

Acknowledgments

The cover image is an original artwork created by Maria Emilov (www.mariaemilov.net) in response to reading
Frontliners

CHAPTER ONE

It was Friday afternoon and Richard Lawrence had taken himself off beyond the lawn and the shadow of the house to sit out on concrete at the far end of the garden. With a wineglass close to hand Richard was dividing his attention between two book collections, marking and transferring from one pile to the other. As he checked and sampled his eyes moved quickly, searching and comparing, forward and back. At one page, a fold-out, he paused, weighing up evidence; at another he smiled; a couple he reread – for most he remained expressionless.

He wondered if now, at last, after talking and trying and so much wasted effort, he'd finally had enough.

A cloud dimmed the sun and for a while he looked off, grey-eyed, abstracted, examining the house. Dream-vague and wishful, he was searching into thought. When the cloud passed over he pushed up in his chair, nodded and read a few more pages. As he checked back on comments he rolled up a sleeve, glanced at his watch, then pressed in closer, bending to his work. Flicking over pages, he recorded marks. High-cheeked and definite with quick, attentive glances and firm-set lips, he was on task.

He'd really had enough. Enough for anyone.

From time to time he put aside his schoolbooks, closed his eyes and angled back his head, directing forward to the mid-May sun. Then he was himself. A boy grown to man: not too old, not too young. Actorly as well; thirtyish, with presence. At other times he gazed both ways, sighting the back gardens while taking in the sounds of birds on branches, dishes clashing, TV announcements, children crying. Occasionally he rose, topped up his glass from an unstoppered bottle, and stood tall beside the fence examining the climbers while absorbing scent from a newly-opened rose. A plane passed over as he sampled wine.

Glancing skyward, he yawned, stretched, then refilled his glass. Returning to his chair he placed his drink on concrete, then, spreading both hands, fingered-combed his hair. Layered from the front, it was mouse-brown, cheek-length and slightly girlish. A dog barked, a window slid up and a radio sounded. When a woman called out he frowned, looked back at the house, then settled in his seat and picked up his ballpoint. Holding it sideways, cigarette-wise, he paused, swigged another mouthful then reached to the floor and scooped up a blue-bound jotter which he'd stowed beneath the chair. He opened, thumbed through the pages, shifted round his pen and stared into white.

Enough was enough. Enough, and too much.

In the house three doors away Vanessa Lawrence was talking with her dear friend Ruth.

"He's OTT," she said, sipping at her tea.

Her host, who was wedged in with cushions at one end of the sofa, nodded. "Mine's the same."

Vanessa smiled. "Doug? Surely not. He's more monkish."

"Can be fiery."

"Ah, but Richard—" Vanessa paused. There was so much she could say.

Ruth leaned forward and blinked. Her face, which was long and narrow, was flushed with awareness. Wearing a belted dress and open-toed sandals, she held herself at an angle, sidelong, with a *why-me* expression. With her slightly watery eyes, red-blotched neck and freckled shoulders, she looked like a tourist just off the beach.

"He's obsessive," Vanessa continued. "Music, writing, the latest theory – it's all about him: his opinions. And each new one's the best, the most important, so nothing else matters."

Her friend tut-tutted.

Vanessa eyed her tea. Thinking, deliberating, she was giving out.

"The men's club," she said, speaking slowly. "They're not like us."

Ruth raised her fingers to signal behind her head. “Bloody Martians,” she called, pulling a face.

Vanessa laughed. Again she eyed her tea. Her gaze was assured, mixed with surprise.

“I do wonder sometimes,” she added, speaking more quietly. “Richard’s so driven. It’s all about what he calls *thinking straight* – which means, as far as I can see, putting things in boxes, labelling, having his own way. And whatever he’s into, it’s that and that only. Day and night, nothing else matters. He’s what you call *hyper*. Life for him is one long campaign.”

Shaking her head, she took a sip of tea.

Ruth, agreeing, settled into silence.

As Vanessa drank, she kept up her talk – but now more random: half-chatty, half-reflective. There was something watchful – even self-regarding – in her well-rounded vowels and stretch on the sofa. With her large eyes and firmed-up mouth, it seemed she’d things in hand. She belonged – at least in imagination – to those well-born ladies whose understated gestures, full of hidden meanings, are references off.

“There are things I could tell...” she said, echoing her own thoughts.

Lapsing into quiet, her expression flattened. She adjusted her hold on the teacup. Gazing, she sighed.

She was measuring and comparing: a level and how much remained. The first taste and after. And how talking with Ruth always brought it out. Framed and examined, seen in perspective, the truth served up. And the images – still-life – held between fingers, the time-lapse and memories, the otherness.

They’d been looking at photos in a frayed black album. It lay discarded now on a low-level table with a double page on show. The pictures, snapshots mainly (dated and captioned with fixed and public smiles) were arranged, it seemed, to illustrate aspects of two contrasting states. On one side a wedding with Ruth in white and Doug by her side (with, below it, a passport-sized cameo of an upstanding Richard, boyish and smiling, offering a toast), on the other side a beach-shot of children squatted, guzzling ice cream. With the women, now older, working as a

twosome, cleaning and wiping and directing to the tent. And, next step in the series, the children facing camera, seated under canvas, finger-licking chocolates and sipping fizzy drinks. While outside (pictured last) were the open-air husbands, one testing and tying up flaps, the other checking pegs. Both seemed distant, absorbed in activity, their minds set on actions, ignoring the rain.

On the upstairs landing there was a scuffle, followed by a thump, a squeal and a door clicking shut.

Ruth eyed the ceiling as if it might cave in. "What on earth d'you think is going on up there?"

Vanessa blinked, unhanding her cup. The answer she gave seemed to come from a long way off. *Something* she supposed.

"A death, I should imagine," replied Ruth, grinning.

A child appeared at the doorway. He was thin and taut, high-cheeked, serious, with round brown eyes and a girl-smooth complexion.

"Stephan," said Vanessa shifting forward, "what's wrong?"

"They locked me out," he said, breathing quickly.

"Locked you out?"

Nodding, he threw himself forward over chair arm and lap.

His mother pulled a face. "Oh dear, I'm sure they don't mean it." She began to rub his back.

"They did."

"Well it's over now."

"They have to let me in."

"I'm sure they will."

His nostrils flared as he pulled back upright. "You tell them."

"I can try."

The boy began to push.

"All right, lovey. Don't get angry."

"*You* tell them."

"All right."

"*Tell* them."

"I will."

"*You tell them.*"

"Yes, yes."

"Go on then."

He pushed and arm-pinched her to upright. “Stephan, don’t hurt,” she said as he herded her to the stairs.

