of the airport. It was the least tiring job he had ever had. He found moving the freight so easy he moved it around just to tire himself out, to the complete astonishment of other workers and the annoyance of those trying to sleep in the cubbyholes they had built in the freight.

Originally, he had made the foolish mistake of assuming that his physical abilities, energy, tirelessness and fierce

determination were a natural reaction to his afflictions. He had failed to realise that they were a blessing, a gift that was almost equal to the curse; that he had been given a fighting chance; that he could have had the same problems without his other physical and mental advantages, which had always enabled him to settle for exhaustion rather than total despair.

He constantly drove himself to the point where he could achieve some sort of peace. He contrived to do every job in the most physically awkward, tiring way. If he could lift something with one hand he would. If he could lift something in an awkward position he would. In his ignorance, it never occurred to him that he could get injured.

Those who sought to teach him to work in a more efficient way assumed that he was a very slow learner. On the other hand, many people had pointed out to Allen that he wasn't as stupid as he looked. This hadn't been obvious at school, as he had been so distracted by trying to maintain an illusion of normality in his appearance. He realised, however, this did not necessarily mean that he was clever; just that he looked more stupid than he was.

Outside work he increased his mileage, covering huge distances on foot deep into the countryside, never putting a foot wrong. This was in direct contrast to his internal world, in which his mind stumbled and tripped over even imaginary obstacles.

The worst part of the airport job was the air pollution, especially from the eye-searing unburnt kerosene in the exhaust of the aircraft engines as they revved up outside the warehouse. Allen had begun to notice the disappearance of once-familiar plants from the margins of nearby cultivated fields, as well as the thinning birdsong. There were no birds in the rafters of the airport hangers any longer, despite the

massive doors being open more often than they were shut.

Added to this, there was the periodic stench of the Monkey Specials, freightliners crudely modified to contain crates packed with rhesus monkeys from Africa for use in medical research. More than half died in their own excrement en route, but nobody seemed interested in opposing this foul trade. It was widely assumed that if the trade was for medical research it must be a good thing, despite the obvious cruelty involved, to which people gradually became conditioned. However, there were those in whom it raised the spectre of recent wartime horrors, to which they had seen people become conditioned in the name of a greater good. These workers didn't last long at the airport.

The stench from the Monkey Specials created further problems at the small industrial estate next to the airport. One of the factories on the site bottled expensive perfume, so it was necessary to keep its doors and windows firmly closed all year round. On one occasion, the factory's salesman, when putting his hat on outside the building, had trapped some monkey-polluted air underneath it, which had remained there until it was released when he doffed his hat to the perfume buyer in the cosmetics department at a London store. Its effect was accentuated by the slight bow he gave, which brought the released sample close to the delicate and highly trained nose of the buyer. At the same time, his patent leather shoes made a squeaking noise, causing her to jump to the obvious, but erroneous, conclusion. This incident hadn't cost him his job as the buyer was too refined to articulate her complaint, but she had swiftly changed suppliers.

So potent was the toxic cocktail from the airport that it carried for miles, staining the neighbouring fields before losing itself in the fresh country air. At that time the acceptable

solution to pollution was still considered to be dilution.

VI

'Bloody 'ell, Allen! What 'ave you bin up to?' asked Prof, his unlikely workmate.

Allen had found Prof in one of the cubbyholes in the freight. There was a fanciful story about Prof falling asleep in one and being flown out to Paris with the freight before waking up.

Prof was an ex-gangster from the Polish Jewish community that had settled in the East End of London at the turn of the century, many of whom decried the recent post-war immigration, especially that of the West Indians.

He had a huge head and a pale, fleshy face that betrayed a violent past, criss-crossed as it was with the furrows of old knife, axe and razor wounds. It was beyond belief that somebody with a face like that should have been employed in a relatively high-security area such as the airport. However, he had turned these scars to his advantage during the interview by describing them as war wounds, thus gaining guilty sympathy from the interviewing panel, none of whom had seen active service either.

He had been nicknamed Prof for his ability to hold forth with great authority on any topic, which was always linked, however tenuously, to boxing, horse racing, market spiel, partying with film stars in the West End or his scars.

They both recoiled from the enveloping stench of a Monkey Special that filled the warehouse.

'God, what a stink those grease-arse monkeys make,' said Prof, screwing his scarred face into an even more macabre pattern, paisley-like in its complexity.

‘Rhesus,’ said Allen.

‘I should ’ave got a gun and shot ’em,’ said Prof, ignoring the correction.

‘Well, half of them are dead on arrival, anyway,’ replied Allen, pretending not to understand the underlying meaning of Prof’s peculiar sentence.

When Prof had come out with that curious phrase – ‘I should ’ave got a gun and shot ’em’ – Allen knew Prof didn’t really mean that he should have shot the monkeys. Rather, that he felt he should have shot those he held responsible for his expulsion from gangland; those whose actions had resulted in him having to swap Savile Row suits for the old overalls he wore at the warehouse. In fact, virtually every sentence he uttered was followed by: ‘I should ’ave got a gun and shot ’em.’ This led to considerable apprehension in those who were unfamiliar with this quirk.

Conversely, his only other catchphrase: ‘Nobody loves you like yer mother,’ always created the impression that he was a gentle, caring person, no matter how much it was taken out of context. A good deal depended on which of these phrases burst out at any specific time.

As it happened, a gun was readily accessible at the warehouse. It was a big, heavy handgun that, to Allen, whose only experience of guns came from watching cowboy films, looked just like a Colt 45. It was kept in the safe to frighten off anybody who might try to steal valuable cargo, such as diamonds, gold or platinum bars, while they were in transit. The trouble was, the safe had to be opened to get at the gun, which would achieve a large part of any villain’s purpose. Besides, none of the warehouse workers knew how to use it. The close juxtaposition of diamonds, gold, platinum and other valuable cargo, an actual gun and an ex-gangster who

repeated 'I should 'ave got a gun and shot 'em', seemed like a recipe for disaster to Allen, which it turned out to be.

The rest of the shift kept clear of the warehouse, not only due to the periodically overpowering smell, but also due to a general aversion to hard work and the frequent presence of coffins in transit. During the night shift the others marvelled at what they saw as Allen's self-control and bravery as he sat alone on a coffin, without a thought of its grinning contents, in the ghostly light of the flickering fluorescent lights high up in the steel girders of the warehouse.

As a result of his self-absorption – his mind in turmoil with intrusive, persistent and unacceptable ideas, thoughts and images arising from and reinforcing his anxious state – Allen was impervious to any fear of what the coffins contained. He was anaesthetised by his own state of anxiety. He treated the coffins like any other freight, and had been surprised to learn of the special handling allowance the shift leaders claimed for this cargo. Despite his sensitivities, it didn't even occur to him that sitting on a coffin might appear disrespectful to many.

The offices at the front of the warehouse were always busy with uniformed permanent staff known as 'the Perms'. They concentrated on the paperwork, much of which involved organising the various scams that had already earned the airport the nickname 'Thief Row'. This reputation had developed rapidly, despite the caraway plants that grew locally with their fern-like leaves, the seeds of which, according to some locals, could prevent theft.

Many believed caraway seeds could even hold a thief in custody. This belief had been reinforced when a villager had taken some caraway seed biscuits Lizzie had prepared to a prisoner held at the police station and he hadn't run away when left unattended. Case proven. This was clearly because

of the caraway seeds he had consumed, rather than because he had been so tired and hungry when he was arrested that he had welcomed the hospitality. The fact that he had endured and survived the horrors of the Great War, physically, at least, didn't arise when he appeared before the magistrates the next day.

Prof paced up and down in front of Allen looking distinctly uncomfortable.

'Allen, I need your help.'

'In what way?' Allen replied suspiciously.

Prof avoided Allen's gaze. 'Well, some old mates of mine want me to help them with a job, and if I don't they could make things difficult for me.'

'Some mates,' said Allen, staring across the remnants of the beautiful fields of his childhood, wondering what Gill was doing and how fate had led him to become the confidant of an ex-gangster from London.

'Yeah, I know. I should 'ave got a gun and shot 'em.'

There it was, the use of that phrase in its place of origin.

'Nobody loves you like yer mother,' he continued, spoiling the effect.

Allen groaned quietly.

'They've found out that I got this job and they want to get at the safe,' said Prof.

'How am I supposed to help you?' asked Allen. 'Anyway, it would make me an accessory.'

'Well, I won't tell nobody,' Prof replied unconvincingly. He couldn't even convince himself that he wouldn't, as when the gang had ousted him in an internal struggle he had grassed on them to the police, which had further exiled him.

Allen continued to gaze out over the fields, wondering what he was doing at the warehouse. Things could go badly

wrong in this place. Responsibilities were dispensed recklessly to naive newcomers – typically temporary workers who were anxious to please and perhaps attain permanent status – with scant regard for the fact that criminal charges would result if anything went amiss.

In fact, it suited the Perms for the odd Temp to go down on some criminal charge from time to time, as it diverted attention from the criminal activities they themselves coordinated. The airport police also understood the situation. They needed prosecutions but couldn't procure anything major against the Perms, as some of the airport police were complicit in the scams. So they went after the Temps.

Their most recent triumph had been the sending down of a poor Temp who had signed for a lorry load of registered mail from a nearby US army base, which had been one bag short. A large army driver had dumped the load at the warehouse, pushed a pen into the Temp's face and demanded a signature before the Temp could count them, let alone identify each one with its lengthy code number.

A Perm would never sign for a lorry load of registered mail if there was a Temp around, and if there wasn't, a Perm would spend all day checking the load. Others signed using a creative nom de plume. Frank Sinatra and Ava Gardner caused some trouble, as management failed to believe the pair had rushed across from the airport VIP tent to sign, separately, for two loads of registered mail. Nevertheless, one of the clerks had turned a profit by selling the information to the press.

'Sorry, Prof, I can't help you.'

Allen was determined to try and curb his natural impulse to help everybody whether they asked for his help or not. He had to reluctantly admit that no good turn ever seemed to go unpunished.

VII

At his previous meeting with Gill, Piotr had lied about having to leave. Things had been going so well between them that he had lost his nerve and wanted to leave before he ruined it by telling her any more of his story. Even for someone who had been through so much, this polite, tentative, introductory conversation had been a rollercoaster of emotion for him. So great was his reserve and watchfulness as a result of his disrupted life that Piotr could hardly believe he had dared to ask to see her again, let alone that she had said yes without hesitation.

Having had so many disappointments, he wasn't used to looking forward to things. It was much easier to be wary and to expect the worst, although in this case he feared there was no surviving the worst. He also felt that looking forward to something was to enjoy part of the pleasure of it in advance, decreasing the contrast between the event and what led up to it, so that the more he looked forward to something the less he seemed to enjoy it when it came; if it came at all, which it rarely had during his lifetime.

If he hadn't met Gill, he could have struggled on in his lonely misery, but having met her he realised he would be finished if his feelings weren't reciprocated. The enormity of the situation stunned him. He realised for the first time that there could be more security in despair than in hope. Despair self-perpetuated and reinforced itself on disappointment. It was reliable and provided a strange security. For Piotr, hope didn't spring eternal.

Piotr could see how, at first sight, his overwhelming feelings for Gill could be dismissed as a predictable reaction to his previous deprivation. He had apparently fallen in love

without any intimacy, warmth or emotion in their exchanges. They hadn't really chatted informally or flirted, but he didn't care. To him, she was a miracle of salvation. It was natural in this cruel world to lose one's parents, but it wasn't natural to meet the absolute fulfilment of one's dreams in a girl, despite what the fairy tales might say.

Also, after all his travels, loss and alienation, he was beginning to feel increasingly at home in Hadleyrow with its parallels to his homeland in Poland. But the more at home Piotr felt, the more appalled he was by the ruthless way in which even the landed farmers were being evicted.

He had sat in as an observer on the airport planning meetings, where his obscure origins and lowly job as an apprentice surveyor rendered him invisible to the senior management, enabling him to glean a great deal of restricted information. Despite his status as a displaced person – of no fixed nationality, let alone of no fixed abode, who was supposed to owe allegiance to no one and no place – he had begun to feel guilty by association for the destruction that was being wreaked in the area.

He had learned that the civil air lobby, planning for a new post-war civilian airport near London during the war, had disguised its intentions with the claim that the new airport was essential for the wartime needs of the Royal Air Force. This had enabled The Defence of the Realm Act to be invoked, allowing the requisition of land and the bypassing of lengthy planning regulations.

As the land had been requisitioned and not compulsorily purchased, rent should have been paid and the land returned to the owners after the war. However, the villagers had received no rent. It was beginning to look suspiciously like there was no intention of returning the land, and the villagers

were still waiting to receive derisory compensation at pre-war prices.

No detail was too small to escape the authorities' mean vindictiveness. Piotr had spoken to one farmer who had been accused of stealing his own gates rather than leaving them to be destroyed. Unable to harvest his crops before eviction, another had been told: 'The crop of broad beans is seriously affected by black fly, and the lettuce crop has not been watered.' Both had had their compensation reduced by the maximum amount allowable, which remained unpaid in any case.

Any prior knowledge Piotr had of crucial developments, especially of planned evictions, he leaked to the locals at The Three Magpies. As he was seen as a total outsider with no connection to the local population, he was never suspected of being the source of these leaks by the authorities.

In reality, it was the vicar – the one who should have been their shepherd – who was the total outsider with no connection to the local population. He had been pleased when, in 1929, the Church Commissioners had sold seventy-one acres of land held by the church in lieu of tithes, as the proceeds had been invested to provide a good income for him and his successors.

The land had been sold to a pioneering aviation company for an airfield to test their new-fangled flying machines. Once they had got used to the sight of flying machines the locals had not been too concerned. The airfield was not a commercial operation; it remained within its original boundaries and consisted of little more than a single hangar and a nicely mown field.

They couldn't have known that it would be the catalyst for the rapid development of civil aviation in the area and

become part of the largest international airport in the world.

The vicar wasn't too concerned about the destruction of Hadleyrow. He had nothing but complete contempt for the miserable God-forsaken hamlet, which didn't even have a proper church. 'Just that non-conformist tin shack with a snuff-snorting harmonium player,' as he described it.

But the monster he had loosed was threatening to turn north across the main road to destroy his own beautiful vicarage, the Norman church with its Tudor brick tower and the finest medieval tithe barn in England; a timber cathedral compared with the hovels of the poor, who had paid for it with their hard labour. The vicar was beginning to discover that, once released, monsters were hard to control.

VIII

While her foot was still mending, Gill was sitting in the sun as it shone through the leaded bay window of the downstairs back room when she heard tapping on the glass. Looking up, expecting to see a bird feeding on the small spiders that spun their webs there, she was surprised to see the wrinkled, weather-beaten face of Lizzie, as brown as a berry, pushed up against the window as if somebody was trying to clean it with a piece of old leather.

It was widely held in the countryside that walnuts resembled the human brain and that eating them improved intelligence. Lizzie hadn't been too upset to learn that the villagers held that walnuts resembled her weather-beaten face and therefore nobody would touch them. She was upset, however, when others said her face was more like a brown, wrinkled, half-rotten or bletted medlar; especially as she knew better than anybody that a bletted medlar had ancient bawdy names, one

of the least offensive being ‘dog’s bottom’.

Gill opened the window.

‘Lizzie! What are you doing here?’

‘I’ve come up to see youm. What’s wrong with yer leg, love?’

‘I hurt my foot running across the fields.’

‘That don’t sound like youm.’

‘It was in the dark and I was upset,’ said Gill, too tired to explain about the cow.

‘I’ll bring some comfrey root fer it.’

Lizzie was known for her encyclopaedic knowledge of plants. Gill had once made the mistake of asking Lizzie the alternative names for great mullein, an imposing plant that grew up to six feet tall, with bold yellow flowers and leaves that were covered in thick, woolly down.

‘Woolly mullein, or candlewick, candle flower, ’edge taper, torches or torch weed, ’cos its leaves be used fer tinder and wicks,’ Lizzie had answered immediately.

Gill was happy with that, as it made clear sense. She had thought that was that, but, Lizzie, after rather aptly refilling her thin clay pipe with her home-grown and cured tobacco, lighting it and clamping it upside down between her leathery gums blurted out a torrent of names, as if she couldn’t control herself:

‘Aaron’s rod, Adam’s flannel, Our Lady’s flannel, flannel petticoats, flannel flower, donkey ears, beggar’s blanket, blanket herb, blanket leaf, clot-bur, clown’s lungwort, Cuddy’s lungs, duffle, feltwort, fluffweed, hare’s beard, Jacob’s staff, longwort, rag paper, shepherd’s club, shepherd’s staff, velvet plant and wild ice leaf.’

Gill was overwhelmed by Lizzie’s knowledge, but she was saddened by a telling omission – ‘hag’s taper’ – which,

because of its dramatic nature, was the only alternative name Gill remembered. It was impossible that Lizzie wouldn't have known it.

'When youm were out there in the fields that night, did youm 'ear the bluebells ring?'

Gill's heart sank. 'Of course not. What are you talking about?! Why don't you ask me about the harebells as well?'

'Only them 'ares can 'ear them.'

'Stop it, Lizzie!' said Gill, becoming increasingly agitated.

Gill knew of the local belief that hares were mystical animals of ill omen with supernatural powers; the devil's servants; changelings shape-shifted from human form that could only be matched for speed by a black hound without a single white hair and could only be shot with a silver bullet or crooked sixpence, which confusingly was also known locally as a Black Dog.

'Did you see an 'are dance across the moon?' Lizzie continued, unabashed.

'Of course not! It's the wrong time of year,' said Gill, immediately regretting lending the legend any credence by proposing a reason.

'All the seasons 'ave gone mad round 'ere since those new-fangled airypalanes started messin' up the sky, so that's no reason.' said Lizzie.

'How do they do that, then?' asked Gill, despite herself.

'Well, when them takes off, them leaves them black exhaust trails. When them 'igher up on clear days, them scratch the sky with them white lines, and them make holes in the clouds with white streaks coming out of 'em. That's why there's been more rain and snow round here at funny times, messin' the seasons up,' said Lizzie.

Gill kept quiet, knowing that although Lizzie had lived

a life that the earliest inhabitants of the heath would have recognised, she had also been among the first in the world to observe the development of aviation when she had seen the early flying machines over the heath, and she was also very observant about the weather.

‘Did you see many rabbits?’

‘Yes, of course I did. They’re all over the place, despite the hunters.’

‘Them brought down that airplane that crash-landed that night some months back,’ retorted Lizzie.

‘How could they do that? The runways are concrete and they get squashed easily enough if they’re run over by a plane. They can’t dance across the moon either,’ said Gill in exasperation.’

‘Them droppin’s attract them field mice, which attract owls, one of which got hit by that plane.’

Gill fell silent. That was the trouble with Lizzie. It was difficult to dismiss her completely as she talked a lot of sense amongst all the superstitious nonsense.

Despite the contempt Lizzie was held in by most of the villagers some of her observations were of huge economic importance, not that she ever got any credit for them, let alone reward. To help control the field mice, she encouraged villagers to let their cats hunt in the clover fields. As well as reducing the number of owls hunting over the runways, it also reduced the destruction of bumblebee nests by the mice, which improved the pollination of every insect-pollinated crop, especially the tomato plants in the greenhouses.

When Isle of Wight Disease destroyed virtually the entire population of the native black honey bees throughout the land, Lizzie had nursed the local colonies through the epidemic with grease patties made from one part vegetable shortening

with three parts powdered sugar and some menthol placed on the top bars of the hive; and by encouraging farmers to plant mixed wild flowers in their fields and glass houses to provide a variety of pollen and nectar, which helped keep the bees healthy.

'Did youm see the man in the suit and bowler hat, with a briefcase and rolled umbrella?'

'No!'

'He's about, youm know.'

'Lizzie! Will you stop all this stuff? If he's a ghost, why is he carrying a briefcase and rolled umbrella?'

'Because when youm see a ghost you see 'em in their time.'

Gill went to retort but couldn't. She had not anticipated that answer.

'Did youm see the Ghost 'Are?' asked Lizzie without a pause.

'No, I didn't! All that hare stuff is rubbish and you know it,' said Gill.

'Where do it all come from then?' asked Lizzie.

'Mostly you around here,' said Gill.

'Weren't me that made the hare constellation look like a reversed swastika, low in the scythe of Horion the 'Unter in the war.'

'Orion the Hunter,' said Gill.

'What love?'

'Never mind. You know some people think you can change into a hare and back,' said Gill.

Gill was worried for Lizzie because by country standards the evidence that witches turned themselves into hares was irrefutable, based as it was on first seeing an old lady and then, when she was out of sight, seeing a hare. When Gill had challenged a villager over this, he had claimed that once,

when a hare was about to be ambushed by a cunning fox, someone had shouted, 'Run, Nanny, run!' providing further proof of its true identity.

'Yes, but I can't 'elp what them thinks.'

'No, but don't encourage them,' said Gill.

'Allen told me to tell 'em they're mistakin' corlation fer cosaneffect.'

'What?!' exclaimed Gill, before realising what Lizzie meant. 'Do you know what it means?'

'No. Didn't work anyway. Made them worse as them just thought I was puttin' a spell on 'em.'

Gill had to admit to herself that she sometimes failed to distinguish between correlation and cause and effect, especially when she thought about something and then it happened.

'Never mind all that, just youm be careful.'

'Why?'

'There's an 'obgoblin about,' said Lizzie.

'Lizzie! A hobgoblin?! What are you trying to do? It's me you're talking to!'

'I tell youm, I seen it,' said Lizzie with an earnestness that unsettled Gill.

'Now stop, it's gone beyond a joke. 'It's those herbs you're always chewing,' said Gill.

'And the inn signs 'ave been changin',' said Lizzie, completely unperturbed.

'When?'

'Over the years. The Plough and 'Arrow be The 'Are and 'Ound now.'

'Well that's because of that old battered painting on the wall of the bar; the one of the hare being chased by a pitch-black hound without a single white hair,' said Gill.

'Yeah, but nobody knows 'ow that got there. Then there's The Three Magpies. Them could change a team of four coachin' horses in two minutes there once, you know.'

'Well it's always been called The Three Magpies.'

'Only in your sweet life, love. It used to be The Three Pigeons, then it became The Magpie and Pigeons, before two more magpies turned up and the pigeons disappeared. Everybody knows pigeons aren't scared of magpies, so why should they leave? A man died there, y'know.'

'No! When?'

'1798.'

'1798? What are you talking about, Lizzie?'

'Don't matter 'ow long ago, still 'appened. He was shot just down the road outside The Old Magpies by 'ighwaymen and carried to The Three Magpies. Magpies everywhere!'

'Hares, hobgoblins and now magpies. What next?' asked Gill.

'I see youm 'ad a young man come avisitin',' said Lizzie, as if she hadn't heard.

'Yes,' said Gill resentfully.

'Do youm like him?'

'Yes, he seems very nice.'

'Well tell him be careful, too.'

'Why?'

'E's in 'arm's way.'

'Stop being so mysterious, Lizzie. Who would want to harm him?'

'A boggart.'

'A what?'

'A boggart. One whom dwells near weeds.'

'Shut up!'

'One worthy of appeasin' with a posy of dog's mercury in

February.'

'What? Those tiny green flowers?' said Gill.

'Ah! Youm 'ave learnt somethin' after all then.'

'Shut up!' Gill repeated, angry but also frightened, despite herself.

'By the way, 'ave youm seen Allen?'

Gill tried desperately not to let Lizzie see her discomfort, but by doing so, ensured that she did.

'What's the matter, love, 'ave youm two fallen out?'

'No, it's just my foot's hurting a bit.'

They fell quiet and gazed out over the remnants of the fields.

'Ave them Germans landed?' Lizzie continued relentlessly.

'What?' asked Gill, completely thrown by this sudden change in direction.

'Ave them Germans landed?'

'No, of course not! The war's been over for years now,' said Gill.

'I heard a villager saying there are some Germans about.'

'The're POWs.'

'No, them say them are definitely Germans.'

'POWs means prisoners of war,' said Gill in total exasperation.

'Is it them knockin' down the old farmhouses and diggin' up our fields?' asked Lizzie.

'Yes, but they're being told by us to help do that. They're on our side now,' said Gill.

'Against who?'

'The Russians.'

'I thought them were on our side.'

'They were, but now it's different,' said Gill, too tired to explain further.

'Why were them bombers still goin' off to Germany after the war then?'

'They were dropping food and supplies for them.'

'Who?'

'The Germans.'

'Hmmm. Are Germans dark brown?' Lizzie persisted.

'No! Why should you think they are?'

'I saw a dark brown man up there in an RAF uniform and thought he might be a German spy.'

'If Germans were dark brown, it wouldn't be much use them just putting on RAF uniforms,' said Gill.

'So 'e were one of ours, then?'

'Yes,' said Gill wearily, realising her mistake.

'Well, if ours can be dark brown and Germans were dark brown, it would be some use them puttin' on RAF uniforms, wouldn't it?'

'Germans aren't dark brown!'

'Whom shot that farmer when he refused to plough up his pasture for plantin' taters in the war, then?' asked Lizzie.

'The police, but he shot at them first,' said Gill.

'Why? Was 'e German?'

'No, he was English.'

Lizzie looked unconvinced. 'Can Russians be dark brown?' she asked.

'No! Anyway, Lizzie, who's still down at the Rookery with you?' asked Gill, desperate to return some sense to the conversation.

'Only Allen and Kate,' said Lizzie.

'Are you all right down there?'

Gill wasn't worried about Lizzie's personal security, as she was wily enough and the flock of geese on permanent patrol would have given any stranger short shrift at any time of day

or night. Gill had even seen one of them force a Jersey bull, which have a somewhat evil reputation, to concede ground by latching tenaciously to its lower lip with its beak. But she was worried about the bulldozers and Lizzie's state of mind.

'No, love. I'm worried fer Kate's coughin'. I can 'ear 'er all night from next door. And I'm worried for meself. I'm not up to the fieldwork any more and I only get by cos Kate 'elps me. I don't know what I would do without 'er.'

Gill knew only too well how hard the field girls worked, as she had given Lizzie a hand once when Kate was off with the coughing. They had worked out in the field from eight a.m. to five p.m. and then gone into the packing shed where they stood around a long table, sorting and packing sprouts until eight p.m. It had been cold and sleet had come down all day, but despite their soaking clothes they had still sung and laughed their heads off.

It had become so cold in the evening that their aprons froze to the sorting table. To get free they had to untie themselves, leaving the aprons looking as if they had stayed behind around the table for a meeting to protest at the harsh conditions to which they were exposed.

As Gill had passed the packing shed the next morning she had heard a rustle that sounded like a sigh as the aprons lost their icy grip on the table and slowly slumped to the floor as if overcome with exhaustion after their all-night meeting.

'The only chance I've got of makin' extra money is with me 'erbs and potions. That's why I try to keep up the mystery,' Lizzie continued.

'Well, don't overdo it. At times like these, people get frightened and can turn nasty. I've heard people talking about you and the hares and I don't like it. So for goodness' sake don't start going on about hobgoblins,' said Gill.

'I've seen it. But don't you worry your pretty little head about me, love.'

'Why won't you leave, anyway?' asked Gill.

'Cos I got nowhere else to go.'

'What about Kate?'

'She won't leave me, even though she's coughin' night an' day.'

The sound of an aircraft overhead distracted them.

'Be that one of ours?' asked Lizzie, repeating a question that had been posed frequently throughout the war.

'Yes, of course it is. Although it wouldn't make much difference if it wasn't as far as the destruction around here's concerned.'

Gill was starting to worry that her mother might find Lizzie with her. Her mother didn't approve of Gill having anything to do with anyone from the Rookery, particularly Allen and Lizzie.

'I'll get goin' now. Remember to warn yer new friend,' said Lizzie as if reading her thoughts, which, despite herself, Gill suspected she might have done.

Gill shut the window and didn't even attempt to watch Lizzie leave, knowing she would see nothing. Gill could see why some of the villagers, and the vicar particularly, treated Lizzie with such fearful suspicion. She wished Lizzie wouldn't play up to them so much. Lizzie was one of the kindest people she knew, but she didn't seem to realise how much hostility her ways generated in the more superstitious villagers.

'Who were you talking to?' enquired Gill's mother, looking around suspiciously as she entered the room.

'Nobody,' said Gill.

'I can smell smoke. It wasn't that Lizzie, was it?' Gill's mother asked, gazing out over the fields.

Gill didn't answer, confirming her mother's suspicions that she was lying.

'She's trouble, you know, just like that Allen. You really shouldn't have anything to do with them.'

'I know, Mother, you tell me often enough.'

'Well, you know what they say about her, don't you?'

'Yes, Mother,' said Gill, steeling herself to be told yet again.

'You know she was found between the rows of gooseberry bushes in one of the fields?'

'Yes, Mother, just imagine. Gooseberry bushes, too.'

'Straight after a huge balloon with its crew in a wicker basket made a forced landing in the next field. Some claimed Lizzie had been thrown out to prevent its crash landing and that her arrival was a portent of things to come.'

'That's rubbish, Mother.'

'Then they saw a gypsy girl out in the fields suckling a baby on one breast and a baby hare on the other.'

'Mother! That's even worse. You'll be telling me next that Mary Tuft was telling the truth when she claimed to have given birth to eighteen rabbits!'

'No I won't, although some would. Especially those who claim to have known her.'

'How could they?! That was in the 1700s!'

'Just you be careful who you mix with,' said Gill's mother.

Gill glanced out of the window. There was no sign of Lizzie, of course, but she only just managed to control herself when she saw a hare speeding away in the distance. She had to get a grip.

Many animals were suffering the destruction of their habitats as a result of the airport development and could be seen more frequently, but it was the hares that were discussed nightly at The Three Magpies.

'Beware the Levere of March,' had been heard again for the first time since the Roman legions marched past the already ancient Caesar's Camp. Those same Legionnaires knew Boudicca, the Celtic warrior-queen, had taken a hare into battle beneath her cloak. But they didn't know that it was the hare, not Boudicca, that had screamed like a woman when wounded.

Even the vicar had started to hear stories about those dammed hares again, and about, that old hag, Lizzie. He had always had his suspicions about the fieldworkers of Hadleyrow. Not the farmers, of course, whose houses he frequently visited for evenings of fine food, wine, music and conversation; although even then not without a small prayer as he crossed the main road, especially at night.

He was tired. His nerves were exhausted. He was losing his grip. These days he shuddered when he saw a hare. He knew all about the Celts and their God-forsaken so-called culture and beliefs. He had made a study of them. He had become obsessed with them. Despite himself, he had fallen under their spell.

CHAPTER TWO

I

Allen and Prof crouched in the darkest corner of the warehouse awaiting a signal to open the side door. Allen was astonished by his weakness in agreeing to go along with it all. He could see that his help wasn't really needed other than to keep Prof company and to share the risk, but he had felt sorry for Prof; a man who had bashed, slashed and stabbed people on the orders of others and still regretted not shooting them! So here they were.

Allen's tension was building as the enormity of what he was about to be part of began to dawn on him. He would now be an accessory for not having blown the whistle whatever happened. He was amazed that such tension seemed to have no upper limit and that he hadn't yet heard a mighty 'twang' inside his head as he finally broke. Not yet, at least.

'Nobody loves you like yer mother,' intoned Prof.

Just then there was a scratch at the side door. Prof quietly unbolted it and two shadowy figures slid in.

'Well then, me old mate, that was easy enough,' said the bigger of the two.

'Yeah, and it would have been even easier to walk in the loading doors, which are always open, and not get us two

involved,' said Allen.

'Who's this funny lookin' geezer,' said the bigger of the two.

'He's a mate of mine. He's alright, don't take no notice of 'im,' said Prof giving Allen a look.

A few years earlier Prof would have taken them both on, but now he was at their mercy. He had lost his nerve after the last big battle, not before, not during, but after he had fought like a hero with his bare hands against razors and axes, with the skin of his forehead flapping down over his eyes.

When he was least expecting it, the world had lost its certainty. In a fraction of a second, all his sense of invincibility and indestructibility had drained away, and he knew he was lost. He had heard of the same happening to servicemen who had records of outstanding bravery under fire, but he couldn't draw any consolation from that. Fear and panic were personal.

He was no longer the man who had helped his boss terrorise half of London and carry out what he liked to call his 'Robin Hood visits' on behalf of beleaguered Jewish businessmen in Birmingham, Leeds and Glasgow, where he had been surprised to hear a razor scar from the corner of the mouth to an ear being referred to as the Glasgow Grin, rather than the Chelsea Grin. He was no longer the man who had never backed out of a fight because he was never afraid.

Prof led the way to the safe, which was wide open as usual. 'Now, lads, don't get jumpy. There's a gun in the safe, but it isn't loaded. It's just for show,' he said.

He placed the gun on a nearby shelf as his mates started rifling through the contents of the safe.

Allen had hung back, determined to make his escape, but as he turned to slink away his sleeve caught the barrel of the

gun, which was overhanging the shelf. He just managed to catch it, but as he juggled with it, it went off with a deafening bang. The bullet ricocheted from the steel shelving in a shower of sparks and killed a feral chicken that had flown into the rafters through the large sliding doors which were open. The chicken tumbled down, followed by a shower of drifting feathers. It fell between two coffins where, out of sight, its still-twitching legs made a scratching sound against them as if the occupants were trying to escape.

The two villains immediately took off. Like all who depended on physical strength for their self-confidence they were terrified of the supernatural, against which their strength was useless. Several Perms rushed through from the offices to see what the commotion was about, while others locked themselves in the toilets. When the fluorescent lights finally flickered on, the scene that greeted them resembled a *danse macabre*. Huge, black, misshapen shadows – including that of a hare that had been chased into the warehouse by a fox – danced distortedly over the racks of cargo.

‘Prof, this could look like we foiled the raid. Just don’t say anything to the police. Pretend you’re shell-shocked,’ said Allen.

Allen didn’t have to worry, as Prof was indeed shell-shocked. As he was calming Prof down, it occurred to Allen that the villains might come back to make sure he and Prof didn’t give evidence against them if the case ever went to court. He needn’t have worried. The villains’ terror at the scratching sound they swore they had heard coming from the coffins was enough to ensure they would never return.

What Allen really would have to worry about, though, were the sinister rumours that subsequently sprang up that implicated Lizzie in the apparent ritual slaughter of a chicken,

along with the associated scratching that more and more people claimed to have heard coming from the coffins and the presence of a giant hare. Also, given the air of mystery associated locally with magpies, it wasn't long before those noisy black-and-white birds entered the story when it was discussed in the local pubs. They pushed in everywhere.

Allen knew all the folklore attached to magpies, especially the chant about the significance of how many of them were seen at any one time. There were several versions, but no matter which was believed, a walk in the countryside could be very disturbing as they all began with: 'One for sorrow' and continued with references to death, hell and the devil himself, amongst a few more cheering ones.

In order to placate these ominous birds, people would doff their hats to the first magpie they saw before noon, saying: 'Good morning, Mr Magpie, and how is your lady wife and family?' Some wore a hat specifically for this purpose.

Superstitions apart, magpies were also thieves of bright, shiny objects including jewellery, and were notorious killers of chicks and smaller birds. As a result, nobody liked them anyway, even though some villagers themselves were thieves of bright, shiny objects including jewellery, and also collected chicks from the sparrow pots for eating.

II

Allen's relief that the robbery had been thwarted was short-lived. When the airport police arrived to interview him he was toying with some of the complimentary packets of four cigarettes that were offered to passengers on the aircraft.

He was shaken by their first question: 'Where d'you get these from, lad?'

‘They’re just free samples,’ said Allen, not dreaming that possessing anything that was normally given away could be considered stealing, especially among this den of thieves.

‘OK, sonny, you’re coming with us,’ said another policeman.

‘What about the attempted robbery?’ asked Allen in complete bewilderment.

‘Your mate can tell my colleague about that.’

Allen’s mouth soured as he realised that, as usual, the police were going for the soft target to boost their statistics with the minimum effort or risk to themselves, while vanloads of high-value goods were ferried out of the main gate on a Sunday afternoon with a nod from the gatekeeper.

He had barely marshalled these thoughts when he received a stunning blow to his head. In his hyped-up state, and because he had a thick skull, a strong neck and a high threshold to physical pain, the blow didn’t hurt at all. It had, in fact, been dealt by accident when one of the policemen had slammed the back door of the car shut as Allen was halfway in with his head still sticking out.

‘Bloody hell! Was that your head?’ enquired the copper as the door rebounded with a loud thud.

‘Yes,’ said Allen, without any fuss.

This incident turned out to be a blessing in disguise, as it put the officers slightly on the defensive. They couldn’t understand how he hadn’t been knocked out, or even worse. That type of blow could have killed some. Nor could they understand why he didn’t make more of a fuss.

On reaching the airport police station, the questioning continued. ‘So where did you get these?’

‘Like I said, they’re free samples. They get swept up by the cleaners, like the barley sugar passengers suck to clear their

ears on take-off and landing.’

‘But you work in a bonded area and are not allowed onto the aircraft, so how did you get your hands on them?’ enquired the policeman, idly making a little house out of the slender red and white packets.

The warehouse was an HM Customs and Excise bonded area. Freight in transit escaped import and export duties as long as it stayed in the warehouse before it was transferred between aircraft. To oversee the movement of these bonded goods, HM Customs employed ‘Watchers’ to hang around the warehouse watching things, becoming closely involved with the Perms and their scams in the process.

One such scam involved a Perm putting a foot through the side of the cardboard crates of champagne destined for the first-class passengers, and the complimentary cigarettes destined for all passengers. When alerted, a Watcher would wander out and sign them off as damaged in transit and the contents would fuel a party in the office, be taken home or sold on.