Appearing on the landing, a girl called his name.

Vanessa looked up. “Charlotte,” she cried, “let him in.”

Her daughter considered. Two large brown eyes gazed into space. “He’s not nice. He says bad things.”

“Never mind, lovey, just let him in.”

The girl stood doubtful.

Ruth appeared, calling encouragement from just inside the door. Vanessa appealed, patting Stephan lightly on the back. The boy stood head down, concentrated, apparently resigned to whatever might follow. A sense of obligation hung in the air.

Charlotte gazed, without saying anything. Her look was fixed. Her eyes, like her mother’s, were round, large and vaguely inquisitorial. Finally she moved back and away, allowing access. “Only if he’s nice,” she cautioned.

Stephan, after some hesitation, climbed to the landing, paused to look back, then threw out a challenge as he headed for the door.

“Don’t!” she shrieked, lunging forward. There was a thump, a scuffle and shouts of protest as the two disappeared higher, fighting for advantage.

“Please. Children,” Vanessa sighed and took two steps up, requesting calm. Ruth stood behind, calling instructions.

Upstairs the protests slackened and a door opened. Two more voices joined in, followed by giggles, then silence.

Vanessa remained poised, head to one side. Like a back row spectator she was straining to understand. “You think they’re OK?” she asked, turning to her friend.

Ruth shrugged, saying nothing.

“Should we go and see?” added Vanessa, descending to the hallway.

“Best not.”

“You think they’re safe?”

“As much as can be expected.”

“I feel we ought to be *doing* something.”

“Then call in Sir Richard,” Ruth said sardonically, “*he’ll* sort ‘em out.”

“God forbid.”

They entered the lounge, shaking their heads. As they settled on the sofa, adjusting cushions, a shout went up from the room overhead.

Vanessa caught her breath.

“Don’t worry,” said Ruth, “it’s a computer game. Latest thing.”

Grinning, she offered more tea. When Vanessa nodded, she topped up and stirred. Her mouth set firm as her eye caught the album. She pointed to the picture of children eating, huddled against rain. Woman to woman, an understanding passed.

“Kids.”

“Husbands.”

It had seemed to Vanessa, when she’d first met Richard, that he kept himself apart. He was tall and rather visible, which made him count, but his manner wasn’t smooth (her friends called him *different*) and he certainly wasn’t easy or trendy or simple to get on with. But he did act teacherly, wording what he said carefully, with weight, and giving off an air of something measured. Because he aimed, he’d once said, to work at what he did – delivery, pitch and (surprising in someone who was, like her, barely twenty-one) a sense of real purpose, an engagement.

And what made for difference was the wildness, the little boy, the joker underneath. With above that the performer, the speaker, the man who registered, holding himself separate as he checked on fact or opened up a gap between himself and fellow students through careful choice of language and what she called *edge*. He’d position and shape and register and first-time definition.

And for her he was special – unusual, uncomfortable – and really quite different.

They’d met on training: PGCE, London, 1982 – both young, seeking experience. For her, a teaching course was a way of

giving back. It opened into life (street life, the actual, the real and present thing), a window on the world. It also offered style, engagement and a break with parents. For Richard it was more ad lib, a try-out and gap-fill, a way of killing time.

At a presentational seminar she'd talked and passed comment, expounding on Illich, Holt and how schools fail. Her voice was a signal, poised and definite. Raised-up and plummy, offered without blushes, it marked her out. To Richard her interventions were of interest – almost stately – delivered clear, for all to admire. Long-faced and abstract, he thought she'd a head – a body too – and held herself tall with long lines and curves and a well-meant expression. She was at centre, talking to impress. And her words came slowly, pausing between phrases, with a hint of something hidden, a glitch or drama, a punch line held back.

When the seminar ended those who remained adopted her suggestion that they went for a drink. They were young and bright and willing and accepted without question. She'd established a following. As she led off down the pavement Richard held back, refusing to be drawn. His jaw was set, eyes to the ground. He'd turned and gone against. Wasn't much impressed. Didn't like her assumptions, her *this is so* manner, her airs and graces.

In the bar (which was steps down to a basement, with fluted columns and pyramid-folded cards positioned on stone-grey tables) he kept a careful distance, minimised, put himself away. Choosing a corner he sat off separate, concealed behind a pillar. As critic and observer, he wasn't taken in.

At one point he'd passed close, on his way to the toilet, and heard her giving forth. She was talking, it seemed, about political parties. She knew a few names, had inside and knowledge, was up on gossip and who was knocking who. When he returned she'd moved on to fashion, galleries and living in the city. As he walked to his seat he felt her inspection and the lift in her voice, the words pushed out, aimed at him.

“Some do, some don't,” she said airily.

“And some teach?” came back, as if on cue, from a short-haired friend called Bess.

“Or worse,” she replied, dryly.

Richard, having reached his table, refused to be drawn. He remained seated by the pillar, purposed now. He'd listen, gather evidence, plot what he could say. The more she talked the more he had her measure. And as the afternoon wore on he felt a strange kind of flutteriness, an overlap, mixed in with irritation and an air lump of tightness, getting larger.

When the others had departed, leaving just them – both held back by unfinished business: a drink to drain, tickets, money, clothes to gather – he resolved to say something, shrugged on his jacket, and went up and spoke. “So what d’you think of the course so far?”

She examined him slowly, smiling without warmth: “What do *you* think?”

He considered, standing at the corner of her table: “The usual crap.”

She gazed off, unmoved: “That’s it, is it?”

“How d’you mean?”

“It’s worth four letters.”

“It will be when we get to teaching and find what we’ve done is useless.”

Vanessa continued gazing. Her long thin fingers, extended on the table, were fidgeting with a mat. “It rather depends...” she said slowly, then stopped.

“Of course we’ve all read the theory,” he said dismissively. “For what good that’ll do.”

She pushed her way up, cool and self-contained. With her large brown eyes and quizzical features she was facing him down. “So I take it,” she said, affecting nonchalance, “you’ll be leaving.”

“What?”

She turned and began to move towards the door.

“You going to explain?” he asked quietly, closing to her shoulder.

“Isn’t it obvious?”

She stopped at the steps that led up to the street. She was regarding him now as if he’d just arrived. “If you really think it’s crap,” she said slowly, “then you know what to do.”

“Not sure I’m with you.”

“I think it’s called the honourable thing.”

“What – fall on my sword?”

She laughed, sardonically. “I shouldn’t bother. It might not do the job.”

Richard snorted: “I’ve offended?”

She narrowed her eyes: “Criminals offend.”

“Bring back hanging. It didn’t do me any harm.”

She pulled a face.

“You think that’s tasteless?” he asked, goadingly.

“Just silly.”

Stepping back, he waved her to the door: “Have it your way.”

Vanessa detached and climbed towards street level. As she reached the frame she glanced back quickly with an expression of distaste. “I will,” she said calmly, stopping at the threshold to button up her jacket.

“Then don’t let *me* stop you.”

She smiled to herself, “Do you imagine you could?”

He grimaced. “If I had to.”

“But you’d rather talk and swear and make protestation.”

“Oh bloody hell, yes.”

She laughed, without humour. It seemed, as she turned into the street, he’d had the final say.

Richard withdrew, re-entering the café. It was bare now and quiet, with plates and glasses stacked on tables, discarded newspapers and drip stains over grey. The chairs were pushed back, there were coins on tables, unused cutlery, side plates with slops and a litter of tissue-scrap – all of which the waiters were clearing, collecting, straightening, wiping over.

He idled by a pillar, marking time. He wanted to stay low. To step back and away, allow for what had happened. Because inwardly he was himself. Surprised, really, to feel this way. Part of him was calm, proud and satisfied at having stood his ground, another part was amazed – at his sudden sharp insistence – and another part focused on what he’d done wrong. But mostly he was himself: alert, observant and distanced off. He wanted closure.

He'd just checked the time and turned toward the door (imagining her pique, the talk with gestures, the version given, protesting to her friends) when his hand brushed the chair back, catching on plastic. Cool-edged and slack, its feel was soft. Withdrawing, he looked down. What he saw made him wince. On the post-end, suspended, was a creamy-yellow handbag which he knew, or reckoned, could only have one owner and had been left there, he suspected, as a quiet kind of signal, something with aim and intention to make him feel obliged.

He swore beneath his breath. Hoping he'd mistaken he checked an outside flap. Her name was there: *Vanessa Quinton* stitched into liner. Words went through his head: excuses, alibis, with time and place and movements reconstructed. Whichever way he played it: damned both ways. Imagining his arrest, he tugged at the handle, paused to examine, before lifting from below. Light and rather fem, it marked him out. With the bag to his chest he climbed to the exit, wondering what to do. He imagined her observing, just beyond the doorframe; charted his actions, had his words prepared, he even *expected*. This, he thought was strange, as if he might want it, plotting intervention as teller and protagonist, was writing as he watched. He could feel his own excitement, the shift and the exposure, as he levelled to the door.

Emerging, he blinked and looked both ways.

The afternoon was mild with sunspots on buildings, birds on ledges and people walking coatless. To his left there was traffic, queued right back. Both sides stationary, mainly commercial, with taxis, a large white bus, cars between vans and the odd containerised lorry. To his right was a split-level office block and a one-way street, a channel for cyclists and walkers. Set back behind the block was a small rectangular park, half-screened by railings and trees. The trees were green-yellow and pre-autumnal. Already the shadow of the building was touching their lower branches.

No Vanessa.

He peered back at the traffic, checking for gaps. Scrutinised for passengers. He recalled her hair – long, dark and centre-parted

– looked for jeans with a purple jacket, scanned along pavements by shop fronts and entrances. He flashed back for a moment to picture how she stood (tall and precise with an element of throwaway, long-faced and inward with a languid kind of smile) and began to search harder, fearing he'd not find her, that he'd be left hanging with her property to account for, a sense of being burdened, and a need for explanation next time they met.

No sign of Vanessa.

Looking straight ahead, he focused in on a paved square. It was crisscrossed by pedestrians and grazing pigeons. In the centre was a statue, blackened by grime, of a long-robed man with a book in his hand. Behind was the glass and metal entrance to a steel-arched station.

Still no Vanessa.

Feeling the bag press against his chest, he turned a half-circle to scan to the end of a narrow walled-in lane. This time he was careful, examining every walker for something familiar, a movement or gesture, aspects of her presence, concealed within the crowd. Perhaps, he thought, it was all in the looking. A matter of approach. He'd just begun to wonder if in fact he'd seen her but simply not noticed. Maybe she was watching or calibrating his performance, reading how he thought. He'd even imagined the maze-like pleasure she must get from giving him the run-around, seeing him discomfited, leading him on. His rebuttal was in process (from casual dismissal, dead set and careless, to looking straight through her as if she wasn't there) when a movement caught his eye. Turning towards the station, he heard his name called and saw her approaching, waving and greeting, pointing to her bag.

“You picked it up.”

Richard acknowledged, trying to read her mood.

“I must have left it. I never thought—”

He held out the bag.

“It's a relief,” she continued. “Thank you.”

In his mind he heard it, registering the shift.

“No problem,” he said, managing a smile.

“Well I'm grateful,” she said, “I was looking everywhere.”

“All part of the service.”

“But you could’ve left it. You might have been tempted. After—”

Their eyes met in a second’s understanding. Richard smiled: “Well, I didn’t.”

Vanessa paused. “I suppose...” she began, furrowing her brow. Her words hung fire while she stared off down the street.

Richard found himself looking with her. “You were wondering?” he asked.

She looked round vaguely. A slackness had descended, a pause, a sighting and a look-around. It was as if they were dancers preparing for the show.

“I don’t know. Maybe...”

Richard took a breath. He could see her watching, awaiting developments. They’d something to catch up on.

“Shall we walk?” he asked suddenly.

Vanessa showed willing. “Hmm. The river,” she said, nodding downhill to a lane beside the station. It was decided; a mood had taken over; together they set out.

They passed into shadow, pacing quietly with a hand’s space between them, crossing the road to reach a sweep of pavement which ran along the front of a tall row of shops. The row was irregular with worn-down frontages, part-wood, part-brick, with fruit crates outside and window stickers displayed at all angles. The doorways led in to tiles and bare boards, dried-out plants and dark, cavernous, piled-up interiors. They walked and observed, saw themselves reflected; they checked and explored and played at being tourists. At one, a bookshop, Vanessa paused, pointing to a photo which showed a thin-faced man peering from the cockpit of an open-topped biplane. She explained he was her cousin Vaughan, a well-known aviator, whose stunts had brought him fame. In answer to Richard’s questions she shrugged one shoulder. In truth, she said, she hardly ever saw him. She added that when she did (glancing skyward as if to spot his plane) he wasn’t that easy.

Richard laughed. “Behind the image. The man’s not so nice.” He stared at the book cover holding to a grin, then suggested they

move on. When Vanessa nodded his voice tone softened: “Well, presumably he can fly. That part’s not managed.”

“Yes,” she said. “And he is a character.”

“Peter Pan?”

She smiled, “I do wonder sometimes.”