During one night shift, Allen had surprised a Temp – who had ambitions to become a Perm and as a result had been recruited into the rackets – kicking in the side of a crate of cigarette packets. On seeing he was being observed, he had thrown a handful of packets to Allen. Not wishing to embarrass the Temp-Perm, Allen had pocketed them and thought no more about it.

But now that Allen’s brain was up to full speed, he could see that accepting goods from a bonded warehouse was completely different from picking up a few discarded complimentary packets from an aircraft. And even though a Watcher had signed off the crate of cigarettes the Temp-Perm had kicked in, Allen realised he could still be accused

of stealing them if everybody involved closed ranks, as they were certain to do. Those who imposed the law on bonded goods also regularly sought out a relatively innocent victim to give themselves a spurious reputation for ruthlessness.

‘Come on, laddie. If you don’t come clean we’ll have you inside overnight.’

Allen was catatonic at the thought. His stomach turned and his mouth soured again.

‘And we can go to your place and see what else you have stored up there.’

Allen felt the sweat beginning to run down the small of his back as he frantically tried to make the right guess. He was astonished that a problem of the real world – the world to which he thought he was so indifferent – could banish his inner demons in a flash.

The thought of a police car pulling up outside those little cottages and poor old Lizzie looking on as they searched the place horrified him, even though it wouldn’t take long to establish that there were no hiding places in those tiny rooms. Lizzie was rigidly law-abiding and her poverty was accompanied by the highest standards of morality. Allen couldn’t bear the thought of the shame this would bring upon her.

Neither could he risk prison for something he still saw as trivial. So he said that one of the Perms had given them to him, and he couldn’t un-say it. Most Perms were involved in stealing from the warehouse and they couldn’t risk any sort of investigation there, so they also needed the cigarettes to have come from the aircraft, which meant the Perms would close ranks and finger the Temp-Perm as the link between the aircraft and the warehouse.

Allen had calculated the odds and traded the risk of going

to prison and finishing off poor old Lizzie against somebody else possibly losing their job, as taking cigarettes from the planes was unlikely to be treated as a criminal offence.

He then played the only card he had left. He started to rub his head and moan quietly as if he were in great pain. It worked. The coppers shot furtive glances at one another and Allen immediately detected a slight easing of their aggressive attitude.

‘OK, sonny, we’ll need to see you again when we’ve interviewed the Perms.’

The police realised that, despite their threat, being in possession of a few packets of complimentary cigarettes wasn’t enough to hold him overnight, no matter what they might learn in the morning. They also knew that this ‘weirdo’ still lived with his grandmother or whoever she was, and never left the village.

Allen felt a wave of self-recrimination and guilt at having become so easily drawn into the culture of the warehouse. As to his standing with the Perms and the security of his job, he didn’t have any as a Temp, so there was nothing lost there. But he had, in effect, shopped the Temp-Perm to save his own skin, possibly still in vain.

All his theoretical morality about standing up for what was right had been exposed as a sham and he instantly realised that, had he been exposed to sufficient threat, he could have stood by in the face of war time atrocities and might even have become entangled in them himself. So he was, in effect, no better than an informer; a collaborator; a war criminal, and had only escaped those fates by avoiding the circumstances through chance of birth and geography.

But who could point the finger at those who betrayed others? Allen wondered. *Not those who had never been so tested and who had*

comfortable, self-satisfied lives without any doubt that they were good, brave people, which was how he had felt before this petty debacle. And what was the point in all his reading and thinking when, in the heat of the moment, he behaved according to the basic instincts of self-interest?

All he did know was that he would have to go to Lizzie's at the first opportunity to warn her in case the police still intended to go there and search the place.

III

Allen paused at Lizzie's old, grey, weather-warped oak door to gather himself before going in. He glanced up at the model weather-house that sat on a shelf and saw that the brightly dressed woman was swinging out rather than the man in the dark suit with the broly, but no briefcase. That would save Allen a lot of time misinterpreting the sky and consulting the unreliable weather plants later. Lizzie came bustling through from the garden.

'Hello Nanny. Sorry I didn't get back earlier. Have you had any visitors?' he asked, looking around nervously for any signs that the place had been searched.

'Yes, the gen'leman in the back.'

Allen's heart missed a beat. *So they had come down! But if they had, where was their car? They would never have walked down here.*

Allen moved tentatively through to the back room.

'What 'appened to you?' asked Prof.

Allen remained speechless with surprise at seeing Prof seated at the table.

'The coppers were leanin' on me. I think I managed to convince them we 'ad nothin' to do wiv the raid, but I'm not sure we're in the clear yet, mate. Either way I've 'ad enough of it down 'ere so I'm off back to the Smoke.'

‘The smoke?’ Allen managed to squeeze out.

‘London, you nutcase. I come down ’ere to see if you wanna come? We should stay together ’til all this is sorted. Otherwise they’ll try and set us against each other. I know what they’re like.’

Once again Allen remained speechless with surprise. Things were happening too fast, he didn’t have a clue as to what he should do. He had been to London before with the window-box crew on Sunday mornings. They had left the plant nursery in Hadleyrow at three in the morning to empty and replant the window boxes of the big city buildings. They would totter up wet and muddy ladders with nobody steadying them at the base on wet and muddy pavements, before inching along narrow, wet and muddy ledges with heavy window boxes on their shoulders. Any slip would have been fatal or at least crippling. After twelve hours of this dangerous, backbreaking work, they would return to Hadleyrow slumped on a pile of mud and vegetation in the back of an open truck, usually in freezing cold rain.

‘It’s not far and you can always come back when all this is cleared up down ’ere. I’ll sort things out for yer,’ said Prof.

Allen was beginning to realise he didn’t have much choice. He wanted to move as far away from Gill as possible following his humiliation and he was still not in the clear from the botched raid and the cigarette fiasco.

‘OK then,’ said Allen, in pure desperation.

As Lizzie busied herself getting them some tea, Allen saw one of the old books he had rescued from the rubble of a demolished Elizabethan farmhouse on the table. He loved these old books: the leather binding, the foxing, the musty smell, the silverfish and, above all, the friends he found within them.

He had increasingly retreated into these books in an attempt to calm his inner world of chaotic thinking, which was becoming more frightening by the day. He devoured everything he could understand and much that he couldn't.

He was surprised by how much he found was relevant and appropriate to his personal experience, as if it were written by friends especially for him. Allen had been greatly relieved to find that he had so much in common with a galaxy of famous and respected people spread over centuries and even millennia, especially as he appeared to have nothing in common with anybody in the village, apart from Gill, not that they had ever spoken of such things.

Initially, he had only looked at books about nature and farming. The first had been a slender volume written by John Woodward, published in 1699, entitled '*Some Thoughts and Experiments Concerning Vegetation*', about the culture of plants in water rather than in soil, and the discovery that plants in less pure water grew better than plants in pure water. Centuries later, before it was bulldozed, the same farm had been investigating using modern hydroponics, involving similar principles, to grow tomatoes.

He had then found an earlier volume by the same author, published in 1653, which contained a collection of notes and observations in which Allen had read with a jolt:

It is the nature and property of that principle to disturb the thoughts, pervert the reasoning power, and present melancholy and vexatious ideas and images of things. So that to advise them to think rightly, or to be cheerful, is just the same as to advise a man under a severe fit of the gout to be easy and to be in no pain.

It was the first time Allen had had an inkling that his terrified state of mind was not his fault; that it was not a sign

of weakness, but as much an affliction as any physical illness. It wasn't very optimistic, but the fact that his condition had been recognised several hundred years earlier was of huge reassurance. John Woodward had died aged sixty-three, but his message reached across the centuries to help him while those around him taunted him on a daily basis.

Allen shook himself out of his reverie. He wasn't sure how much he could trust Prof, but he had no one else to help him get away. He had isolated himself from any idea of friendship as part of his campaign to alienate himself before people could alienate him, a sort of pre-emptive alienation.

The one exception was a chap called Briscoe from the Caribbean who worked at the airport as a van driver, delivering to and collecting from the warehouse. Allen had been surprised to find he had a lot in common with Briscoe. Despite their differences in appearance and origins, they shared the experience of being outsiders and had the same intelligent interest in everything around them. But he couldn't ask Briscoe for help as it would bring him under suspicion from the police.

No. It was Prof or nobody. He had no choice. He couldn't manage it by himself.

IV

To Piotr's huge relief, the conversation with Gill had continued with the same warm humour during his next visit, as if it had never been interrupted. However, Piotr was no more relaxed as seeing Gill in a dress was more disorientating than it had been previously. He knew he was in love with her, even though he had no previous experience of what that meant. He just knew he wanted to spend every single second

of the rest of his life with her. *If people wanted to deride that, it was their problem*, he decided.

‘How did you get over here today?’ asked Gill.

He paused momentarily, only just managing to avert his gaze as she raised her knee to scratch her mending ankle.

‘My lovely new motorbike. Well, new to me.’

‘Oh, so that was you roaring up. It sounded like one of those V1 flying bombs in the war that landed around here.’

‘Yes, it makes as much noise, but it doesn’t crash like the V1s did when their engine stopped. Perhaps when your foot’s better I could take you for a ride?’

‘I’m not sure. I’ve never been on a motorbike before. Is it dangerous?’

‘It can be, but so far it’s been less dangerous than running across a field in the dark can apparently be,’ replied Piotr with a smile.

A comfortable silence fell between the two as they gazed out at the remaining countryside.

‘Do you notice anything about the ivy growing up the trees?’ asked Gill.

‘No,’ said Piotr, puzzled but relieved that they were chatting about less distressing things than his story, or the destruction of the village and his unwitting role in it.

‘It never reaches the top,’ said Gill.

‘I can’t believe that.’

‘Well, now you can spend the rest of your life checking, like the rest of us do,’ said Gill with a smile.

‘I’ll try not to,’ said Piotr.

‘You won’t be able to stop yourself, and the harder you try the less you’ll succeed.’

‘Anyway, I thought most of the tall trees had been felled by now because of the aircraft,’ said Piotr, unintentionally

returning to the airport development. 'I've even seen woodpeckers reduced to drumming on chimney cowlings to attract a mate.'

'There are still some tall trees near the Rookery down towards the Pits. But that's the fascinating thing. Ivy never reaches the top of any tree and it applies everywhere.'

'The Rookery? I've never been down there. Why do they call it that?'

'The cottages are built out of wattle-and-daub, which the villagers call sticks and mud. And it's inhabited by dark, noisy flapping shapes that to outsiders all look the same. The villagers even take it as a sign of rain if the residents swirl close to home, just like rooks do.'

'I heard they're all a bit strange,' said Piotr.

'That's just what outsiders say. Some of the nicest people I know live down there, especially Lizzie and Kate,' said Gill, feeling bad that she hadn't mentioned Allen.

She knew that if modern life met some cataclysmic end, which it could do at any moment now that the Russians had the atom bomb, the rookeries of the world would survive while civilisation collapsed around them. But not this particular rookery, as it was about to meet its cataclysmic end without any help from an atom bomb.

'Doesn't that Allen still live down there with those two?' asked Piotr, as if, like Lizzie, he could read her mind.

'Yes, I think so,' said Gill, compounding her guilt.

'I heard most of them down there have never left the area, let alone the country,' said Piotr, whose travels up to that point matched those of the migrating birds that passed through Hadleyrow as they followed the sun on its annual travels.

'That's not their fault,' said Gill, slightly flushed in

response to what sounded like a hint of superiority from Piotr, particularly as she had never left either. But it was true; those who lived down at the Rookery were like the local grey partridges, which spent their entire lives in the fields, where they could disappear when huddled in a tail-to-tail circle, giving an all-round view of the open landscape; ever watchful.

‘Do you feel up to telling me more of your story now, Piotr?’

Piotr looked up at the timbered ceiling. ‘Those beams look old,’ he said.

‘Yes, they’re older than the house. They’re timbers from an Elizabethan ship. She kept her pigeons in the dovecotes here.’

‘Who did?’

‘Queen Elizabeth.’

‘*The* Queen Elizabeth?’

‘Yes, and in living memory King Edward VII had his lunch here on a hunting trip from Windsor.’

‘All that royalty,’ said Piotr.

‘Yes, but the real royalty were the RAF fighter pilots billeted with us during the war. They used to spread them out of the camps for safety. They would tilt their wings over us on the way back if they’d shot down any enemy aircraft.’

There was a long silence, during which the old beams could be heard to creak, as if they were still at sea with a storm approaching.

‘What about your story, then, Piotr?’

Piotr gripped the arms of his chair. ‘Well, when I was ten, my mother and I were deported by the Russians to a Siberian labour camp.’

He had wanted to soften his story, but had learnt that if he ever attempted to tell anything other than the truth he got in such a mess it wasn’t worth it. However, it was such a

dramatic tale it sounded like anything but the truth. In fact, it sounded like something one would make up to earn the sympathy of a beautiful girl. He couldn't win.

'That's terrible,' said Gill, looking shocked and suddenly understanding Piotr's reluctance to tell his story.

'Look, Gill, it is terrible. And once I start I can't stop.'

Piotr's past always returned to haunt his present. He would have preferred to delay the telling of it until a lot later, but he wasn't sure there would be a lot later, and she had asked.

'I don't want to ruin our precious time together,' he added.

Piotr immediately felt he should have been more restrained about revealing his feelings for at least a few weeks, but he wasn't calm. He was desperate and he was losing control.

'No, go on,' said Gill, shyly ignoring his flirtatious compliment.

'Well, when the Nazis invaded Poland from the west, my father, who was a pilot in the Polish air force, joined his unit to fight the Germans.'

'What happened to him?'

'I don't know. We never saw him again.'

'No! That's terrible.'

Piotr showed no sign of a reaction and pressed on as if in a trance. 'At the same time, the Russians invaded Poland from the east. When they arrived at our village they gave us half an hour to pack, including food. We were taken to the station in the freezing cold and loaded thirty-odd to a cattle wagon, for what was to be a three-week journey to Siberia. Once our own food was finished there was only a slice of bread a day and sometimes a bowl of watery soup. Any dogs, cats or rats that could be caught around where we stopped were eaten. People's hair froze to the sides of the wagon while they slept. The toilet was a hole in the floor. Hundreds on every train

died from cold, hunger and disease.’

‘I don’t know what to say,’ said Gill.

‘Don’t worry. That’s just the right thing to say. I’d better stop there for now.’

Piotr felt that telling his story at this point was potentially disastrous, as it would emphasise his foreignness and introduce alien horrors to Gill’s mind. Also, as well as telling Gill, he was retelling himself and the story was not much better in retrospect.

V

‘I saw you,’ Gill said, while out with Piotr for her first tentative walk on her nearly mended foot.

‘What?’ replied Piotr, fearing he had done something to upset her. No pretty girls had walked by, and even if they had he wouldn’t have looked. Not any more. There were no other pretty girls now that he had met Gill. He had been relieved that his story hadn’t stopped Gill from agreeing to see him again and amazed that Gill’s mother had agreed to let them walk out together.

‘Checking the ivy on those trees,’ she said with a smile.

‘Guilty,’ he said with almost tangible relief.

To his astonishment and delight, Gill slipped her arm through his.

‘Piotr, I know telling your story upsets you, but now you’ve started I just have to know how you ended up here. But only if you want to.’

‘OK. As long as you’re sure.’

‘Yes, I’m sure,’ said Gill.

‘Well, we arrived at a labour camp near Archangel, about seven hundred miles north of Moscow, just south of the

Arctic Circle. We were already in a terrible state and we were put in unheated huts infested with lice and fleas. I discovered pregnant females don't hop... fleas, that is,' he added, in a weak attempt to lighten the mood a little.

'That's just what Allen said! They didn't have lice, but he used to clear fleas from rooms by tempting the fleas onto him by crawling around on the floor every night for a few weeks in his, er, shorts,' she said hesitantly, not wanting to say underpants.

Although he was intrigued as he knew the Romans had used their slaves in the same way, Piotr was visibly irritated.

'Where was that, then?' he felt obliged to ask. He couldn't imagine what sort of camp Allen had ever been in.

'In their cottage down at the Rookery during the war. They also had bedbugs and they used to be painted purple all over to get rid of itch mites, which cause scabies,' said Gill.

Despite himself, Piotr was irked to have his story compared to that of someone who hadn't been through what he had. Such were the extremes of his experiences that it was hard for him to credit English people's suffering if they hadn't seen any of the war in Eastern Europe. He should have taken the opportunity to shut up, but he couldn't now that he had started.

'Sorry, Piotr, please go on.' Gill understood that it might have sounded as though she was trying to make Piotr's story sound less dramatic, which was the last thing she intended. She was just surprised by the parallels. *Remember this isn't a conversation*, she warned herself. *All you have to do is listen.*

In the winter, the mercury in the office thermometer usually froze, which meant it was below minus thirty-nine degrees centigrade. People estimated that it went as low as minus seventy. When the air was still, a fog of frozen breath

could hang in the air, and if someone walked through it slowly their silhouette was left cut out of the icy cloud. Tiny ice crystals called diamond-dust fell sparkling to the ground from a clear blue sky with a tinkling sound we called *shopot zhyozd*; the whispering of the stars.'

'Diamond dust!' Gill exclaimed at the familiarity of the phrase. In the winter of 1946-7 she and Allen had tossed hot water out the door to watch it freeze before it hit the ground. They had called that diamond dust, but that had only been at minus twenty.

'Yes, what were you going to say?' asked Piotr.

'Nothing. I just thought it was a lovely description,' said Gill.

'In the summer it was hot and infested with mosquitoes. We all contracted malaria, which plagued us for years. You would start shivering and sweating. You would have a violent headache and keep vomiting. Then the symptoms would ease until the next time. For us it was another fact of life, like the weather and the fleas, and we just accepted it. There was no quinine.'

'What about Herb Bennet?' asked Gill.

'Herb who?' replied Piotr, puzzled and again irritated.

'Not who. What. It's a plant. Allen told me the spicy roots were used by the Romans against malaria,' said Gill, mad at herself for interrupting again and disconcerted by the strength of her memories of Allen.

In turn, Piotr found himself struggling to curb his irritation at the repeated interruption to the flow of his story and the mention of Allen.

'We were always starving. The main food was a sort of slurry or watery soup with a few grains of barley at the bottom. The daily bread ration was eight slices for workers

and four for non-workers. We were allowed to cultivate a patch of land in order to keep us working, but it was very difficult to grow anything worthwhile.'

'Yes,' said Gill, remembering, against her will, how she and Allen had struggled with gluts and poor storage when growing vegetables in their gardens.

'Yes, what?'

'Yes, I imagine it must have been difficult,' Gill said, not entirely convincingly. She felt helpless. The harder she tried, the less she could stop recalling parallels with Piotr's story, especially parallels involving Allen.

'During the summer and autumn, people used to collect nuts, berries – mainly cranberries – and edible fungi to be dried and saved for the winter months. But we still all suffered with deficiency diseases.'

Gill sighed in exasperation at herself, as she recalled the days they had been given off school in 'nut years' to gather hazelnuts from the hedgerows, and how much trickier it had been in the generally alternating 'berry years' as so many were poisonous.

Puzzled by Gill's response, Piotr continued hesitantly. 'We heard stories of people finding frozen salamanders and mammoth remains in the melting permafrost, and thawing and eating them. The meat was still fresh after tens of thousands of years.'

Gill, now nearly at her wits' end, grimaced, as she couldn't stop herself remembering the diamond-dust winter once again, when the gravel pits, ponds and small local rivers had frozen almost solid. They had chipped out fish, which were locked like jewels in the ice; 'chip 'n fish' the locals had called it.

'Are you OK? Are you sure you want me to go on?' asked

Piotr, startled by Gill's grimace.

'Yes. Of course. It's just my foot hurting.'

'Well, the lack of sanitation meant dysentery and cholera epidemics occurred. Heart attacks and cancer were common, even in the young, which everybody believed were stress-related. The birch trees for miles around were stripped of their fungus-induced cankers or chaga, which were used to make an infusion people swore cured cancer, especially of the stomach.'

Gill just stopped herself from saying: 'Lizzie does that.'

'There were lots of horses for pulling timber out of the forest. We gathered hay for winter fodder for them during the summer. When the adults asked to be treated as well as the horses, we were threatened with reduction of rations and told that the horses were more valuable than us.

'All they were worried about was making sure we kept working. They threatened the women that if they didn't fulfil their work quotas their children would be put into Russian orphanages. Only a parent could ever imagine the terror that would induce. What monsters could threaten that?'

Gill bit her lip. It had broken her heart when she had seen children from a children's home just down the road waiting on Fletham Station for a train to London, from where they were to be shipped out to Australia, either to orphanages or for adoption. They couldn't have known what fate awaited them. Rumours had rippled back about some abuse at the hands of some of their so-called carers. Some evacuees from London during the war had similarly failed to find paradise awaiting them in the beautiful countryside. She felt sick to her stomach at the thought of it all.

Completely confused by Gill's obvious discomfort, Piotr fell silent and stared resolutely out of the window, biting his

nails.

‘Can hares be black?’ he asked after a while.

‘Yes, although they’re very rare. The old villagers sing a song about ‘The Bonny Black Hare’ that hid up a girl’s apron, but I don’t understand it. Why do you ask?’ enquired Gill, grateful for the respite from the relentless hardship of Piotr’s story and the thoughts it provoked.

‘I think I just saw one.’

Gill followed Piotr’s gaze out over the fields, hardly daring to look. Over towards the Pits she could make out a black shape, but she could tell from the way it moved that it wasn’t a hare, nor was it Lizzie.

‘Shall I go on?’ he asked despondently.

‘Yes. You must now you’ve got this far.’

‘One of the worst things was when my mother had to have a tooth out. There was no anaesthetic, of course. Two people kept their feet on the stool where she sat and the third person pulled,’ continued Piotr abruptly.

Gill winced as she listened to this description. She was done for. It was about the worst subject Piotr could have touched on. She knew all about bad teeth from Lizzie and others of her generation from the Rookery. It was perhaps the most terrifying experience of all for those benighted inhabitants.

Gill had been horrified to read an account written by an early traveller who had noted about the Rookery:

These forlorn cottages house the sorriest collection of residents concentrated in one place imaginable. Largely, they have no teeth, and those that do use them to chew tobacco, squirting the brown expectorate accurately at the vermin that share their miserable hutches.

Gill had been overwhelmed by the descriptions of the crude dental practices Lizzie had suffered as a girl without anaesthetic, other than the occasional use of the deadly henbane. She too had been held down in a chair, but with a string tied between the bad tooth and the handle of an open door, which, when slammed, pulled the string taut, extracting the offending tooth. As she had grown older she had been left to do it by herself – or not.

As was traditional in the area, Lizzie had had the remainder of her teeth pulled out to celebrate what was guessed to be her twenty-first birthday. At least those extractions had been performed by a dentist and not, as in earlier times, by the blacksmith. She was also lucky to have been fitted with plastic dentures rather than wood, bone or ivory ones; nor those set with ‘Waterloo teeth’ extracted from the dead of the Battle of Waterloo and later battles, which had still been going around in the countryside when she was young.

Lizzie only lost her false teeth in the mud once. She never found them again and that was that.

Gill gripped the arms of her chair and squirmed as she recalled Lizzie telling her that in the old days pretty girls who wanted work as servants at the Manor House were forced by the lady of the manor to have a front tooth pulled out to render them less attractive to the lord of the manor. And once she had noticed that when a local lad had had just one of his front teeth knocked out his girlfriend would have nothing more to do with him.

Piotr was totally distraught by Gill’s silent facial contortions, which he interpreted as signs of disapproval.

‘Sorry about the horror,’ he said, unaware of the horror that she, in turn, was struggling to keep from him.

‘Don’t be silly. You did warn me, after all.’

VI

After Piotr's desperate disappointment over their most recent conversation, he was astonished and quite overcome when Gill agreed to meet again as if nothing was wrong. Apparently he had also won over Gill's mother, as she agreed to let him take Gill on her first motorcycle ride.

On his arrival, Gill virtually leapt across the pillion and, to Piotr's delight, held him tightly around the waist; not that she had any choice if she was to stay safely on the bike. They rode across to the big river and sauntered along the towpath. It was a beautifully bright, clear, cold day, and the river flowed darkly in the sunlight.

Despite the difficulties she had experienced previously, Gill was determined to hear the rest of Piotr's story. Even if she hadn't been falling in love with him, she had always felt a responsibility to learn about other people's experiences.

'Are you ready to go on with your story?' asked Gill quietly.

'I hope you don't think I am going on,' replied Piotr, seeking further encouragement. He didn't want a repetition of their previous conversation.

'No, don't be silly. Go on.'

Piotr coughed nervously, cleared his throat and continued in a rather more formal manner as he prepared to keep tight control of his emotions.

'Well, when Russia was attacked by Hitler, Russia became an ally of Britain and they released their Polish prisoners for the men to be recruited to a new Polish army to fight the Germans.

'The camp commandant didn't want to let us go. He was terrified as his work quotas stayed the same and he knew he couldn't fulfil them without us. It wouldn't surprise me if he

ended up like his predecessor, who shot himself when he lost his Party membership card because he was so terrified of the consequences.

‘Curiously, being deported by the Russians most likely saved us from the Nazis; almost definitely so for the Jews among us. Anyway, we somehow made our way thousands of miles south in an endless blur of illness, dirt, hunger and fatigue to Persia, which was then under British control.

‘The Polish army under General Anders went to fight the Germans in Italy, and many of the Jewish men eventually went to Palestine, while the women and children were held in Persia before being dispersed throughout the world.

‘We stayed in a huge tented camp on the outskirts of Tehran. It was hot in summer and freezing in winter, but compared to Siberia it was like a holiday camp. We used to get Red Cross food parcels. I remember my first egg and my first taste of cheese, which we called soap. We swallowed the eggs raw so as not to destroy the vitamins.’

By this point it was easier for Gill to resist mentioning that they had reacted in the same way when they received similar Red Cross food parcels from Canada during the war.

‘But I hated the lavatories, which were deep pits with planks slung over them.’

‘The earth privies...’ started Gill, silently completing ‘... are still a bit like that down at the Rookery.’

‘What about the earth privies?’ asked Piotr.

‘That’s what they would be called in English,’ said Gill deceptively.

It was getting dark and a light drizzle was falling.

‘So much for: “Mackerel sky, twelve hours dry.” Or is it: “Three days neither wet nor dry”?’ said Gill with a grin.

Piotr felt relieved that the elements would prevent him

from going on and on, which he could so easily have done as his brain attempted to rationalise its chaotic memories and emotions.

A duck quacked.

'That's a female,' said Gill, seizing the opportunity to return to the present.

'How on earth do you know that?' asked Piotr.

'Only female ducks quack,' she said with a smile.

'So are those honey bees,' added Gill.

'What?'

'All worker honeybees are female. And that mosquito, which is just about to bite you.'

'So all mosquitoes are females, too?' asked Piotr, slapping at the offender.

'No, but all the ones that bite you are.'

'OK, so what do the males do?'

'Drink fruit juice.'

Piotr had a flashback to the pestilence of the camp and could not imagine benign male mosquitoes drinking fruit juice or even finding any in that hellhole.

'So is that cat,' said Gill, pointing to a cat that was just disappearing over a fence about fifty yards away.

Piotr had another flashback to the railway stations, where it would have been caught and eaten irrespective of its sex.

'Go on, tell me.'

'All tortoiseshell cats are females,' said Gill, not being completely truthful, but finding it too complicated to explain.

Gill reflected on the ridiculousness of posing as an expert on the subject of sex; a topic that was finally entering her life with great urgency. Her innocence was a product of the times; her religion with its prohibitions; her upbringing throughout which sex had been a taboo subject; and her sensitive, self-

conscious and introverted personality. She couldn't have known that Piotr's situation in this regard exactly mirrored hers.

'I know that pregnant fleas can't jump,' said Piotr again, in a weak attempt to follow the thread.

'I know you do,' said Gill, reassuring him that she had been listening carefully to his story.

'Your story sounds so terribly sad. Did you ever have a happy time?'

'Oh yes, in the camp outside Tehran, even though it must have been terrible for my mother, worrying about me and not knowing my father's fate. I feel guilty about that now, but it was such a relief after Siberia. We had enough to eat, I had lots of friends to play with and we had the occasional treat. We had no toys, but any old bits and pieces would do.'

'Yes, you don't need much to be happy. We had no real toys either, but we had each other and the freedom of the countryside,' said Gill, relieved that that did not necessarily mean her and Allen, which it did.

'Were you ever physically attacked in all the terrible places you were moved to?' asked Gill.

Piotr thought for a while, tempted to make up some incidents, but rejected the idea as disrespectful to the memory of those who had suffered them.

'No. Nobody laid a hand on me, but our lives were permanently under threat from the conditions and people died all the time. Nor did I see or hear any explosions until I got to England during the war. It was the mental stress and illness – especially the fear of an unknown future and the malaria – that were so unbearable.'

Gill thought of those in Hadleyrow who had been killed and injured by the bombing during the war, but said nothing.

‘Let’s look for ivy growing to the tops of trees for a while,’ Gill said.

As they wandered along, inevitably failing in their task, Piotr could not suppress his urge to reach out to hold her hand. To his delight she did not withdraw it. It was the first time in Piotr’s adult life that he had ever held hands with a young woman. The deprivation heightened the impact and he found it difficult to continue speaking.

No boy had ever held Gill’s hand in this way either. She had been equally isolated from contact with boys other than Allen, who nobody seemed to think counted as such. She had been brought up as a strict Catholic in an isolated, rural community where some still believed that a girl could get pregnant just by touching the provocative flower of the cuckoopint, which, according to the whispered rumours, resembled the human sex organs.

‘What happened next?’ asked Gill, finding herself holding his hand tighter as she steeled herself for a return to Piotr’s story.

Piotr’s heart leapt. The pressure on his hand reassured him more than any words ever could have done.

‘We were in that camp for about eighteen months until the summer of 1943, when we were sent to Karachi, more than a thousand miles away. It took weeks in convoys of lorries with Indian drivers. From then on it was an endless blur of events. From Karachi we were put on a British ship, *The Old City of London*, to Bombay. There we were transferred to an American passenger ship, *The Hermitage*, for a six-week voyage to Los Angeles.

‘When we arrived in America we were shocked when military trucks took us to an internment camp holding Japanese Americans, where, even worse, our section was

enclosed by barbed wire. The conditions were much better than our previous camps, of course, but we were prisoners again.

After four days, we were loaded onto a train with sealed windows. A military guard was posted at the door of every carriage and no one was permitted to leave their coaches. Some panicked and started screaming, fearing a repeat of what they had seen and heard of in Europe. One never regained her sanity on the very threshold of freedom.

‘After a journey of about seven hours we reached the Mexican border, where we changed to a train with no guards and we could open the windows and wander from one compartment to another. We were in Mexico and we were free again. The Mexican railway workers were on strike, but as a gesture of solidarity they let our train through.

‘After another long journey we arrived at a station decorated with Polish and Mexican flags, where we were greeted by a welcoming committee and a small band playing the Polish national anthem. For the first time in years we felt like human beings. We were overwhelmed by their hospitality.’

‘Where on earth were you?’ asked Gill.

‘The Hacienda Santa Rosa near León. It was completely renovated, with a communal dining room, schoolrooms and accommodation for families and the couple of hundred orphans that were among our number. There were flower gardens, ponds, play areas for the children and a theatre. We were showered with gifts from charity organisations. To us it was paradise on earth.’

‘How wonderful! Why did you ever leave?’ asked Gill.

‘We wanted to stay there forever, but after the war was over in Europe in 1945 various attempts were made to move us on, until the camp was finally shut down in 1947. So once

again we were heartbroken and homeless.’

Piotr stopped speaking and tried to avoid Gill’s gaze.

‘You can stop if you like,’ said Gill, sensing his distress.

‘No, I might as well finish and get it out of the way.’

By now the pressure of Piotr’s grip was becoming uncomfortable.

Piotr shifted uneasily, took a deep breath and continued in a wavering voice: ‘We hung around the camp for as long as we could, working locally, and found lodgings with a family who had worked at the camp and were grateful for the rent. Eventually, my mother learnt that some relatives had managed to survive the war and had got to London, and she decided I should go to them.’

‘Just you?’

‘Yes. I don’t know why, but it must have been for the best as she saw it, after the way she had fought to protect me all those years.’

‘Where is she now?’

‘I haven’t heard from her since.’

They stopped walking and turned towards each other, now holding both of each other’s hands.

‘I’ve tried everything I can, but I’ve been unable to find out what’s happened to her yet. But I’ll never give up trying.’

They resumed their walk in silence, watching the dark river flow by.

‘How ever did you get to England?’

‘Well, my mother and I had been working at odd jobs and had managed to save enough money for me to take a bus for a seven-hour journey to the port of Tampico, where I bought a one-way ticket on the British ship *Empire Windrush* for passage to England. There were about sixty other Polish passengers en route to London, mostly women, some already

on board. It was basically a troop ship and we travelled on the lower deck they'd opened up for all the West Indians who'd already boarded in Trinidad and Jamaica. I'd never met people like them before, but they were a great bunch, mainly young men. There was a cabin class, but they didn't mix with us. We called in at Cuba for two days, and Bermuda for three, before crossing the Atlantic to London.

'During the voyage I discovered that it was originally a German cruise ship for Nazi Party members, called the *Monte Rosa*, then a Nazi hospital ship in the war, before being captured and eventually renamed by the British in 1947.'

'That's amazing. Everybody in Britain thinks the *Windrush* only carried West Indian immigrants,' said Gill.

'Yes, I know. That annoys me. That voyage was the only one it ever made to the Caribbean.'

'Everybody over here thinks that was all that it did,' said Gill.

'Curiously, there are West Indians of Polish descent,' said Piotr.

'What?'

'Yes. A Haitian on board told me about descendants of Polish troops sent by Napoleon to help quell the great slave revolt in Haiti. Following the victory of the slaves, the 1805 constitution forbade white people to live on the island. But some Polish soldiers had deserted and fought with the slaves for their independence, and these were allowed to stay and preserve their Slavic customs if they accepted being officially categorised as "black". Their descendants still live in the villages in the mountains and they proudly call themselves "Lapologne". They are also known as "moun rouge". But try telling somebody from the Caribbean with African slave ancestry that white people were among the first to be officially

called black and that their descendants are called red!

'How did you get on when you got here?' asked Gill, feeling a bit lost.

I lodged with my relatives, who all had terrible stories to tell. I slept in the kitchen until I could get a job and rent my own room. But overall, I experienced great kindness from strangers and found most British people friendly, helpful and trustworthy. More so than many fellow Poles.'

To her annoyance, Gill remembered that Allen still slept in the small room that passed as the kitchen in Lizzie's tiny cottage.

They wandered along in silence for a bit.

'By the way, Piotr, do you have any enemies?' asked Gill, thinking back to Lizzie's warning.

'Yes, millions in Central Europe.'

'No, seriously. I mean here.'

'Yes. Strange you should ask. There's a man up at the airport called Burian. He tried to pretend he was Russian.'

'How did you know he was pretending?'

'When the locals went on about their soil being the best in the world he boasted that the black earth "back home" was so good the Germans had shipped it back to Germany by the trainload during the war. He also boasted of the sugar production "back home" being among the greatest in the world. The West Indians thought he was mad when he said that. When he referred to people from the Caucasus as "chorny" or "black", and I noticed his soft consonants when he was talking, I realised he must be Ukrainian. I knew he was Catholic and hated me for no good reason, so that almost certainly made him Western Ukrainian. When I tried to force him to admit it, he went mad.'

'Be careful,' said Gill, without fully following Piotr's

explanation.

'I'm always careful. Especially with him, as he gradually moves behind anybody he's talking to. I saw the camp guards do that when they were interrogating people.'

'Yes, but especially so,' said Gill.

'Why?'

'Well, Lizzie seems to know something about him somehow,' said Gill.

'I'm watching him, anyway,' said Piotr.

'Maybe I'll meet him. I've just applied for a job in catering at the airport,' said Gill.

She hoped against hope that she wouldn't meet Allen there. The airport was sucking them all in, one way or another.

'Let's sit here and enjoy the river,' said Piotr, anxious to get as physically close to Gill as he could and soothe the tension generated by telling his story. The seat was enveloped by a curtain of branches from a weeping willow tree on the bank of the river, so they were virtually invisible from the path and those cruising by on the river. They sat in the dappled sanctuary, arched over by the delicate, pale green tracery of the rustling willow branches, tentatively exploring what each would allow, while hoping they wouldn't be allowed to explore too far.

VII

Some days later, Piotr was wandering along, lost in his thoughts about Gill and what her reaction would be to his story, when his reverie was interrupted by a shout.

'Hey, man! Did you hear the news?'

Piotr looked up to see Denzil waving at him over the waist-high chestnut-paling fence that surrounded a field that

was grandiosely called the Airport Public Enclosure. In one corner was a wooden, shed-like café with an ex-army, brown canvas marquee acting as an extension, which served the huge weekend crowds. One Sunday in June 1947, seven thousand people had paid three pence each for entry to the enclosure to watch the aircraft; more than the number of outsiders who had visited the village in the previous hundred years or more. Everybody who worked in and around the airport used the enclosure café as their unofficial meeting place, avoiding the entrance fee by exploiting a gap in the fence.

Denzil was from the Caribbean. He was as tall as Piotr, with a stronger build, straighter hair, lucid green eyes and only slightly darker skin.

'I heard Prof and Allen have disappeared,' said Denzil.

'What?' exclaimed Piotr.

'Yes, man. Rumour is Prof knew one of the gang involved in that failed robbery, which also puts Allen in the frame. If you fly with John Crow you'll eat dead meat,' said Denzil, letting slip a traditional phrase from the West Indies about keeping bad company.