They walked to the row end, emerging at a gateway flanked by railings. It led in to a small public garden. On the other side, rising in tiers, the steel-grey station closed off the sun. Turning through the gates they followed a path which wound through a shrubbery. They were talking now in snatches, exchanging observations as if they were the owners inspecting their patch. They had their favourite colours, knew most plant names, were aware of other walkers, had the river now in sight. Everything amused them, everything was a show.

“Do you walk a lot?” he asked, as they passed out through a gate and faced across a busy main road, looking to the river.

“This way, yes,” she confirmed, pointing to a bridge with a walkway to the side. “It’s exercise. My route, here and back. To my flat,” she said, pausing between phrases to scan the road, then crossing quickly.

Richard followed. In both directions the vehicles were queued up, windows down, waiting for the lights. He walked between bumpers, eyeing her waist glimpsed between the half-length jacket and long-strapped handbag. Below and beside it her hips moved smoothly, shifting in an arc. She’d set off, he imagined, to avoid any further questions.

At the far side of the road Vanessa veered right. She led pointing forward to open-framed steps. They rose like a fire escape, turned halfway and connected side-on to the rail bridge. She pointed, but her words were lost, drowned out by a lights-change and the traffic roar that followed. Richard nodded, Vanessa took the railing, and they climbed the metal steps to the walkway. It ran out over water, divided from the trains by cross-barred girders.

They stopped at the centre to gaze upstream. The sun had now declined and the buildings by the water were already part-shaded. Behind them, higher, light fell in patches on walls and

tiles, while higher still the domes and office blocks were bathed in ochre-yellow brightness. On one building, halfway up, a window glinted. Beside it, where columns rose to a carved stone pediment, a gull was circling and a collection of flags rippled in the breeze.

As they watched a pleasure boat appeared. It approached, skirted a line of tied-up barges, gave a toneless hoot, and passed beneath the bridge. The barges continued knocking and jostling afterwards, shunting like freight.

“Ships in the night,” said Richard. He’d spread both hands on the walkway railing. It was flat, studded with bolt heads and hollow underneath.

“You wonder what the barges are carrying,” said Vanessa, looking down.

Richard peered through struts at their tarpaulin-ed decks. “Dirty British coaster...”

“Ah... we did that one at school.”

He nodded.

“And you have the words by heart?”

Richard frowned. “Not sure. But I know it ends with cheap tin trays.”

“You enjoyed it?”

“Would’ve done. If it wasn’t for the teaching.”

She paused, looking down. “You remember how they did it?”

“Don’t I just.”

She pulled back from the railing. “We have to do better. Improve. Find another way.” She was speaking now with an offhand assurance, gazing past him as if he was only half there. “I read somewhere that teaching is about power-sharing. Knowing when to lead and when to step back. The book called it signposting. It’s all about building skills, finding what works, then bowing out.”

He laughed. “But is it that easy?”

Vanessa thought so. It was, she said, what their course was about. Opening doors. Learning new methods. Making the difference.

Richard shook his head. He just couldn't buy that. "They want to fit us," he said thoughtfully. "Line us up. All in one mould. The university knows best. Big Brother professors with nothing better to do. It's a kind job creation scheme: only dyed-in-the-wool academics need apply."

"You think so?"

He nodded. "It's what they call *process*. They think they're counsellors or something. Always batting it back. 'And how do you *feel* about that? Isn't that rather *directive*? Are you *sure* of that?' It's a power game really. They keep us dangling till we see it their way."

Vanessa stared off towards the far end of the bridge. She'd heard and understood, knew just what he meant. She pictured their tutor: a soft-voiced woman whose frequent pauses were (she thought) designed for effect. Long-held stares and ironic deliberations, a sense of things expected, of traps and evasions and laid-out sequence, of hoops to jump.

"Leading from behind," she said, surprising herself.

Richard nodded. It all seemed to fit. Her words, his, and suddenly they were *talking* – not just sparring but offering, responding, analysing experience and adapting what they said. The bridge, the river, something in the air (or maybe earlier: the handbag, the walkout, the faces in the garden) – whatever it was, a viewpoint had opened. She wasn't what he thought. They'd found common ground.

"Yes," he said quietly, "but we don't have to play that game."

As he spoke, a far-off shiver ran along the bridge. Beginning low, the sound moved round and out, advancing with a shudder and a bottom-heavy lurch. It drummed and became firmer, harder, shifted up, then moved to a percussive rattle and a slow, bumping weight of metal on metal. Sound filled the air, moving and tracking like a heavy hinged door.

"Pullman," he mouthed as the engine passed by, dragging behind it a long line of carriages. Each was flashed purple, with curtains in the windows and self-absorbed faces behind tinted glass.

Picking up speed, the train cleared the bridge. The sound went with it, dropping to a murmur as the last retreating carriage curved off between buildings.

“OK,” said Richard. “It’s gone.” Suddenly he smiled. “So now, in the words of the song: *should I go or should I stay?*”

Before she could answer a second train appeared, this time incoming, and the bridge began to shake. As the noise level rose, Vanessa ducked forward. Her eyes scanned the walkway in search of a reply. “Stay if you like,” she said quietly. When Richard didn’t answer she pointed forward. “Stay...” she repeated, louder. When he raised both hands, pleading deafness, Vanessa shouted. As the train roar closed, she said it once again (mouthing quietly, just between themselves) pointed, then led off smiling to the bridge end, the steps down and the walk towards her flat.

“It isn’t much,” said Vanessa when they arrived at the door.

They’d walked the quickest route, cutting down streets with office blocks and flats, passing through a tunnel (with above them the railway, thundering, and on one side a wall with shoulder-level doorways, on the other side pits and chambers in what looked like a dig). They’d emerged up a ramp, traversed an estate, a rundown shopping mall, a park with asphalt paths and unplanted borders, continuing along a high-kerbed road, with houses in blocks, fences with gaps, long unkempt gardens and concrete steps fronting peeling doorways.

Her block, she’d told him, was shared. It was three stories high with a bay at the front and a path leading round to an entrance with lights above. There were bells with name slips which he glanced at as she opened. They were handwritten, faded, almost illegible. As they entered he saw a carpeted lobby, woodchip wallpaper, doors both sides and a staircase straight ahead. It smelt of cooking and polish.

“The downstairs used to be a surgery,” Vanessa said, leading up. “A dentist’s, I think.”

The stairs were wide, turning once, again at a landing with more doors off, narrowing at the top to a ladder-like ascent, rising to a bare-walled square, a skylight and a white-and-blue door.

“Chez nous,” she announced, then proceeded to unlock.