'Well, that puffy old Pole!' said Piotr in disbelief.

'I didn't know Prof was a Pole like you,' said Denzil.

'Yes. Like you and that other lot are West Indians,' snapped Piotr as he wandered away, not wanting to be grouped with Prof and knowing Denzil did not want to be classed as a West Indian.

In Caribbean terms, Denzil was a 'face-man' of high colour and good hair. Some would even say a 'red-man', like the moun rouge in Haiti. This was about as ridiculous as calling him black, which, to his utter astonishment and burning resentment, had happened several times since his arrival. He was certainly no darker than Piotr, nor most of the field

girls; especially Lizzie, who was as dark as a Romany, with her scaly, weather-beaten face like that of a bletted medlar or lizard. Terrified of being labelled black and of lizards in equal measure, Denzil couldn't repress his horror when it came to Lizzie.

Whenever possible, he would pass himself off as South American. If pressed, he had to remember that Guyana was the only English-speaking country in South America. Even this often misfired badly for him, as most people thought Guyana was in Africa.

Despite being healthy, strong and good-looking, with many healthy children, Denzil's life was poisoned by obsessions with racial status – especially those related to skin colour and hair texture – as he struggled to avoid what he considered as racial taint. He had ensured that his passport photo had been developed 'light', even though most photographic studios back home did so anyway. But the problem with photographic bleaching was that it was a 'face card'. Its benefit was largely psychological, as, while the subject could deceive him or herself, it wouldn't fool anybody else. At times he had even contemplated going for the real thing and lightening his skin with cake soap – a detergent containing bleach – but he feared for his fine complexion. Even though Denzil took great pride in the fact that his good hair was straighter than Piotr's, this still wasn't enough to assuage his dented pride.

Denzil worked as a van driver for one of the airlines. Having known better times back home, he was deeply ashamed of his job. When he had to deliver to West Indians darker than himself it made him squirm. Even they told him that a man with his high colour shouldn't be doing delivery work.

'See di man deh who want to be blacker dan he is,' they

said in disbelief.

His shame was deepened by the fact that Briscoe – whose appearance spoke of Africa across oceans and centuries, and who Denzil considered to be, and called, a ‘nayga’ – had the same job. He couldn’t believe some bracketed him and Briscoe together as black and even treated Briscoe as an equal. It made him seethe inside.

However, despite being from opposite ends of the pigmentocracy in the Caribbean, Denzil and Briscoe had both experienced similar shocks on arrival in the ‘mother country’, as they had been brought up to consider it. When Allen had first heard mention of the mother country, he had asked where it was, and Briscoe had looked at him incredulously.

Local accents, especially the whining estuarine English of Londoners, jarred compared to the refined English spoken by whites back home. White women with fine, straight, tall hair wearing rollers were a complete puzzle. Black women in the West Indies did the same, but for the opposite effect. The sight of white road sweepers, dustbin men and even white people riding bikes shook them to the core. As for handicapped white beggars, many of them casualties of the First World War, they had never seen their like before.

Neither had they seen a double-decker bus in real life, let alone ridden on one, feeling as though they would capsize when going around corners. Nor had they seen white people queuing in the freezing wind and driving rain, or a white man on a bus. A white man on a bus back home was either mad, broke, a misfit, a loser, or a combination of all of those things, like ‘the walk-foot-buckra who had not horse in days of slavery’.

However, Denzil derived some consolation from the fact that, as far as he knew, none of the British he had met so

far could drive, and nor could Piotr. Denzil had never met a man of high colour at home who couldn't drive, except the Germaicans – descendants from German-indentured labour – who didn't really count as far as Denzil was concerned. This slight consolation would have been denied him if he had known that Gill had learned to drive a tractor at the age of ten and her dad's van at fifteen, and that when she was seventeen she had once driven up to Covent Garden market at four thirty in the morning.

VIII

Before their arrival on the *Windrush*, Denzil's personal story was as different from Piotr's as could be imagined. Denzil had grown up as free as a bird in a tropical paradise, despite being surrounded by dire poverty. Day length and temperature varied little all year round, as did the height reached by the blue sea up the beaches of silver sand. Tide and time appeared to wait for all men on Denzil's Caribbean island.

Denzil belonged to a large extended family that was successfully involved in building, haulage, retail, farming and teaching. He also had children all over the place by more 'baby-mothers' than he could name, let alone the children. Some would say he was perpetuating his ancestors' white slave-owner genes and conforming to the missing father stereotype and the matriarchal model of a former slave-based society.

He was genuinely surprised if he was ever criticised over his multifarious affairs. *That was what real men did.* He didn't have the slightest sense of guilt with regard to his treatment of women. He also believed that these women had a completely free choice in the matter, as nobody forced them

to sleep with him. He believed he was doing them a favour and that without him they would be a lot worse off, which economically was true. He was flattered when people used to say: 'Im cyaan lock im hose off.'

In contrast to Hadleyrow, which was set in a pan-flat landscape a few feet above sea level, Malvern, the small village in Jamaica Denzil came from, was perched high up on the edge of the western mountains, overlooking the coastal plains to the blue Caribbean beyond. Malvern's cool, fresh climate had attracted the original plantation owners to have their houses built in these hills, overlooking the plains from which they had made their fortunes from the horrors of slavery. Some of their descendants remained there, while others had returned to Britain with their poisoned wealth, both groups still privileged and financially advantaged, living off their ancestors' sins well into more enlightened times. These days, the plains were dotted with the ruins of old sugar plantation buildings, which were disappearing under the relentless and overwhelming power of vegetation. Nothing could withstand it; not even airports in cooler climes, let alone in the tropics.

Denzil had lived in a large new-build bungalow in the hills below the great houses, to which he was never invited. Even so, the veranda of his bungalow looked west over the plains to the coast from a height greater than that attained by sightseeing flights over Hadleyrow.

His numerous business activities around the island had waned during the war. He had tried 'higglering' crops to the hotels on the north coast, but he didn't like to be too closely associated with the peasant growers in the hills, or to the men at least. The wives and daughters were another matter. As far as Denzil was concerned, it didn't matter how black they were as long as they knew their place.

It was warm, windy and dry when Denzil – with his fine hair and a big white smile on his handsome face, a white rum in his hand and a beautiful woman on his knee – decided to take up the offer of a ticket on the *Empire Windrush* to England, in order to seek his fortune in the mother country. The island newspapers of April 13, 1948, had carried an advert offering one-way passages to England on the *Windrush* sailing on May 24. Passage was available for anybody who wanted to work in the UK, as immigration restrictions for citizens within the British Empire had just been lifted.

To his dismay, Denzil had had no luck with the white women on the voyage to England. To his surprise, they were not English but Polish DPs – displaced persons – about sixty of them, most of who had boarded in Mexico. The Polish women had been withdrawn and impervious to his advances, so he simply assumed they were prejudiced against him. It was their loss, as far as he was concerned. He invented a new name for them, ‘the refusenikas’, a description he was rather proud of.

The fact that there were few Polish men and boys with them signified nothing to him, except that he had less competition. He certainly didn’t remember seeing Piotr among their numbers, but then Denzil had paid extra to travel cabin class. He would never have shared a cabin with a bunch of naygas like Briscoe on the troop deck.

On arrival at Tilbury in June 1948, Denzil and Piotr couldn’t have known what to expect. Their individual receptions couldn’t have been more different. With regard to culture and education, Denzil was virtually English, whereas Piotr was truly foreign. But with regard to their appearance, Denzil was treated by many as a foreigner of the worst type – a black immigrant who had arrived on the *Windrush* – while

Piotr was almost universally accepted. And it was those from the Caribbean rather than the Poles who caused MPs to raise questions, even though a good proportion of the West Indians were servicemen on leave who were returning to their units, ex-servicemen intent on re-enlisting, or potential new recruits, mainly for the RAF, one of whom would confuse Lizzie in Hadleyrow.

Those who were not destined for the forces were appalled by the temporary accommodation provided for them at the Clapham South deep bomb shelter, but it was close to the Employment Exchange in Brixton, enabling them to register for work, which most did on arrival.

Neither Piotr nor Denzil took into account the state of Britain when judging their reception. Britain was bombed out, bankrupt, exhausted and suffering a level of deprivation worse than during the war years, when there had been bitter winters the like of which had not been seen for sixty years.

It was said that the summer of 1946 fell on a Wednesday, as it seemed there had only been one sunny day all year. Cereal crops were badly damaged and in Hadleyrow hay, wheat and oats were spread on the aircraft hangar floors to dry. Bread rationing was imposed for the first time. During a sustained period of bitter weather from January to March 1947, Britain was left frozen, plunged into darkness and on the brink of famine under the 'hunger moon'.

The thaw that started early in March only made things worse. The ground was frozen so hard that the melting snow, swollen further by major rainstorms, ran off as raging torrents. Storms swept in from the west; hail, sleet, lightning, sun, rain and rainbows sharing the same sky in the wettest March on record. March was traditionally a dry month, the drier the better for ploughing, sowing and planting potatoes,

which made the spring floods of 1940 and 1947 – in which thousands of square miles of rich farmland were flooded – a double disaster. Deep winter frosts had already destroyed a huge number of stored potatoes, and potatoes were rationed for the first time until the following spring.

Because Piotr's wartime experiences had been so extreme, it was unlikely that knowing the state of Britain in advance would have changed his view that civilian hardship, other than in the cities during the Blitz, sounded trivial in the face of those suffered by millions in Eastern Europe.

Piotr's view was strengthened when he heard of the so-called post-war period in Eastern Europe. There, the terror continued: a world of vengeance and violence, rape and looting. Seventeen million displaced people scoured the land, including twelve million Germans driven out of Eastern and Central Europe. Rival nationalists in Eastern Poland and Western Ukraine fought on in an undeclared war of horrifying savagery, displacing a further two million.

During the winter of 1946-47, the populations of Europe's destroyed cities were reduced to a Stone Age existence. People cleared the rubble of bomb-flattened towns with their bare hands as they scavenged for food and fuel. They would have given almost anything to be in Lower Hadleyrow, sitting around the fire eating Lizzie's rabbit stew.

Prior to his arrival, Denzil, in complete contrast to Piotr, had never suffered physical hardship or emotional trauma. Even with regard to the weather he had only experienced two seasons, wet and dry, both of which were warm. Unless 'windy' was included as a season, when from February to April the north-easterlies rustled the tender purple mango leaves. Some talked of summer when the mangoes ripened between the rains of May and those of October and November, but

They Couldn't Have Known

no one spoke of winter. Although hurricanes brewed at sea in August and September, they didn't always strike the island.

CHAPTER THREE

I

Prof and Allen stood waiting for the London train at Fletham station.

Intent on paying his way and having some money for the unknown events ahead, Allen had retrieved some cash from the old tin box hidden under his bed in time-honoured country fashion. He had made sure to leave more than enough for Lizzie and Kate should any emergencies arise.

The tin under the bed was not as vulnerable to theft as it might seem. Nobody from outside the Rookery would have had the nerve to poke about under Allen's bed with all the wildlife around. Bedbugs, fleas, spiders and rats were underrated as defences against burglars. It was the big houses with their locked doors and windows, guards and guard dogs that were much more vulnerable, as the owners often discovered when crop picking was at full tilt and the travellers were about.

'Bloody 'ell. There's Briscoe. What's he doin' 'ere standin' out like a sore thumb?' asked Prof.

Allen pulled himself out of one of his endless ruminations to see Briscoe standing well away from everybody else at the end of the platform. Briscoe waved and walked towards them.

Allen couldn't hide his discomfort as Briscoe approached. He realised that being seen with him and Prof on the train could be almost as incriminating for Briscoe as giving them a lift up in his van.

Allen's discomfort did not go unnoticed and Briscoe felt even more disconsolate than he always did in the face of such a reaction, as in this case it was Allen, who he considered to be the first white man with whom he had anything in common.

'What yer doin' 'ere?' asked Prof.

'Mi van block up,' said Briscoe curtly, showing his anger by not explaining any further.

Once on the train, the unlikely looking trio sat resolutely looking out of the window in glum silence.

'Raatid! Them treat wi like dog an wi still no get no bone,' said Briscoe breaking the silence despite himself.

'What's up?' asked Allen.

'I just see a notice in a window: "No Blacks. No Dogs".

'Well, I've seen: "No Dogs. No Irish". In that order! So it's not just you, mate,' said Prof.

'That nuh make it much better,' said Briscoe refusing to be placated.

'It may not mean what you think,' said Allen.

'Nuh? What the hell could it mean then?'

'Well a landlady might be a war widow or spinster who is nervous about who she lets into her house, especially if she has never seen what you call a black man before. Also, she might not like dogs. It doesn't have to mean they're saying they don't like you, nor that you are like dogs. They're just afraid,' said Allen.

Briscoe and Prof fell silent as they contemplated this possibility.

'Anyway, how could they expect a dog to turn up on its

own?’ Allen added in a vain attempt to lighten the mood.

‘Yeah and me wife’s bin called Black Irish,’ said Prof.

‘Black Irish?’ queried Briscoe.

‘Yeah, because of her dark eyes, skin and hair. She looks like that film star Ava Gardner, who I used to meet at parties. Supposedly they’re descended from the crew of the Spanish Armada wrecked on the west coast of Ireland,’ said Prof.

‘I saw a book called *The Black Irish of Jamaica* about Irish prisoners shipped out by Oliver Cromwell as chattel slaves,’ said Allen.

‘Was that before or after you Africans?’ asked Prof.

‘Cha man, who yuh callin African? People in England nuh go round tellin each other where they came from centuries ago. Anyway, I’ve got Irish in me too,’ said Briscoe, remembering a cousin called Dermat, who was some sort of ‘ologist.’

‘Keep yer ’air on. You’re not black, anyway. Dark brown, I would say,’ said Prof.

‘All I know is, nobody here is black or white. We’re all coloured,’ said Allen, getting tired of all this divisive talk. He gazed out of the window at the increasing urban sprawl that was spilling over the countryside.

‘Coloured! That’s worse,’ said Briscoe.

‘Why? We’re all some sort of colour,’ said Allen.

Allen hated the appropriation of the words black and white with regard to race. He suspected this was because his contrary mind recalled the connotations associated with black and white centuries before different races were widely known about; not only in the local legend of the evil black hound without a single white hair, but also of the mythical white beasts that failed in their missions because of a single black hair. But it wasn’t only about colour. He hated anything that

categorised people into faceless groups, perhaps because that was what had been done to him, literally, throughout his life.

‘Oh yeah! I saw the way you looked at me when you saw me at the station.’

Allen felt awful. ‘It’s not what you think,’ he said.

‘Oh no! What is it, then?’ asked Briscoe staring defiantly at Allen.

‘Prof and me are still under suspicion about that failed robbery and I’m suspected of being part of a bonded goods racket. You’ll be a suspect too if you are seen travelling up to London with us.’

‘Oh,’ said Briscoe embarrassed at having jumped to the wrong but most obvious conclusion.

‘No Dogs. No Blacks. No Irish. No Black Irish. No Black Dogs. No Irish Dogs. No Black Irish Dogs, No Poles,’ continued Prof regardless.

‘You OK, Briscoe?’ asked Allen, sensing more tension.

‘No,’ snapped Briscoe, annoyed by what he saw as attempts to trivialise the racism with which he was regularly confronted. ‘Black is not our colour. It’s our core. It’s what we livin, fightin and dyin for,’ he said, inadvertently striking a rhythm.

‘You’re gettin’ niggly,’ said Prof.

‘Nuh use that bad word to me,’ said Briscoe, becoming increasingly angry.

‘What word?’

‘*Nigger.*’

‘What yer talkin’ about? I said “niggly”. Anyway, even if I ’ad, when we were kids it didn’t mean nothink to us,’ said Prof.

‘That show jus how much it soaked in yuh society,’ said Briscoe.

'We couldn't have known. And, by the way, it's not "my" society, either, it keeps wantin' to lock me up,' said Prof.

Allen thought he had better not mention what he had once heard Denzil calling Briscoe.

'I get fed up with everybody staring at me,' said Briscoe.

'What do you expect if they've never seen anybody like you before? Anyway, it's not always them being rude,' said Allen.

'Huh! How come?' asked Briscoe.

'Well, the villagers and the Gypsies believe in "mother-impression", and when pregnant they stare at men who have the features they would like for their babies. So it can be a compliment.'

'They're black enough already, so what they hoping for?' said Briscoe.

Allen didn't answer for fear of being misinterpreted, but he guessed they were hoping for Briscoe's big white smile, which had survived years of chewing sugar cane as a lad, unlike his own, which had almost never been exposed to sugar, despite having grown up surrounded by thousands of acres of sugar beet.

'That's just a way to explain why a baby and a man other than the 'usband look like each other,' said Prof.

'Forget just looking at them. If one parent is black and one is white, as you call them, why aren't their children grey?' asked Allen.

Briscoe sucked his teeth.

'Mother-impression definitely affects an unborn baby's mind. A teacher told me children born during and after the war were more nervous than normal,' said Allen, ashamed of his attempt at a joke about grey children.

'Yes, I knew a man seem like him come this world ready

fraid by what his mother see them-time,' said Briscoe, sounding less hostile, but with his speech still all over the place as a result of the tension he felt.

'Briscoe, why do you speak so differently sometimes?' asked Allen.

'We make allowances for who we're talking to.'

'Are you doing that now?'

'Yes.'

'How?'

'Well, back home we also speak patois.'

'Is that a language?'

'Yes, but it's not standardised.'

'Why?'

'It's the language of the poor. It's more spoken than written. People dem argue all day bout patwah,' Briscoe said to illustrate his point.

'Why d'you expect so much of this country, anyway?' asked Prof.

'Cos them did tell wi so,' said Briscoe, continuing to demonstrate his point.

'Who did?' asked Allen.

'You English.'

'I never told anybody anything,' said Allen.

'And good Queen Victoria.'

'The Famine Queen?'' asked Prof incredulously, who had heard his wife going on about her.

'She did save wi from the planters.'

'Why didn't she save the Irish, then?'

'Yuh mean the potato famine?' asked Briscoe, surprising Prof with his knowledge.

'No, starvation. It ain't famine in the face of plenty. More than a million starved to death next to the richest nation

in the world, good Queen Victoria an' all. And more than a million went to America on what they called coffin ships as so many died on the voyage,' said Prof, hoping he had remembered correctly what his wife had told him so many times, as it seemed impossible for such a small country.

'She mussy did try fi help them. Me know she went there,' said Briscoe.

'Yeah! They said her receptions lit the graveyards,' said Prof.

'Perhaps she did help through the government,' said Briscoe weakly, before remembering having read that the British government had granted three times as much money as compensation to West Indian slave owners after emancipation as they had to famine relief in Ireland.

They all fell quiet as the rattle of the wheels over a long section of points drowned out their voices.