The apartment they entered was a converted loft. Set within the eaves, it was long and spacious. Running the length of the back extension, it had a central corridor with four doors off and, beyond that, a kitchen side-on to a large, L-shaped lounge.

“My nest,” she said with irony, leading through.

He noticed the shoes lined on a rack, the clothes on chair backs, the artworks and posters pinned on doors. A string across an arch held postcards and photos; glass and ceramics occupied the shelves. There were transfers on the windows, stickers on the fridge and piles of worksheets and files scattered all over.

She offered tea or coffee. When she'd brewed they settled, Vanessa at the centre of a two-seater sofa, Richard at an angle, sat forward on a chair.

He was calculating privately, turning over phrases, reckoning what to say. To be here and facing (and not just facing but in agreement, somehow, clicked in and focused, sharing space) – it made him wonder, really, just what was happening, whether he should say something and how far it might go. Though he also felt he'd rather not put that kind of weight on it, that this was far enough. Anything further might prove difficult.

“I like your flat,” he said, smiling. He glanced round quickly, to avoid putting pressure. In himself, he was admiring. Her long lean body, visible in outline, was there on view.

“It's a tip,” she answered, wrinkling up her nose. “I try, but things go all over. You'd think it had gremlins, messing up the place.”

Richard shrugged. He mentioned the words *interesting* and *choice*, leading on to a poster he could see displayed on the door. Waving, he named it. Film clips... Russian... Expressionist. With scenes from Eisenstein which he recognised by shots from the Odessa steps. They were surrounded by a collage of guns and cornfields and people running. There were raised fists, a picture of

Lenin and an outside border of flags and tractors with words in Cyrillic.

He wanted to know about her politics. Vanessa smiled. She had some, yes.

“Politics, capital P. Your beliefs.”

“Ah, my Personal manifesto. Now let’s see... Should it be *The People?* Or *Popularist?* Maybe *Proleteriat?*”

Expressionless, Richard shook his head: “Aka Posturing.”

She laughed, a full-mouthed show. It came out quickly, in a rush. Richard realised that she’d intention.

He checked back on her opinions, what she really liked. His words were chosen carefully.

“I’m a believer in style – all styles,” she said when asked about revolutionary art, “especially the ones who had it.”

“Anyone with attitude,” she added when pressed for names.

“Groucho?” she countered when asked about Marx.

And she looked as she talked, levelling her expression, watching, examining, taking in his interest.

For Richard it was simple. He knew the conventions, had been with other girls, understood the score. To be here drinking coffee (invited, asked in, access freely given) – well, wasn’t that a signal? She’d chosen, showed herself willing, or at least she’d requested. And whatever happened now, they’d established permission.

At one point in the evening they stood at the window observing the garden and the blocks beyond (side by side, their bodies nearly touching, watching the lights appearing in windows, the glimpsed interiors and the drawing of the blinds). They stood, aware of the physical, yet pleased to take it slowly, to profit by delay. There was time yet, and opportunity. Later, at Vanessa’s suggestion, they sampled bits of salad folded into pitta bread, adding in cheese, thin-sliced ham and a collection of dips. They talked through the meal of places to visit, projected journeys, their lives in prospect, two years, five, ten: where they’d like to be. Both were against settling, wanted experience, had much to explore. They were world citizens.

Afterwards, when they'd moved back to the lounge, he offered to wash up.

Vanessa pulled a face. She'd rather he left it.

"Well... I ought to do my bit."

"No, no. I'll do it."

Richard smiled. He wanted reasons.

"It's the least I can do."

He blinked: "What for?"

"What I owe."

"What you *owe*?"

"Hmm. For what happened."

"Ah, you mean the handbag." He shrugged: "Anybody would've done the same."

"Well, I'm grateful you did."

"No trouble." He laughed. "If that's all it takes—"

Vanessa shook her head. "But just imagine. If you hadn't..."

"OK. But you don't *owe* me."

"Oh yes I do."

Richard shook his head. "The other way round. I took against. Pigeonholed you. I shouldn't have done that."

Colouring slightly, she smiled. "Takes two. I thought the same."

"And now..." he said, breaking off as the words of the song *What now my love* sounded in his head.

She smiled and offered drinks.

Richard declined. "I think," he said slowly, "I'd better get going."

"You're leaving?"

He angled his head to one side, "What else?"

She sucked in her breath. "It would be nice..."

Between them now there were thoughts and suggestions, hidden implications, a balance to be struck.

"I suppose..." he said, indicating the door. "You see, I don't want you to get me wrong." Suddenly he rallied: "OK, it's simple. I'll stay, if you're willing, but we play it by ear. There's nothing *required*."

She smiled. Of course, she said, it was always like that.

“In any case,” he continued, “I think I’d like—”

Vanessa half-closed her eyes. A silent invitation hung between them.

Richard realised suddenly that whatever he said, or intended, didn’t really matter. He was here and now, simple as that. From rival to visitor (and now, it seemed, a more-than-welcome guest), he’d entered, fitted, settled in to join her.

“But then,” he added slowly, in dialogue with himself, “that’s just theory. The stuff of books.”

Vanessa nodded. Together they’d engaged.

He moved to where she sat. Angled on the sofa, her body was long and slim and her face was smiling. He touched her on the arm, lightly, with purpose. As he lowered to her side his hand found hers. Squeezing gently, he paused and examined. There were of course words: soft words, slow words, words of approbation. And also those words that passed beneath breath, heard but not said, half-thought or silent, the words that now guided – underthoughts and promptings, flesh-touch expressions. And the one word that remained, the *feel* word, smiling, as they closed together and, working together with calm and willing movements, absorbed each other in a long-held kiss.

When he left next morning he could hear her voice tones running in his head. Offhand but warm, they were delivered as given, with attention, on the level. Closing the front door he heard, or imagined, her words on waking, exchanges and jokes, their goodbyes on the stairs. As he turned down the street the birds were singing and the traffic was picking up. Glancing at his watch, he smiled. This early, and the airfresh brightness was something he walked through, a close and steady presence, a spotlight in his head. The city, which was stirring, had its own sounds and rhythms, tide flows, divergences, openings, closures and unsuspected corners.

Crossing the park, he retraced his steps. As he paused and looked at a junction between paths, Richard smiled. He stepped out onto grass, continuing forward with the sun to his right.

Moving smoothly, his awareness played across light and shadow. At the end of the grass, rejoining the path, he noticed again the unplanted borders. On the other side a line of bushes were draped with webs and torn plastic bags. There were pigeons strutting, dogs with owners and cyclists in Lycra. Here he thought, beating out a rhythm, was a slice of life. Leaving by a gate, he crossed a narrow road. Lengthening his stride, he headed for the river. His route led past shops, along by the estate (taking in flower tubs and bunting behind fences), over concrete and tarmac, cutting between walls and down steps, returning through the tunnel to the upstream offices and footbridge back.

By the river was quiet. The light was still, the bridge was empty and the water below was rippling slowly. Approaching the steps, Richard took the railing. He thought of Vanessa's cousin. Again he heard the words *a slice of life*. When he'd climbed to the walkway he stopped and looked out. Before him now were the river sights and buildings, the rooftops, skyline, and water with reflections – a bird's eye view. As he stood he felt the air, the brightness, the big drop below. He heard the sounds of traffic, engines, music, bells in the distance. And behind that, part-heard, advancing, drumming through metal (spreading and expanding with a surf-like weight, a shiver, an impact and loose percussive beat), the gathering thunder of the first departing train.

CHAPTER TWO

In the week that followed Vanessa was surprised by how much she felt. At first, immediately after he left, she kept herself busy, touching, examining, putting things in place. She heated up the kettle, glanced at magazines, sampled bits of toast. As she ate, she saw him as he'd entered, looking from the hallway, taking in the flat. It was, of course, a mess. But then he hadn't seemed bothered. *Interesting*, he'd said, and looked straight through it. Or perhaps he'd thought it lived-in. He'd even said he liked it, though to her mind too quickly, with too much expression, as if he'd an agenda. Either it didn't register or, out of sympathy, he'd chosen to ignore. One way or another, he'd have to have a view.

Turning in her chair, she gazed at the artworks. Clip-framed reproductions which she'd chosen for effect. Impressionist, mainly. Early and stylish, with parasols and cypresses and rowboats on water. Thinking of Richard, she wondered how he'd seen them. She supposed he'd not much liked. Or perhaps he'd thought them what he called *limited*. Something to kick against – or point to – a lesson held up.

For a while she sat back reviewing what had happened. The handbag, rail bridge, walk back home. She could still hear him talking – firm-voiced but tentative, with a slight northern accent – could see, as in a film, his face in close-up, his long appraising looks; could feel his hand-touch, body-clench – and the soft-hard pressure of his inward searching tongue.

Rising, she crossed to the lounge where she occupied herself placing cushions, then stood looking out. Seen from above, the back-to-back gardens were ragged and unkempt. They were bare and narrow, bordered by breeze blocks and half-rotted fences. Last night they'd seemed deeper, wider; grey-black and shadowy, concealed within the dark. Now they were exposed. And she saw herself with Richard, hand-close and vulnerable, standing at the

window gazing into night. It was as if they were preparing, like her cousin, to step into air, kick away the chocks, take a leap of faith.

All that morning, as she slobbered around the flat, she wondered at her state. Up till then she'd known men in passing, tried them for a while, comparing as she went (with quirks and styles and types to watch out for). She'd chosen and sampled, kept them close to hand. They were her *lads*, observed for what they offered. But now it seemed, as she imagined Richard – his touch and attentions and fine-tuned smiles – that she barely knew herself. Because she'd had this persuasion (she told herself while dressing, with a half-ironic smile) that she didn't mind the guys if they knew their place. So she'd learned how to play them, how to have and aim and arrange things to advantage. In truth, in fact, she'd thought of men as other. As youths or boys or strangers to themselves. The ones who played it down, who went with what happened. The one-nights, the casuals and those not bothered.

But now, with Richard, she'd a whole new perspective. For or against, he'd said and he'd engaged. Showed himself willing, pushed to keep it real. And his face... level-eyed, passionate, a northern Giovanni. The highbrow kid. And behind that the attention, the fine line, the walkabout. They'd talked and they'd set out. A space had opened, a viewpoint and drift, a stretch across water. They were up there, first-foot, dream-led, as they climbed the metal walkway, looked out into sunlight and crossed the bridge together.

On the first day she kept a score. A mental timeline. An account, she called it, of when and where she met him and what they said in public – how far, how much and what remained hidden. On the second day he came round, stayed over, then left after lunch. The third and the fourth (she'd begun to make a rhyme, a variant on Solomon Grundy mixed in with mnemonics and snatches from skipping chants) they were already quite couply, declared at college and parading hand in hand. Five was busy with both on first placements and Vanessa seeing parents, so they saw each

other late – on overnight again, talking and touching and waking early morning. Six was for study, an initial proposal with theory expected and updating journals (which meant for Vanessa long consultations with two other students). So it wasn't till the seventh that they put aside everything, Richard stayed over, and they spent the whole day on a trip out together.

“It all depends on feel,” she'd told him from the start. By that she meant not only venue (outdoor for preference) but also process, how they got there, the act of deciding. Because since day one there'd been ideas floating, fancies, a range of possibilities. Richard had talked of walks or boats upstream, she'd thought shopping, they'd both named parks with outdoor cafés (one with a theatre) he'd suggested pedalos while she mentioned views (or maybe sculpture, or even writers' houses). For a while they'd talked of markets or districts or nightlife or touring the main sights. And each time they'd decided (or cut down to a shortlist) a new thought popped up or an old one returned or somehow they got sidetracked – resulting in a pause, a fall-back, and an evasive kind of smile. They'd too much to choose from, with nothing that definite. Decisions, it seemed, were that much easier if taken without forethought, arrived at quickly, agreed to on the day.

And since they'd a whole day, had time and leisure plus a promise of good weather, they decided, rather than talking further, to adopt a new suggestion (made by Richard and endorsed by Vanessa) to go with cameras and spend the time watching, taking in the habits and names they'd still to learn, as they joined the crowds of sightseers who filled the city zoo.

They journeyed there by bus, talking of first times, of packing as a family and wet summer holidays. Richard map read, transferring between stops and guiding from the terminus, then led through a park with ornamental gardens and a stream with bridges. On the way he kept up a commentary, observing the route, the flowerbeds, and the groups headed zoo-wards. He noticed as he talked how his role today was to lead on words, on gesture, while

Vanessa it seemed was content to play audience. In fact he felt the pull, an undertow of thought, almost as if he'd not made contact or there was something in the way. She was, it seemed, doubtful. Or maybe, he thought, she was just getting used and simply needed time. Though he couldn't help noticing a lag now between them, a clear space feeling, a gap beneath the real. So he kept up the talk, the one-line observations, quick thoughts and noticings and oddities in passing. Everything had its tics, its instants and surprises, its own specifics. It was as if they were provisional, first time, caught on camera. And his job was delivery, to talk and present and move the action on.

It wasn't till they got there that Vanessa, who was wearing moon-shaped earrings, declared one was missing. "It must have dropped," she said, checking both sides and scanning tarmac. "Might be anywhere... just anywhere," she added, tailing off. Suddenly there was edge. Her colour was up and her breath came slowly. This was a case, it seemed, for rescue.