A lot had been written on the subject of slavery in Allen's books, and he had been relieved that none of his old friends had served on the Defence Committee, which defended Edward Eyre, the murderous judge of the Morant Bay Rebellion in Jamaica, after he returned to England.

'And 'ow many West Indians died of starvation durin' 'er reign?' Prof asked when they regained the smooth rails.

'There's another one! "No West Indians",' said Briscoe ignoring Prof's question.

'Why do they call you that?' asked Prof.

'Cos "Christ-tief-come-rob-us" did think im sail round the world to India,' said Briscoe.

'Who?' asked Allen.

'Christopher Columbus. Im did bring the sugar cane, the cause of our sufferation,' said Briscoe.

'Well, we grow our own around here,' said Allen.

'What?' said Briscoe.

'Sugar.'

'I neva see nuh cane here, man.'

'Acres of sugar beet. There are miles of trucks piled high with it over the railway sidings in Fletham.'

'I thought them were turnips.'

'They look like turnips, but three of them give one pound of sugar,' said Allen, who had once watched Lizzie crystallising out the sugar in her tiny kitchen.

'Why do they call Red Indians Red Indians when they're not red or Indians?' asked Prof idly.

'Even them did have black slaves,' said Briscoe.

'What?' asked Prof.

'Everybody enslave us,' said Briscoe.

'I've never enslaved anybody,' said Allen, desperate to dissociate himself from any link with slavery and its consequences. But his contrary mind instantly reminded him that an old friend from one of his books, Montaigne had observed that:

Every man has within himself the entire human condition.

When he had first discovered friends in his old books, Allen had been afraid that, by living so vicariously through the writings of others, he would be accused of being even further removed from reality than he already knew himself to be. But his sense of relief had been almost tangible when, in Michel de Montaigne's essays – which were addressed as to an old friend who had died – he came across the timeliest quote, which freed him to rejoice in the wisdom of others without reservation:

I quote others only to better express myself.

To Allen, Montaigne was still there beside him, on the train, now aged four hundred and seventeen. Whenever he could, Allen worked out the ages of the spirits of all his friends, or at least their messages. It helped prove their worth.

Another chap, Terry – Allen didn't know his second name – proposed:

I am a man and nothing human is foreign to me.

Naturally, Allen took this to mean that he was capable of doing evil and that, under certain circumstances, he might. It never occurred to him that these considerations applied to everybody and not just him; that he was no more susceptible to behaving in an evil way than anybody else. This would have been scant comfort, perhaps, but much more than he had ever allowed himself.

'Even the captin of the West Indies cricket team haffi be white,' said Briscoe,.

'What about George Hadley in 1948?' asked Prof, ashamed of his interest in cricket having once been a gangster.

'That was only for one match. For the series the captin haffi be white,' said Briscoe.

'Is it really like that?' asked Allen, despite himself as he did not want to prolong the discussion.

'Worse. Back home, black girls have white dolls with blonde hair and blue eyes, and draw pictures of themselves like that. Later, them straighten their hair and bleach their skin. Even me own mama buy the weave and try to get her skin more fair. She say black is lower; she never say black is power. Every John Crow think him pickney white. We still inna slavery inna wi own country. So what chance we have

here?’

All the talk about race and then crows triggered an association in Allen’s mind with Aesop’s fable about a crow and a swan, but it had been used to promote racial prejudice, so he kept quiet. He also kept quiet about Aesop who, despite being white, had been a slave, although by now he guessed Briscoe would most likely already know that. Allen’s interest in Aesop had been heightened by the fact that he had also reportedly been hideously ugly and even dumb. If he ever existed, that is.

‘You’ve got a better job than me, and none of you West Indians are working in the fields over here,’ said Allen, surprising himself with his forthrightness. Naturally he immediately remembered the British woman of African descent who had been refused entry into the Land Army four times during the war on the basis of her colour, until questions were asked in parliament.

Briscoe did not respond immediately. He knew nothing about the field girls living in greater poverty, suffering greater prejudice and working harder and in worse conditions than he ever had. He thought of them as coolies: dark and mean-looking, with narrow, pinched faces. He certainly didn’t think of them as white. As far as he was concerned, white people never worked on the land. They only went near it to boss black people about.

Similarly, the field girls wouldn’t have had a clue about Briscoe or his origins. Their knowledge of Africa came from *Tarzan* films at the makeshift cinema in Timbertown or the Fletham Playhouse; films in which there wasn’t a single African. The supporting cast came from Hawaii and were paler than the field girls. Tarzan, a white man – King of the Jungle – had a beautiful white girlfriend called Jane

and a very clever monkey friend. Tarzan swung through the trees, dropping down to fight lions, tigers, jaguars, leopards, pythons and crocodiles or alligators, while herds of dairy cows milled around.

‘Trouble is, the pressure buildin. A big set of bouys now stormin Britain. Any corner you turn, odds on you bounce up a spade. These days every shipload is big news. It not like long time when forty or fifty straggled in. Now they comin by the hundreds. Worse, a lot are hustlers, spoilin it for us,’ said Briscoe, revealing the typical prejudice of the pioneering immigrant.

‘Why don’t you go back then, mate?’ asked Prof.

‘When yuh go a foreign, yuh cyaan go back less yuh pockets full. An when us fellars who here long time see people runnin from there, is only logic it damn foolishness to go back,’ said Briscoe.

‘I’ve seen a notice in showbiz digs up west saying: “No Performing Animals. No Dancers. No Jugglers”,’ said Prof, ploughing on regardless.

‘No Black and White Minstrels,’ suggested Allen, who had seen pictures of them in a magazine, taking a risk, but finding it quite funny nonetheless.

When Prof chipped in with ‘No Lodgers’, Allen and Briscoe couldn’t help laughing, whether he meant to be funny or not.

‘Man, me dead from laugh,’ said Briscoe, finally cheered by the madness.

It was the first time Allen had laughed with anybody but Gill.

II

Allen was overwhelmed by the crowds at Waterloo station, while Prof and Briscoe were completely relaxed.

‘Ah! Home sweet home,’ said Prof, sniffing the air.

They had just led Allen through the ticket barrier, when a thick-set bruiser moved in on them.

‘Well, well, if it isn’t our old mate Colmore!’

It was the first time Allen and Briscoe had heard Prof’s real name.

‘Teddy!’ said Prof, shooting a glance at Allen and Briscoe.

‘Who are these two weird-looking geezers?’ asked Teddy.

‘Just a couple of blokes I met on the train,’ said Prof totally unconvincingly.

‘Oh yeah! We ’eard you was coming up, let’s all go and see Spot,’ said Teddy.

Teddy raised a finger and a taxi broke out of the middle of the rank and came straight to them.

‘Paddington. The Vienna Rooms,’ said Teddy.

Briscoe and Allen looked quizzically at Prof, who just spread his hands and shrugged his shoulders in despair.

During the journey, Allen became increasingly car sick with the twisting and turning, so he was relieved when they finally pulled into the dingy courtyard at the back of a large, turreted, red-brick Victorian building.

‘In you go, lads.’

The dimly lit, seedy-looking room, which contained several packed gaming tables, fell silent. The air was so thick with smoke that Allen thought the place was on fire and wondered why everyone was sitting there so calmly.

‘Who the hell are these two?’ asked an even bigger, well-dressed bruiser in a grey suit, looking at Allen and Briscoe.

‘They came up with Colmore,’ said Teddy.

‘Right, stick ’em in the safe room till Spot gets back. We don’t want no spade wandering about around ’ere anyway,’ said Grey Suit.

Allen and Briscoe sat in the gloom of the small, windowless room, with a cluster of dusty filing cabinets and a large safe in the corner.

‘Who’s Spot?’ enquired Allen.

‘Jack Spot, self-proclaimed King of the London Underworld. Him control most of the gambling: on-course betting, horses an dogs; boxing an pavement. Nuh drugs or vice, though.’

‘How do you know all that?’ asked Allen.

‘It’s where we immigrants live, between the Arch, Water, Gate and Grove.’

‘Where?’

‘Marble Arch, Bayswater, Notting Hill Gate and Ladbroke Grove.’

‘Sorry I got you into this mess, Briscoe, but I did try and avoid you.’

‘No worries, man. I can see why now.’

‘Well, it was the police I was worried about. I didn’t see this coming. I should never have felt sorry for Prof in the first place. Talk about no good turn goes unpunished.’

‘If yuh sorry fi mawga dog, him turn an bite yuh,’ said Briscoe, quoting one of his traditional phrases with the same message.

‘Spot sounds like a dog, anyway,’ said Allen, not quite understanding.

They sat in gloomy silence for a while.

‘It cold in here, mon. Nuff respect mi have now fi yuh rass climate,’ said Briscoe, parodying his patois to emphasise his

foreignness with regard to the weather.

‘On the boat comin over we heard on the BBC the Colonial Secretary seh that cos we had British passports, they had to let wi land, but there was nothin to worry about, cos we wouldn’t last one winter in England anyway.’

‘You missed our worst winter ever.’

‘When was that?’ asked Briscoe.

‘The winter of 1946-7. Lizzie told us it was coming.’

‘How she know?’

‘In the autumn of 1946 leaves still hadn’t fallen by St Martin’s Day, onions grew thick skins, bees blocked their hives deeper with wax, and ladybirds clustered in sheltered places.’

‘Did it come as bad as she seh?’

‘Not at first, but she also said: “As the light lengthen, so the cold strengthens.” Which it did after Christmas. Freezing rain covered surfaces in glassy black ice. Trees crashed down under the weight of ice on their branches. Leaves of evergreens tinkled and rattled in the wind. When we trod on the frozen grass it snapped and crunched like breaking glass.

‘Different types of birds huddled together in large groups, but still froze on the branches, as did our chickens on their perches. The January King cabbage crop was ruined. We were cut off for months, but we had everything we needed, perhaps because we were poor.’

Briscoe shifted uncomfortably. He hadn’t heard a white man talking about being poor before, and he felt as if he were being robbed of something.

‘We lived on Lizzie’s famous rabbit stew she made in a pot hanging over the open fire. It was so cold we could catch the rabbits by hand, and sometimes even pheasants for a treat. We hacked potatoes and root vegetables out of the ground.

‘The Pits froze nearly solid and we made a slide right across one. It was scary looking into the depths and seeing the long, green weeds frozen in the ice. On still nights, bitter cold air slipped down the slopes into every dip, so cold you couldn’t breathe.’

‘Must be relief when it over,’ said Briscoe.

‘No. When the thaw set in, there were massive floods. Those wattle-and-daub cottages that had no stone foundations were washed away in a mass of mud, straw and reeds, like giant drowning hedgehogs. We could only tell where the rivers and the Pits were by the willow and alder thickets on their banks.

‘Spring sowing was delayed. Our famous pea crop is shallow rooting and needs a lot of water, but not that much. Lizzie used to say: “Get up with thy barley lande, dry as thou can: at March, as thou layest it, so loke for it than.” But nobody had a clue what she meant. We didn’t hear a thrush until March and the hawthorn didn’t flower until June.’

‘When should they have done?’

‘Hawthorn normally flowers in May, which is why it’s known as May blossom. Thrushes can sing all winter, but they usually start about February.’

‘Our thrush birds sing all year round,’ said Briscoe, upon whose island of origin most things went on all year round.

‘Did you live in a town or the country?’ Allen followed up.

‘Country. Same area as Denzil, but he live in the hills.’

‘Did you know him out there?’

‘No chance. We no mix in the same places.’

‘What was your house like?’

‘Like your wattle-and-daub, but with tin roofs. Corrugated iron, that is. My wife and picknies still there. Nice place. Yet I get asked if I lived in the jungle,’ said Briscoe.

‘Well, if people genuinely don’t know they have to ask and

then at least they learn. "The confession of ignorance is the beginning of knowledge," said Allen, repeating one of his favourite quotes and confusing Briscoe with his change of speech.

'What do you grow on your island?'

'There still some big sugar estates, the oldest in the world, and banana plantations. But up in the hills, where Denzil live, them grow vegetables like here: tomatoes, cucumbers, Irish potatoes, onions, and specially carrots and cabbages. More cabbage eaten than any other food on the island.'

Allen thought that was something The Cabbage King would have been interested to hear.

'But in the parish where Denzil and me come from, them tearin up the land for bauxite.'

'What's that?'

'Aluminium ore. Everything covered in red dust from the opencast mining, including us, so they call us "red men". They also call us that because many light-skinned people there with blue or green eyes. Descendants of Europeans.'

'Slave owners?' asked Allen, horrified at the implications.

'Some, but also them survivors of shipwrecks; prisoners from England, Ireland and Scotland; and planters, many from Glasgow. Campbell a common name in the island,' said Briscoe.

'There's an old phrase: "Never trust a Campbell",' said Allen.

'Raatid, man. Me thought it was: "Never trust a camel." Them one time on the island, yuh know.'

'That's better advice,' said Allen, who had read about camels' bad tempers and grudge bearing.

'Also, descendants of German and Polish indentured labour. They keep themself to themself, so many born with

problems,' said Briscoe.

Allen recognised with a pang the parallel with the situation at the Rookery, although there it was the neighbours – who considered them stupid, diseased, mad, possessed of black magic powers and emitting a pungent body heat that would shrivel an apple in their hands – who isolated the inhabitants.

Allen knew such wretched and 'infectious' outsiders were invented by societies around the world to promote a feeling of wellbeing and identity for the insiders. But it was difficult, if not impossible given his anxious state of mind, not to fear that he could well be contaminated in the ways described.

The stranger, more unreal, grotesque and frightening his thoughts, the more he felt compelled to follow them through, almost as if he were mesmerised. He felt driven to find out the worst. In a state of sensitisation and fatigue, he would deliberately probe to see how bad his thoughts could be. Being so suggestible, he couldn't resist testing his suggestibility. He suspected there was no limit to how bad it could get.

III

The door crashed open.

'Right, the spade comes with us,' said Grey Suit.

'No he doesn't, fatso. He only travelled up with us,' said Allen, who, as usual, was less frightened of real dangers than his inner demons. His dramatic change in demeanour took Briscoe by surprise.

'Shut up, you funny-looking scumbag,' said Grey Suit.

'Shut up yourself, fatso,' said Allen, to Briscoe's total astonishment.

Grey Suit hesitated. He was as superstitious as everybody else and this bloke looked really weird.

'Hwat iss thin nam, uh?' hissed Allen, exploiting the hesitation.

Standing behind Allen, Briscoe heard only the strange phrase and thought it entirely responsible for Grey Suit backing off with a look of horror on his face.

At that moment, there was a bustle in the gaming room and a voice said: 'Spot's 'ere.'

An immaculately dressed man wearing a trilby and with a huge cigar in his mouth appeared in the doorway. Allen's attention was drawn to the large mole on his left cheek, at the same time noting the man's flicker of resentment as he noticed Allen's glance.

Allen couldn't believe he had been trapped by the same inherent attention to facial details as others by such a small blemish. *How could he blame people for being so repelled by him? He couldn't. It was pure biology, against which a wonderful life and friendship with Gill could not prevail.*

'Bring them both in here,' said Spot.

Grey Suit thrust Allen and Briscoe into the gaming room. There was no sign of Prof.

'Who the hell are they?' asked Spot.

'They came up with Colmore.'

'Did they now? Perhaps Colmore will be able to tell me what 'appened at that bloody airport fiasco. I haven't seen those other two wasters since they botched it up,' said Spot looking more interested.

Allen tensed. Spot was obviously the one who had sent the gang members down for the raid, but didn't yet know about Allen's involvement. Considering Prof's alienation from the gang, the gun incident and the total failure of the raid, Allen feared for Prof's safety. *He should never have helped him in the first place. Perhaps then Prof wouldn't have had the nerve to go ahead,*

despite the threats from the gang. If Prof let on that he, Allen, had been the one that had caused the gun to go off, there would be trouble for him and now Briscoe. Why had he not totally ignored Briscoe on the platform? He shouldn't have cared what Briscoe would have thought; he would have been much better off thinking it was yet another case of prejudice. But oh no, he had just had to let Briscoe know that he was not being discriminated against. Again, no good turn had gone unpunished.

'Look, my mate here just sat with us on the train,' said Allen.

'Your mate? A spade?' said Spot with a look of surprise.

Briscoe was almost as surprised by Allen calling him his mate.

'OK. Let 'em go. We don't want no more trouble with the spades,' said Spot.

To their amazement, Allen and Briscoe were shoved out into the courtyard.

'You were a bit easy on them, Boss, especially the spade. You know the trouble they're causing us opening all those dumps they call clubs,' said Grey Suit.

'Yeah, and we don't want no more. It might be 'andy to 'ave one on our side,' said Spot.

As they stood outside in the courtyard, Allen and Briscoe couldn't quite believe their luck.

'Rass, man, that was close, what you seh to mek that bruiser back off? Some sort of Obeah?'

'No,' said Allen, not knowing what Obeah was, but guessing it was something similar to the witchcraft Lizzie was often accused of practising.

'I asked him what his name was in Anglo-Saxon. Lizzie taught me. By the way, Briscoe, what's your other name?'

'Taximan.'

'Taximan?'

'What's wrong, man? It's what everybody call me back home. No different from Butcher or Baker.'

'That's true. I wonder why you never come across a Candlestickmaker, though,' said Allen.

'What's yours?' asked Briscoe.

'Aglab,' said Allen.

'Aglab?' said Briscoe with some relish.

'Yes, I saw the name on some parish list. There were dozens in our village.'

'Where you goin now?' asked Briscoe.

'I don't know, now that Prof has disappeared. I hope he's all right.'

'Well we can try and find him,' said Briscoe.

'OK,' said Allen only too aware of how guilty he would feel if he just abandoned Prof to his fate.

'Good, let's get over to my area,' said Briscoe.

'Where's that?'

'Ladbroke Grove.'

They went by bus as Briscoe correctly assumed that Allen wouldn't have been able to face travelling by tube.

'Ah! Home sweet home from home,' said Briscoe breathing deeply on their arrival.

They strolled past huge bomb sites, which reminded Allen of Hadleyrow in miniature, except here nature was making inroads into man-made devastation, rather than the other way around.

In the short time since the war, life had flooded back into the bomb craters and burnt-out ruins of London. The deeper craters had water in the bottom and were indistinguishable from the small borrow ponds and marl pits in Hadleyrow. They teemed with life, which had arrived just days after the bombs fell: insect larvae, water boatmen, pond skaters, snails,

fish eggs on birds' legs, frogs and newts.

The charred brick walls of the ruins were green with plants colonising every nook and cranny: mosses, ferns and flowering plants, including the aptly named gallant soldier and London pride. Buddleia, the butterfly bush, flourished even on brick walls. Rosebay willow herb or 'fireweed', rare in London until the Blitz cleared sites for it, grew tall. In a few weeks' time, its purple flowers would give the impression that the embers of the burnt-out buildings were still glowing, and later their fluffy white seeds would look like clouds of smoke as the embers died. At night, the sweet smells and ghostly white trumpets of bindweed, or hedge-bell, silently summoned the moths and, in their wake, the noisily silent bats.