Richard offered, Vanessa accepted and they quartered the entrance, peering into corners, prodding around walls and checking into bushes. When nothing turned up he suggested they walk back.

"Not now," Vanessa said, pointing to a developing queue. She was struggling to hold down. "Don't worry, it's nothing," she called, and waved him to her. She fixed her gaze forward, Richard joined her, and they shuffled to the window.

He offered coins, which Vanessa supplemented, and an attendant issued tickets.

"Well, now we're here – we have to see everything," said Richard, once in, examining the signposts and the times of feeding chalked up on a board.

"You mean that?"

He nodded. "We're on safari," he said, leading forward past a line of abandoned cages.

Vanessa smiled. Now they'd arrived and passed in through the gate, she wanted to indulge. Before, on the journey, she'd needed him to prove, to show himself willing, make things happen. She didn't want him casual. Or taking advantage. Or

doing what people called ‘the distance thing’. Because already she could see him (absurdly), pictured with family – all those briefings, meetings, stages up ahead – and *she’d* have to satisfy, play both sides, act as intermediary.

But now she felt different. A day, an outing, almost like a holiday – well, wasn’t that enough? A first act and gesture, a kind of sizing up. Because now she saw him clear (out there, leading, angled slightly forward, advancing on the green), he’d his own fine line, his choices and personals. It was as if, she thought, he was on countdown (with her in close attendance) moving with purpose, about to start the show.

The green led down to a long curving lake. Set off to one side, it looked almost ornamental. It was grey-blue and vague, like a sketch for a painting. Intrigued, they approached behind a fence, glimpsing reflections in a still sheet of water. It ended in concrete at one end, with banks both sides, and an overflow beyond. Here it bulged out with stone-dammed pools, winding mud flats and intersecting basins. As they came nearer, they could see, gathered at the end in a loosely formed arc, something that resembled black-and-pink clouds, or a corps de ballet.

“Flamingos,” he said, advancing slowly, camera in hand.

The birds were standing, half-asleep and sculptural, in ankle-high water. With their long thin legs, pod-like bodies and tubular necks they looked like they’d just landed.

“God, it’s thick,” said Vanessa, pointing to the water at their feet. “Reminds me of lentil soup. Only this smells more like those ghastly concoctions we used to make in chemistry.”

Richard examined the grey-yellow liquid. It was solid-looking and cloudy. “It seems to quite suit them,” he said, lightly.

Vanessa stared. The birds now were striking poses: some seemed to sprout, others jack-knifed, there were ones coiled like pipes and others standing tall. A group in the corner were head down, ruminative, poking in mud; a few were chain-linked; there were hook-shaped beaks and pseudo-plants, and a number whose dream-like positions resembled half-finished artworks.

“They look so strange,” she said, thoughtfully.

“Surreal?”

“Gothic, I think.”

“I suppose it works for them.”

They circled the lake end, arriving at a viewing spot that overlooked the pools: a curved concrete space with bench and signboard, divided from the birds by a clear mesh fence. They joined a small group of photo-smiley visitors. A tall man with a map was finger-tracing a route, while the woman beside him was reading from the signboard. A family on the bench were listening to a radio as they filled up on drink squares, crisp bags and chocolate-coated bars.

Ignoring, Vanessa raised her camera and waved Richard towards an unoccupied corner. “Best spot,” she called as she chivvied and pointed, checked in the viewfinder, then snapped. Exchanging places, he took her twice, clicking quickly, then motioned to move on.

Vanessa showed surprise.

“Lots to do,” he said brightly, waving to the slope.

“Well, yes...”

He glanced at his watch. “It’s a big place. Have to get round.”

Vanessa pulled a face: “How far would that be?”

“I dunno. A mile, maybe more.”

“You mean that?”

He nodded.

“Sounds like a route march.”

Ignoring, he looked out: “Sights to see.”

For a moment she was thrown. There was nothing more she could say.

“The big five,” he added. “That’s what we came for.”

She shrugged, “Well, if it’s really that important—”

Richard confirmed, nodding vigorously as he named them.

“Are you sure they’ve got them all here?”

“They certainly used to have. When I was a boy, visiting.”

She smiled, superior now: “Ah, but supposing things have changed...”

“What makes you say that?”

“Chances are. On average...”

“Chances? Averages? Sounds like a lecture to me.”

Vanessa stared past him, expressionless. “It’s what I think, that’s all.”

He looked at her oddly, still grinning. There was challenge in the air. “OK. We’ll go then... Find out.”

Before she could reply he’d moved off uphill, climbing a path that curved through bushes. He moved inside a space, a direction separate, with Vanessa following, saying nothing.

She caught up in a dip where the path opened out. He’d descended to a double line of walls and was standing beside concrete, observing carefully through reinforced glass. The window looked out on a trench full of water and beyond that some protective netting, a few scattered rocks and a broad savannah-like compound.

“One,” he said, pointing to a large brown-and-grey lion laid out on a platform.

Vanessa pursed her lips. “Four to go,” she reminded, eyeing the animal as if it couldn’t be trusted.

“I bet two’s close,” he said, wandering forward down a mall-like avenue with walls both sides and vistas through double-thickness glass.

“You think you’ll find a leopard?” she said with an upward inflection, warming to their task.

“Voilà,” he replied, moving to a window that had misted slightly. Behind it a long, muscular, brown-white cat was slumped on grass.

Vanessa took a breath: “Well I have to say—”

Richard nodded. He knew what she meant.

“I’m not sure I like it,” she continued, touching his shoulder, “doesn’t look too friendly.” She shivered: “You can see it in the face. It’s all about power. Blind, unquestioning power. And if it comes for you, you’d better get going.”

“If looks could kill.”

She squinted forward, then shifted in front. “Do you think it sees us?”

“Hmm. Don’t think it’s interested.”

“Too busy contemplating the next meal.”

He laughed and joined her, hand-shading glass and moving side to side to get a better look.

“I used to think big cats were boring,” he said, “when I was young.”

“And now?”

He smiled, enigmatically: “Two down.”

Beside them two small girls were talking loudly, quizzing their mother. It really wasn't fair, she'd made them a promise. And they couldn't go much further. How long, they asked, before they'd see monkeys? She stalled for a while trying to interest them in big-cat stories, then, when they persisted, warned about distance and steered them off.

“So, lunch break?” Vanessa asked, smiling. Richard nodded and they walked. They turned uphill following a winding path which led past a rockery and a fenced-in paddock, emerging at the top at a soft grassy lookout with wooden benches and a stone orientation table.