Small thickets of willow, birch, sycamore and alder had sprung up, providing cover for birds including a newcomer from Europe, the black redstart or bomb-bird. City pigeons and house sparrows preferred the buildings. A crow flew overhead but Allen didn't see any rooks.

Here and there, people had cultivated small allotments, growing crops in the area for the first time since Anglo-Saxon times. A handful of chickens wandered about, pecking aimlessly, while others fluffed their feathers up in the dust bowls they had scratched out of the soil.

'That one look like a peel-neck, scraggy, red-feathered senseh fowl,' said Briscoe, pointing to a sorry-looking specimen.

'What's that?' asked Allen.

'A chicken which scratch up buried Obeah tricks.'

'Looks like a Rhode Island Red at the bottom of the pecking order to me,' said Allen with some feeling. He knew chickens to be intelligent animals with a complex social

organisation that could break down under pressure, typically resulting in violent bullying of the lowliest; a position that was familiar to him.

A movement near his feet caught Allen's eye. Glancing down, he saw an injured lizard trying to crawl away. He could see that it had lost one of its back legs and its tail. But despite its pitiable state, it was still beginning to show streaks of green in vain preparation for the mating season. It seemed to so embody Allen's fate that he gathered up the lizard gently and put it in his pocket, where it seemed to settle straight away.

'What you doin, man?' asked Briscoe with a look of horror on his face.

'Well, it wouldn't have lasted long with those chickens around.'

'So? So?' stammered Briscoe.

'So, I'm going to look after it until it's stronger and let it go in a safer place,' said Allen.

'Raatid, man!' Briscoe shook his head in complete disbelief. Allen putting the lizard in his pocket was the equivalent of him, Briscoe, putting a huge spider in his.

A big reddish-looking bruiser sauntered up to them. 'Wanna try our new club, man?' he asked.

'I've never been asked to join a club before,' said Allen.

Briscoe grinned and nodded to the bruiser, who led them around a corner, down some stairs and into a dingy half-basement flat.

'What the hell are you two doing here?' a familiar voice enquired, as a plush office chair, quite at odds with the dingy surroundings, swivelled round.

'Denzil!' Allen and Briscoe exclaimed simultaneously.

Denzil was as dismayed to see them as they were surprised to see him. They were the last people he wanted to see up

there. Apart from the loss of face he would suffer by being seen with that damned naygar and weird white man, they both knew too much about him, which was dangerous.

‘Well?’ insisted Denzil.

‘We came up with Prof,’ said Allen.

‘Where is he now?’

‘We don’t know, but we last saw him at Spot’s place,’ said Briscoe, forgetting he was talking to a fellow West Indian.

‘He knows Spot?’

‘Yes. He was one of his gang,’ said Allen.

‘Hmmm. We could make a connection there that might tek some pressure off. So, welcome to my club!’ said Denzil, with a grandiose sweep of his arm around the smoke-filled room.

‘Your club?’ questioned Allen.

‘Where d’you think I’ve been shipping all that airport stuff to on Sunday afternoons? I’ve got nuff champagne and cigarettes to run for years. All profit.’

Allen and Briscoe were dumbfounded.

‘This mi cousin, Big Radish,’ said Denzil, nodding towards the big, red-tinged bruiser who had brought them in. ‘He’ll be keeping an eye on you.’

‘Big Radish?’ Allen queried, reacting to the familiar name.

‘Because him big and reddish. Drinks on the house,’ said Denzil.

IV

Briscoe had wandered off to the gaming tables and Allen sat in a corner nursing a glass of rum and observing the scene. Gradually, Allen sensed the presence of a huge spider on the wall near his face. He froze. It was his phobia. Even

though he thought he didn't care about anything any more, his subconscious knew better. He looked around, but nobody was taking the slightest bit of interest in the spider until, uncharacteristically, Denzil spotted Allen's discomfort.

'*Cenus malvernensis*,' said Denzil, wandering across.

'What?' asked Allen, astonished that Denzil, who had never shown any interest in nature, knew the Latin name for this monster.

'They name it from where they did first find it, in mi village, Malvern. They come in with the bananas and people bring them here to keep the cockroaches down,' said Denzil.

Despite his terror, Allen couldn't help but recall that the word 'malvern' meant 'evil alder grove', many of which could be found around the Pits, according to the older villagers.

With a mocking laugh, Denzil grabbed the spider in one hand and dumped it into Allen's drink. Allen was paralysed with fear at the sight of the huge spider flailing its legs around in the rum and threatening to get a foothold on the rim of the glass. The commotion attracted a crowd. Nobody else appeared to be afraid of spiders and most took great pleasure in Allen's terror.

Allen remained catatonic as the big black horror finally got a purchase on the rim of the glass and crawled out onto his sleeve. Suddenly, a woman screamed, and chairs and tables were scattered as the crowd fled. Looking down, Allen saw the lizard with one of the spider's legs hanging out of its mouth.

Stunned by the swirl of events, Allen was left alone in the empty bar. After a few moments, faces tentatively reappeared at the door. When they could see no trace of the lizard, which had returned to Allen's pocket, they slowly drifted back, looking at him in some awe.

Their fear of lizards had obliterated any memory of Allen's fear of spiders. Fear was very personal like that.

Allen couldn't understand what was going on. His status seemed to change so quickly around here. Apart from white English, he barely knew what he was supposed to be any more. *Hero or coward? Perhaps both.* He had noticed that the Spaniard who had the same ears as Gill had spoken of somebody being 'brave on that day' or 'afraid on that day', rather than one or the other as a permanent state. He would try to settle for that.

Briscoe picked his way through the upturned furniture.

'Raatid, yuh a man of iron, fi sure,' said Briscoe in awe.

'What are you talking about?' Allen asked him.

'That lizard, man. Back home, lizard them incarnations, omens, warnins of evil. If lizard bite yuh, yuh must plunge into water or die, even though some did die doing just that. The "croaker" that walk on ceilings a national phobia on him own.'

Allen was bemused. He loved lizards; they were perhaps his favourite creatures. It was the contents of the lizard's stomach in his pocket that terrified him.

Idly looking around, Allen noticed that a new huddle had formed at the bar, with Big Radish sitting in the middle, arm-wrestling all newcomers for whatever they wanted to wager.

Big Radish was a legend back home and now in London for having wrestled and killed what everybody thought was an alligator. This was a reasonable assumption, as he had been working as a bouncer at Alligator Pond, a bauxite port on the south coast of his island. But, like most legends, it had little to do with reality. He had, in fact, concocted the story to impress the bargirls waiting for the next bauxite ship to dock. The story had gone around the island, and by the time it had

got back the man-eater had clamped its jaws on Radish's leg, who, with his bare hands, had prised its jaws apart until they dislocated and penetrated its skull. He was so seduced by the story himself that when a government nature conservation officer had come sniffing around to investigate the rumour that someone had killed a protected crocodile – there being no alligators on the island – Radish had felt guilty and, despite the heat, had worn long trousers.

'OK, you de only one lef nuh,' said Big Radish with a grin.

Allen looked around to see who he was talking to. There was nobody else, just him. It was a frivolous challenge. Big Radish had only made it to involve the strange white man rather than in any seriousness. Big Radish always looked out for the underdog, which is why he took such good care of his girls. Woe betides anybody who abused them; more, that is, than the abuse they suffered in being there in the first place.

Allen's arms looked like sticks next to Big Radish's massive, overblown bulk, and Big Radish was surprised by the equanimity with which Allen accepted the challenge. Actually, Allen wouldn't have accepted if he hadn't been so preoccupied with the contents of his pocket.

Allen took up the strain, holding the tension easily, and when he felt Big Radish faltering, largely out of shock, he exerted just enough effort to put Big Radish's arm down. The only things that concerned Allen were being in such a close face-to-face situation and avoiding any extra distortion of his mouth through the effort.

It all happened so quickly that Allen didn't have time to realise that, having mistakenly accepted the challenge in the first place, it would have been better to have feigned losing. His reputation wouldn't have suffered, while Big Radish's certainly had in being beaten by this stringy white man. There

were gasps of disbelief from the group of beaten participants amid much sucking of teeth; not only at Allen's impossible victory, but because it also meant that he would have beaten each of them as well. As a result, some decided Allen must be a Meki-man and shivered.

The barman turned away and wiped a few glasses. He didn't want to witness Big Radish's discomfort and embarrassment. Big Radish was a good influence around the place and his mere presence was enough to keep the peace.

'Try the other arm,' a man in the crowd said.

'Good idea,' said Allen, wishing he had always had second chances to put right the things he had regretted in the past. To him the past was not gone to be forgotten. It wasn't even past. Once created it remained to haunt him.

The barman turned back. He had expected this white man to brag about his unlikely victory and make the most of it in front of the stunned audience, but there wasn't the slightest sign of that.

Big Radish was in turmoil. *What had just happened couldn't have happened. But now he had a chance to put things straight.* This time Big Radish easily forced Allen's arm down flat onto the table.

'Try the right one again,' pestered the crowd, eager for the weird white man to be put back in his place.

Again, Big Radish put Allen down with ease. Big Radish shot Allen a glance as he and his group of acolytes moved away to play dominoes. Big Radish was mightily relieved that his public reputation had been restored, albeit a little tarnished. The arm-wrestling helped to maintain his invincible aura in a non-violent manner, and provided a good source of income. He also knew that it was a good indication of his overall strength.

At that point, Denzil emerged with a big grin on his face and a girl on each arm.

'What's up?' he asked Allen reluctantly, sensing the awkward atmosphere in the bar.

'Nothing. Big Radish has just beaten us all at arm-wrestling,' said Allen quickly.

"Us?" You a fool yuhself. Leave dat fi de strong men dem,' said Denzil incredulously, forgetting to temper his patois for Allen.

Not able to sit around when there was any work to be done, Allen started tidying up the chairs and tables.

'Kiss me neck, look pan dat deh mashmout bredda, de alibotn work fi not'n,' one chap whispered to the astonished group, their entire history and personal experience having been based on white people exploiting their physical labour.

'Who dem callin alibotn?' asked Denzil.

'Me. What's an alibotn?' queried Allen. He had made out the sounds 'mash' and 'mout' well enough on his own.

'Alibotn satisfai wi enitin; alibotn work fi notn. Someone who thinks he's worthless, satisfied with anything, works for nothing. Someone stupid,' said Denzil, his speech finally under control.

Allen said nothing. He couldn't complain too much as that was exactly how he saw himself.

Denzil was embarrassed by the attention Allen was drawing to himself. He was beginning to suspect the worst of Allen, who never smiled, couldn't drive and, worst of all, hadn't yet taken the chance to go with any of the bargirls. Denzil had also noticed that Allen treated everybody as a complete equal, which he considered totally ridiculous.

Some things were essential for any male worth his salt as far as Denzil was concerned: good teeth, the ability to drive

fast, and the ability to belly-wop women all night and make them cry out, although not necessarily in that order. Allen failed on all three, or four for those who counted the last one as two. Denzil could never separate them and therefore always counted them as one.

Denzil considered dumping Allen in the street, but with Jack Spot's men watching he didn't want to leave a loose cannon like Allen wandering around. Perhaps Allen would be his Yawsy-Bwoy, a character from Caribbean folk tales whose skin was scarred by 'yaws' – a tropical disease – and who, though ostracised, manages to save the day. Not that Denzil held out much hope.

He didn't care about Briscoe. Briscoe was so black nobody would take any notice of him, whatever happened.

V

Denzil had disappeared again and Briscoe had drifted away to watch the action on the gambling tables when one of the bargirls came over and sat with Allen.

'Buy me a drink, suh?'

'Yes, what would you like?' said Allen.

'Two double Scotches,' she shouted out to the barman.

'Please,' said Allen. 'You didn't say please.'

The girl stared at Allen in disbelief before breaking into peals of laughter.

'Weh yu carry come gi we yasso, Denzil?' she shouted across to Denzil, who was sitting with the two girls entwined around him.

'An buy me a patty, den,' she said to Allen.

'Certainly,' said Allen, not exactly sure what a patty was.

'Two patty deh ova deh so,' she shouted to the barman

again.

Allen opened his mouth to decline, but gave up.

'Dem a soon come, but nuh figet fi seh please an tanks,' the barman said, amid guffaws of laughter.

Allen was on his guard. He was becoming a figure of fun again, but this time for his manners. This had never happened in Hadleyrow. He had been denigrated for just about everything else, but not for his manners, which Lizzie had indelibly imprinted within him when he was young.

Allen could see that the girl was about to ask for something else, so he said: 'Order whatever you want, you don't have to ask.'

The girl looked at him askance. She wasn't used to this, and to her surprise she was even beginning to feel the slightest bit guilty about plying her trade on this innocent young chap with the funny mouth.

Duppy must ave boxed im dere, she thought.

He looked haunted and on guard, unlike the cruel, arrogant men who normally came in.

Briscoe came over, thinking Allen might need some support. He ordered a couple of rums for Allen and himself, and a Scotch for the girl, who was obviously trying hard to get drunk, as if she were preparing herself for some sort of ordeal.

'This is watered down, yuh know, man,' said Briscoe.

He looked pityingly at the girl and softly began to intone:

*'Agnes o' de Village Lane
Fancy o' me childish will.'*

'Do you know her?' asked Allen.

'No, man, she just remind me of me first sweetheart,' he

said, before continuing:

*Playin', now before me eyes
Sadly I remember still
How much once your love I prize.'*

'Did you write it yourself?' Allen asked.

'No, man. It's a famous poem back home.'

The girl felt uncomfortable under Briscoe's gaze. She didn't want any black man getting between her and her white man. And she wasn't called Agnes, either. Taking her patty with her, she wandered off to find a friend to attract Briscoe away.

Allen stood up as she left the table.

'Nuh. Steh hya mi soon come,' she said, completely misunderstanding Allen's politeness and thinking he was trying to come with her.

'I know one about an Agnes. Saint Agnes,' said Allen.

'What does she do?' asked Briscoe.

Quoting from one of his old books, *Mother Brunch's Closet Newly Broke Open*, and sounding a bit strange as he tried to emulate Briscoe's style, Allen intoned:

*'St Agnes, that's to lovers kind
Come ease the trouble of my mind.'*

Encouraged by Briscoe's attention, he continued:

*'Agnes sweet and Agnes fair
Hither, hither, now repair
Bonny Agnes, let me see
The lad who is to marry me
Now good St Agnes, play thy part
And send to me my own sweetheart*

*And shew me such a happy bliss
This night of him to have a kiss.'*

There was a sudden, dramatic change in Briscoe's demeanour, and Allen realised he had somehow put the fear of God into him.

'Fi God sake, shet up,' Briscoe hissed. 'People deh bout who woulda kill a man fi a talk lika dat, an even me fi a listen. Dem tink we batty man dem for sure.'

Allen's first reaction was that the reference to 'batty men' was to do with cricket, and he wondered whether there were also 'bowly men' and 'fieldy men'. But his instincts told him it was yet another word for a homosexual man.

'I just recited it as it was written,' said Allen resignedly.

Allen had heard Briscoe and other West Indians bemoaning the welcome they had received in England, yet all the ones he knew had well-paid jobs in which they were treated as well as, if not better than, he had ever been. They found it hard to find good accommodation, but nobody was going to kill them for quoting poetry.

Realising that nobody had overheard them because of the cacophony of noise, mainly from those playing dominoes West Indian style, with much slamming of the 'cards' and leaping up and shouting, Briscoe calmed down.

The girl returned, having been unable to find anybody to attract Briscoe away as he was too black. Much to Allen's amazement, she plonked herself onto his lap, put her arm around his neck and started whispering into his ear. Allen couldn't understand what she was saying, but he could feel her warm breath on his ear, smell the whiskey on her breath and feel her firm bottom against his thighs as she wriggled

about.

Allen was confused by this sudden intimacy.

Briscoe looked sad and returned to his soft refrain:

*Fus I saw your pretty smile
Loved your face so free o guile
An your soul so clear of stain
Agnes, Agnes o de lane
Agnes o de lane no more
For you went away, my pet
Agnes once so sweet an pure
To a miserable deat
Oh, deembrance brings me pain
Fallen Agnes o de lane!*

Allen had barely understood a word, but he sensed the sadness of it all. As far as he could tell, Agnes had fallen into debt, but that didn't seem to match Briscoe's sadness. The girl on his lap, however, understood only too well that it described her wretched situation as a bar girl. She wasn't dead yet, but she knew other girls who had once been just like her who were. She stopped wiggling about on Allen's lap and started quietly crying on his shoulder.

She whispered: 'Me did tink London town woulda be pretty-pretty and dat I could mek someting outta meself.'

'How can we help her?' Allen asked Briscoe, his heart breaking.

Briscoe stared at him long and hard to see whether he was making a cruel joke, and then looked around nervously.

'It difficult, man, she have nowhere to go. They take her earnins and keep her in debt so she can't run away. If we help her, they track her down and treat her worse. She not much

more than a slave when it come to it. Same old business, no matter how it dress up.'

'What does she do for a living?' asked Allen, assuming from her behaviour that she wasn't married.

Again, Briscoe looked at him in blank amazement. 'Where have you been all your life?' he asked in as kindly a way as he could.

'Hadleyrow,' said Allen.

VI

Throughout this conversation, a fat, round-faced white man, with short, fair hair and thick, horn-rimmed glasses had been staring at Allen and the girl with his mean eyes. When he saw the atmosphere change between them and the girl start to cry, he got up and pushed his way across the crowded bar. He was wearing an untucked white shirt to hide his bulging beer belly. To Allen, he looked like a fat white toad, although Allen realised that wasn't fair to toads, which had beautiful golden eyes.

'Cheer up. Come with me, gal, eh,' he said in what sounded to Allen like an American accent. 'I'll show you a good time. Don't waste your time with this one, eh. He doesn't seem to know how to keep you happy, and we know what that means,' he said with a smirk at Allen. At this, he took her arm and pulled her off Allen's lap into a slow dance on the tiny patch of floor.

Allen was so surprised he was slow to react, but the girl didn't object and nobody in the bar took any notice, so he decided he would have to let it go. *Yet another insult to swallow.* If she had asked for help he would have stopped the man, but he seemed well-known to the other girls and the locals

at the bar, so Allen thought it better not to make a fuss for Denzil's sake. There was something about the man to which Allen instantly took against: the self-assurance, the arrogance and the superciliousness.

*'And after all, many gals richer than me
Pretty white girlies of better degree
Live as I do, an are happy an gay
Then why shouldn't I be as happy as they?'* intoned Briscoe in his sad, singsong rhythm.

It finally dawned on Allen what had really happened to Briscoe's first love. She must have left their village and somehow ended up as a bar girl in a city, which was why this girl had triggered Briscoe's melancholy.

'Your Agnes reminds me of a girlfriend called Anne of Oxford Street,' said Allen.

'That's a funny name,' said Briscoe, relieved that Allen had at least had a girlfriend.

'Well, nobody knew her real name.'

'How did you meet her?'

'No, I never met her. I read about her.'

Briscoe's heart sank.

'How come she did in a book?'

'Well, she was a young runaway who lived on the streets of London and was kind to a homeless young man. He became a famous writer and wrote about her and her kindness, describing how he saw her in his dreams years later, more beautiful than she was by lamplight in Oxford Street and no older. Which is how I read about her and why I feel sad for her,' said Allen.

'Is she still alive?'

'No, the two of them lived hundreds of years ago.'

Briscoe's heart sank further.

In fact, this writer had been of great help to Allen with the observation:

For it may be observed generally that, wherever two thoughts stand related to each other by a law of antagonism, and exist as it were by mutual repulsion, they are apt to suggest each other.

Allen loved this quote. It was ingrained in his memory, but he felt that it could have been refined by the addition of the words 'in a contrary way'. In other words, only for the worse, never for the better; a 'bad' thought never being apt to suggest a 'good' one. But, with De Quincey there with him, Allen thought he had better not. Thomas De Quincey, English essayist, master of poetic prose and staunch abolitionist, would have been one hundred and sixty-five if he hadn't died aged seventy-four.

Allen had also discovered, beyond coincidence as far as he was concerned, that De Quincey was mentioned in a Sherlock Holmes short story, 'The Man with the Twisted Lip'. The fact that this story also highlighted the adverse effects of opium addiction and was inspired by De Quincey's account of his experiences with the drug, gave Allen pause for thought with regard to his admiration for De Quincey's work. He could never separate artists from their art.

De Quincey had become addicted to laudanum, a mixture of alcohol and opium, which he took to relieve chronic toothache. Lizzie knew of an ancient anaesthetic containing opium, mixed with the juices of various herbs, which was supposed to produce a sleep that lasted several days. But some of the ingredients were so dangerous she never dared

to try it.

Instead, Lizzie had prepared a powder from the bark of alder, willow and birch to dull the pain of toothache – as Allen had read the ancient Greeks had done – which actually worked. Yet Saint Apollonia, virgin and martyr of Alexandria from the third century, was still invoked locally against toothache.

To offset the imbalance between science and religion, when he had read that Horace Wells was the first to use nitrous oxide to pull a tooth painlessly in 1884, Allen had carved ‘Wells’ deep into the smooth, grey bark of a sycamore tree near the Pits. It wasn’t much of a memorial, but it was better than nothing.

One of the German refugees wandering past some time later couldn’t believe his eyes, assuming that it referred to Otto Wels, leader of the only party in Germany to vote against the granting of absolute power to Hitler. Allen had unwittingly commemorated two heroes for the effort of one.

Briscoe had left to get some more cigarettes in little red and white packets of four when the girl wandered back to Allen’s table.

‘Yuh nuh eat yuh patty yet,’ she said, sitting down close to him.

Luckily, Lizzie had taught him: ‘Be not ’asty eatin’ pie or pasty.’

As a result, he always looked inside a pie or patty before eating it. When he prised the patty open he was faced with a pastry boat full of squirming blowfly maggots, which, on exposure to the light, wriggled out all over the plate with amazing speed and agility.

The girl screamed and recoiled in horror, but Allen wasn’t

too put out. He was used to maggots. In fact, Lizzie had once said: 'Always choose them apples with the maggots. Better the maggots youm see than the poison youm don't.'

In response, he would trot out his one and only joke: 'What's worse than finding a maggot in your apple?' To which Lizzie would in turn dutifully reply: 'Alf a maggot.' Although she really wanted to say: 'No maggot'.

The girl looked on in astonishment as Allen attempted to catch all the maggots and put them back, but each time he caught a few he couldn't get the pastry lid back on quickly enough before more got away. On returning the patty, he apologised for letting some of the maggots escape and meekly accepted another one in the way of compensation, as he didn't want to make too much fuss.

The girl, who by now was getting drunk, started urging Allen to go into one of the rooms with her. Allen grew increasingly uncomfortable. Even if he hadn't been damaged, he was so innocent when it came to sexual matters that he wouldn't have known what to do anyway. The only thing he did know about the subject was that 'protection' was important if you didn't want a baby. So, when he was out with Gill, he had always carried a Brussels sprout stalk as a cudgel, not that he knew what he was supposed to be protecting them from.

It didn't occur to him to go next door with the girl and offer her twice the money just to sit with him for a suitable length of time before returning to the bar in order to do her a favour – to save face, for want of a better phrase – and perhaps even to learn something. He didn't think like that. All of this was too sudden and too new for him to act with any guile. Anyway, it was Gill he yearned for, not just any girl.

'Sorry,' said Allen.

The girl downed her drink in one go, pulled a face and

moved over to a group of soldiers who had just arrived.

‘Rhaatid, yu a wutless bwoy,’ she said as she moved away. ‘What yu need is a good Front-End-Lifter to big yu up nice.’

She had persuaded the kitchen staff to keep a pot of ‘mannish water’ – a salty soup of entrails, testicles and head of goat – to feed to her customers, but the kitchen staff had drunk it all themselves. So she used horse tonic whenever she could get it and kept some small spiders in a jar for the same purpose. She and the kitchen staff, were wasting their time, of course, as these were about as effective as other such remedies around the world, including those used in Hadleyrow. Generally it wasn’t a problem, as most of her customers were sex maniacs anyway.

Allen settled further back into the corner and longed to be alone in a hedgerow in Hadleyrow watching the hares in the rain amid the cool, green countryside, or at least what was left of it.

He wondered what Gill was doing.

VII

Allen became aware of the Big Fat White Toad standing next to his table. ‘You see that weirdo on the next table, eh? He doesn’t go with the girls. He only hangs around these places because he’s covering up the fact that he’s queer. Q-U-E-E-R,’ said the Big Fat White Toad with a smirk on his face.

Caught by surprise once again, Allen involuntarily turned to look at the next table. It was empty. Puzzled, he turned back to see the Big Fat White Toad waddling back to the group that was gathered around the bar. The anger Allen had been suppressing for weeks for the sake of other people’s peace and quiet began to well up to bursting point. *What right*

had that Big Fat White Toad to call him anything?

He had overheard enough to know that queers were men who went with men rather than women. At first he couldn't imagine what men might do to each other, and when he had heard, he wished he hadn't. Either way, he had the sense to realise that queers could no more choose to be who they were than he had chosen to be who he was; that they could choose their actions but not their instincts.

Despite Allen's unfamiliarity with patois, it was becoming apparent that, in Denzil's club, the hatred was fiercer and the language more creative with regard to homosexuals than towards any other group. Any man with a fenky-fenky, mincing walk, even if he was suffering from ingrown toenails, bunions or any foot problem that prevented him from walking in a manly way was – as it was 'a mixed race ting; a white people ting' – an effeminate white pussy hole.

Allen suspected that those singing the songs would have approved if landladies had put up notices saying: 'No Effeminate White Pussy Holes'.

This hatred was even expressed in songs: 'We dreamin of a new island, when batty man fi dead.' And, more puzzlingly: 'Bun a fire pon a kuh pon mister fagoty, ears ah big ben up and a wince under agony, poop man fi drown a yawd man philosophy.'

Briscoe had refused to translate, but Allen guessed that it was something like Guy Fawkes Night, only with some paradoxical drowning involved. He wondered what sort of philosophy could celebrate such horrors. In Hadleyrow, Hallowe'en and Midsummer had been celebrated with bonfires, but both had been extinguished by Guy Fawkes on the Fifth of November, when the burning of a Catholic was celebrated. As a lad, it had never occurred to Allen that there

was anything barbaric about burning the effigy of a man, but when it did, he winced at the thought and couldn't watch the flames as they consumed the Guy. But at least he had never tried to rescue it.

Similar venom was aimed at women who only loved women. Allen hadn't heard of these in Hadleyrow and found the idea even more unfathomable. But here they were a similar source of artistic creativity, as expressed in a song he heard in Denzil's club:

*When yuh hear a Sodomite get raped
But a fi wi fault
Two women gonna hock up inna bed
That's two Sodomites dat fi dead.
Bwoy dem kinda gal naasti, sab!
But dis caan happen, two shutpan caan join.*

When Allen had asked Briscoe to translate, Briscoe had nearly choked. Allen knew Sodomites had come from Sodom near the Dead Sea in biblical times, but he wasn't sure how they had arrived in the Caribbean.

And now the Big Fat White Toad, without ever having met Allen before, had exposed him to this potentially deadly threat. When the Big Fat White Toad got back to his gang at the bar, they all turned to stare at him. One of them started wiggling his nose like a rabbit, while another made strange, limp-wristed movements with his hands. Again, in innocent surprise, Allen looked around to see who all this was aimed at.

Because he had been mocked all his life, and because he was insecure, Allen was vulnerable to every perceived slight and insult. But because he was competitive, he felt the need to meet every challenge. And because retaliation had to be

suppressed in everyday life, he simmered with resentment and bore grudges, which was like swallowing poison for a prolonged period in a bid to cause the offender to suffer.

Whenever he could he had always taken off on a long run over the fields. The relief of doing something so natural in such beautiful surroundings had always worked its magic, so that, although he couldn't forgive or forget the insults, his anger was dissipated. Even in the sphere of emotion the solution to pollution was dilution.

But he couldn't do that in this case, so the anger built up like a pent-up volcano. He wanted to disfigure the Big Fat White Toad so he would know what it was like to be alienated, insulted, mocked and attacked; always by a stinking, cowardly mob that had to outnumber its victims, like the hounds and the hare. *Well, this hare had had enough. He would take on the bounds around the bar. He would take on the whole lot of them.*

Allen pushed his chair back, stood up and squeezed his way across the crowded dance floor, involuntarily saying: 'Excuse me please,' as he went. He couldn't help himself.

He grabbed a glass of white rum from the table of a surprised customer, intent on driving it into the face of the Big Fat White Toad. However, even in his anger he realised as he drew near that he couldn't do such a thing and lost his resolve. Even in the heat of the moment he remembered a line about 'bold action being sicklied over with the pale cast of thought'.

Coming upon the sniggering group at a pace, focused entirely on the Big Fat White Toad, he still didn't know what to do. *What could he do? What should he do?* He saw the Big Fat White Toad getting bigger and fatter and whiter.

Allen was nearly upon him when the decision was made for him. He slipped on the tiled floor, wet with spilled drinks,

and as he fell he grabbed the Big Fat White Toad. As they both crashed to the floor in a writhing heap, Allen's main concern was to avoid dislodging or harming the lizard in his pocket.

Disentangling himself and springing up, leaving the Big Fat White Toad heaving on the floor like a beached seal, Allen was angry that he hadn't carried out his plan to inflict serious damage on the Toad's face, even though he knew he would have spent the rest of his life regretting it.

Nevertheless, Allen's ill-conceived attempt at getting back at the Big Fat White Toad had been partially successful. By the time the Big Fat White Toad had been helped up, the story that he had been involved in a public demonstration of affection in Denzil's club with another white batty man was already out the door and on its way around the tenements and clubs. So for a while the Big Fat White Toad's reputation was in tatters and he was exposed to the same potentially fatal consequences as Allen. Even when the true story caught it up, the reaction amongst most had been: 'Yu nebba see sumoke widout fiyah.'

The estranged husband of one of the bargirls, embittered with jealousy and resentment towards Denzil, whom he blamed for his wife's cruel fate, took his cue from the furore, and tried to start a rumour that Denzil was a batty man, but it never made it out the door; unlike the husband, who was slung out for being such a 'fool-fool fi troo'.

On hearing of the incident, Denzil turned a deathly pale. Normally he would have flaunted this natural bleaching in his frantic efforts to distance himself from those dammed naygas, but on this occasion he kept out of sight in his private room at the club, wondering how the hell he could sort out any damage to his reputation. Even as his mind raced, however,

he admired his temporary 'high' complexion in the mirror.

Denzil need not have worried, as everyone knew only too well that he would never have had anything to do with batty men. Luckily for Allen, this also proved to the crowd that he couldn't possibly be a batty man either, although all agreed he was the weirdest white man they had ever seen.

Cheered by the reassurances shouted by his friends through the door regarding his bigotry and prejudices, Denzil re-emerged into the front bar, downed a couple of glasses of cowneck, grabbed a spiced pickled herring and shouted to one of his women to cook him up some salt codfish fritters, peppered shrimp and fried cassava bread. He had no trouble sourcing supplies.

Denzil had an irrepressible character and immediately worked on further retrieving the situation. He didn't waste time wallowing in the aftermath of bad luck or mistakes. Generally, this was a good life strategy, except for the young children playing in dusty yards back home without a daddy in sight. He might never see any of them again, except perhaps for some of the daughters he might unknowingly meet in a bar some time in the future.

VIII

Allen staggered outside, desperate for a breather and for some contact with nature. He took a deep breath and realised that, since leaving Hadleyrow, he had experienced fewer of his terrifying thoughts. This proved that, born as they were from the internal world of fearful imagination, the chance of obtaining relief from them increased the less it was sought and the more he was distracted by real experiences.

One of his old friends turned up to share this wisdom:

Richard Baxter, English Puritan church leader, poet and theologian, who would have been three hundred and sixty-nine if hadn't died aged seventy-six. Allen had read that his ghost was still seen in Kidderminster. Not that he had to go up there to see him, as Richard Baxter always arrived when he was needed to advise Allen to:

Take less notice of your troublesome thoughts. If you answer them, they will never be done with you. Take no notice of them and they will become weary. Be sure that you keep yourself constantly employed as far as your strength will bear.

The sun shone weakly through the city gloom. He had no idea how long he had been away from Hadleyrow. In terms of new experiences, it felt like a lifetime.

He wondered what Gill was doing.

Briscoe and Radish had seen Allen leave and followed him out to keep an eye on him. The unlikely trio sat in silence, which hinted at friendships forming through shared experiences, despite their disparate origins.

'Do you know anything about that fat white man?' asked Allen, only now realising that referring to him as white suggested there were similarities between his own situation and what Briscoe termed being black.

'Yes, man. He live in Jamaica and when he come over on business trips he's always in here. Him one of them white fellas who must live in a black country to get somewhere. The only other place he lived is South Africa. He wouldn't do so well among his own kind.'

'Raatid, they're at it again,' said Radish.

'Oh no, man!' said Briscoe.

Allen looked up and saw that they were gazing over at a group in a far corner of the bombsite, where loud music had

started thumping out.

‘Wait here, mon. Deh need stoppin,’ said Radish.

Briscoe had no intention of waiting there and followed at a distance. Left alone, Allen took the opportunity to check on his lizard. It was sluggish and very cold to the touch, so, finding himself alone, he slipped it into his mouth. It was nothing unusual to him. He had done it before in the fields to revive a lizard caught out in a cold snap. His mouth lacked the normal sensitivities as a result of the damage inflicted upon it over the years. He had even astounded people in the past by putting a large bumblebee in his mouth so they could hear it buzzing about inside. He had never been stung.

The music stopped and Allen saw an altercation between Radish and the group, with Briscoe hurrying up to join him. Allen followed and nobody noticed him as he joined one end of the group.

Egged on by the others, one of the gang was urinating against a grimy, semi-basement window, through which he just caught sight of the pale face of an old woman recoiling in horror.

Allen saw Radish confronting the apparent leader of the gang, a giant of a man who was built like a gorilla. Radish looked as though he sensed he had met his match even before he was felled by a huge blow. Briscoe, following up, was simply brushed aside. Allen rushed forward and grabbed one of the Gorilla’s arms, unable to reach around the Gorilla’s biceps even with both hands.

‘Coo deh, look wot we got here,’ said the Gorilla when he became aware of Allen hanging onto his arm. Pinning Allen down on a pile of rubble, he pushed his face right into Allen’s and said: ‘Come den, rabbit man. Mek we look pan yu mout.’

Sensing more trouble than they had bargained for, the gang

began to break up. At great personal risk to his reputation, one ran to the police station for help. A few thought they should help the strange white man but weren't sure why or how. They spent some time trying to work out their best plan of action and came to the conclusion that: 'Kakruoch no bizniz iina faul fait.' So, like cockroaches, they didn't interfere in a fowls' fight.

Despite his apparently desperate situation, Allen couldn't believe his luck. Emitting a weird gurgle through his clenched lips, he gently aligned the lizard up with his tongue towards an avenue of escape from the dark, warm, wet cavern in which it had mysteriously found itself.

The lizard tentatively poked its head out through the hole between Allen's lips. If Allen hadn't gently blocked off its retreat with his tongue and forced it forwards, it would have shot back into its sanctuary at the screams that greeted its appearance. When the Gorilla and the remains of the group saw the lizard emerge from Allen's strange mouth they all recoiled in utter horror. They knew they were in the presence of Great Evil.

As soon as he felt the Gorilla loosen his grip, Allen unleashed all his pent-up fury to break free and leap off the heap of rubble. He was so quick that everyone who witnessed it convinced themselves that not only had this male version of a white witch spewed out a lizard, but that he had also flown across the yard. Briscoe shoved the shocked Gorilla backwards over Radish's slumped figure, causing the Gorilla to crack his formidable skull on an even more formidable piece of concrete, knocking him clean out. Radish came to and was unable to make any sense of the turmoil that surrounded him.

'What was all that about?' asked Allen as they staggered

back to Denzil's.

'That mob works for a Jamaican landlord who's getting rid of all the old lodgers so he can pack a load of West Indians in and charge them a fortune in rent,' said Briscoe, without a trace of patois in his subconscious attempt to dissociate himself from the offenders.

'Yes. British and Polish slum landlords do the same,' said Allen, trying to ease Briscoe's embarrassment.

'Yes, mon, dem all bastards, no matter weh dey from,' said Radish.

'What happened?' asked Denzil when they returned to the club.

Denzil had his suspicions that Radish was losing his powers and had been looking at the leader of that gang to replace him at the club.

'Him mash up de big man,' said Briscoe quickly.

Radish looked bemused for a moment.

'Yes he did, good and proper,' said Allen.

'Yuh see nuttin like it, man. Radish give im a beast lick. Me sey me cyaan believe it. Them jump an kick an gwan like a coolie duppy pon them,' said Briscoe, using his patois to increase the dramatic effect.

Radish couldn't remember a thing, but he had the distinct feeling they were covering for him somehow, so he kept quiet. He knew his powers were waning, and had already resolved to get out of the business as soon as he could. Things seemed to be getting more and more violent. He also knew there would be no end to it. *In de bad-mon bizness peace is beside de point. How cyaan yout set demself up, distinguish demself inna dere area, widout violence?* he pondered.

'When have you got to go back to the airport?' Allen asked Briscoe.

‘Tonight. You comin?’

‘No. I’ve got nothing to go back for. I’ll try and get a job up here,’ said Allen.

Briscoe looked doubtful but didn’t say anything. He resolved to keep a lookout for Allen through his network of connections, just in case.

‘Denzil’s got other properties. I’ll ask him if he can find you a room. Walk good, tek your time, less you buck your foot.’