The sky had cleared and the crowds were building. Families mainly, but also busloads: organised outings and tourists in groups. A few distinctly old, some middle-aged, others twentyish. But mostly children. A tide-flow of children, all over, everywhere; wave on wave filling up the zoo. So much so that the place was sounding and looking like a break-time playground. There were groups of children in lines and gaggles, some linked with parents, some eating and drinking sitting on grass, others it seemed on breakaway missions, still others gathered by cages and compounds. There were very small children with toys or sweets, slightly older children asking questions, older still wriggling or dodging or pushing to the front, notebook children carrying rainbow-striped pens, costumed children, red-faced children, moon-eyed children and yah boo sucks kids wearing oversize T-shirts and mud-splattered trainers.

“The human zoo,” said Vanessa, gazing out.

“You don't like them?”

She laughed. “*Adore* them. Children are wonderful.”

Richard, surprised by her vehemence, chose to say nothing.

They ate. Vanessa had packed two foil-wrapped pasties, each with a napkin and fork. Richard reached deeper into his backpack to add in apples, bottled drinks and a bag of peanuts. They spread them on a mat and lay out on grass, talking over what they'd seen and where to go next. As they ate and drank and chatted between mouthfuls they kept a kind of focus, a doubleness of view. Suddenly, it seemed, they'd moved on from spotting or collecting or ticking off the five. Richard wasn't bothered (floating options, different possibilities, while propped on an elbow, gazing into space) and Vanessa too was low-key and agreeable, quite without design.

When they'd finished and cleared, Richard moved closer, fitting to her mood. They smiled and kissed, then stretched out side by side, fingering flesh. Together they were involved, touching each other, while talking intermittently and dozing in the sun.

Vanessa was curious. She wanted to know his thoughts.

"Maybe you can guess."

She considered. "Well, I suppose I could try. But only if they're nice."

He laughed: "Oh, they're nice all right."

"Ah, but *how* nice?"

He smiled. "Triple tick I'd say."

"That much?"

He nodded.

"Well, let's see," she said, sitting up. "Your thoughts – are they about *now*: the zoo, the sun, where we're sitting?"

"Hmm. Could be."

"Could be?"

He turned and levered up. "That's part of it. They're definitely warm."

"Yes, I appreciate that. They're warm... Anything else?"

"Oh lots." He paused, then laughed. "I'm full of ideas: crazy things, projects, what might never happen."

Vanessa nodded. Gazing round slowly, she drew one hand lightly over grass. "That's good," she said, leaning forward. The grass was tufty, yellow-green at centre, edged with blue. Reaching

sideways, she touched and tested, selecting stems. Choosing the tallest, she pinched out from the bottom then straightened to a bunch. “Very good,” she confirmed, adding in some vetch and a sprig of clover.

Seeing her absorbed Richard cast round, selecting his own bunch. He pulled up a plantain, some pineapple weed and a twist of ivy. “Mine’s rough,” he said, waving them for show.

She looked up, surprised, then laughed: “Don’t tell me that’s my bouquet.”

“You like it?” he asked, adding in sorrel and shepherd’s purse. In response to her nod he offered.

Vanessa eyed it carefully. “You take them both,” she said, counter-offering hers.

Richard blinked.

“Go on,” she urged, “take.”

“You sure?”

“They’re all yours,” she smiled. “And the task,” she added, passing over her bunch, “is to arrange them – well.”

Richard laughed, putting down his collection. After sorting, he doffed an imaginary cap: “England expects.”

“Today’s good deed,” she continued, half-ignoring.

“At your service, ma’am.”

“Well, if you don’t want—”

“No problem,” he cut in. “In any case,” he smiled thinly, “we can use them as feed.”

Vanessa looked puzzled: “Feed?”

Richard confirmed. He twisted to one side and, fishing in his backpack, tugged out some string which he knotted and doubled, securing the stems. “Some animal will be glad of this lot,” he said, grinning.

“But you can’t—”

He stood and stretched. “Hmm, you don’t think so?”

Vanessa shook her head.

“Well I do remember...”

“I don’t think they allow it.”

He hesitated, weighing up: “I suppose you’re right.”

Before she could reply he shrugged, picked up his backpack and moved to the orientation table.

“I know what you’ve been thinking,” he said when Vanessa joined him.

“You do?”

“What you said – about the route march.”

Vanessa dismissed it as nothing. Really. She’d moved on since.

“But there is a point,” he returned, placing the flowers at the centre of the table. “I mean you must have thought: why does this guy have to rush so.”

Vanessa nodded slightly.

“After all,” he continued, “it’s a whole day free.”

Again she showed agreement.

“But I’d thought, you see, if we came here, that I’d do it like before.” He smiled to himself: “I mean like those kids,” here he nodded out towards the crowds. “But now I see...” he laughed, “it’s not that simple.”

As Vanessa expressed doubt he raised his camera and, positioning carefully, sighted the flowers. Leaning forward, he clicked several times from all round the table. “And now,” he announced, waving her to him, “both of us – for the album.”

“Both of us?”

“It’s on time release,” he said, explaining the mechanism while balancing the camera on the bench head.

“You think it’ll work?”

“Believe me,” he said, pressing the button and drawing her close. “And smile.”

The shutter clicked as they embraced.

“But how do we know if we’re in the picture?”

“We don’t,” he said, “so we’ll try again.”

Vanessa laughed.

“And we’ll keep on trying,” he added as he button-pressed, moving position. “And again,” he insisted, pressing and positioning, “And again,” he repeated, “till we’ll bloody well make it work.”

For the rest of the day they worked the zoo. They went with their feelings, taking pictures and sharing observations. Following the signs they ticked off the five, visited the reptiles, went bear-watching, saw the seals feeding and ended late afternoon surrounded by children, viewing monkeys.

Vanessa enjoyed the babies, cooing at their eyes, their size and how they rode their mothers. "Perfectly formed," she exclaimed, fascinated.

"Great circus," said Richard, following their parents' tricks.

"Gymnastics," called Vanessa, watching as they tail-swung and danced across ropes.

And they went with the crowd, hand in hand, seeing what they could, peering into cages and taking pictures.

Richard liked the chimps. "There's my Big Sis," he said as a heavy-jawed female slid along a beam and dropped to a crouch.

"Hi there Old Man," he waved when a male climbed down to join her.

And it was when they reached the gorillas, Vanessa's favourite, with their long slow nods, rocking movements and penetrating stares, that they agreed they'd seen enough and were ready as a couple to finish for the day.

On the bus back, recovering, they named on recall, checked their impressions and totalled what they'd seen.

"Seems like we did it all," Richard said as they walked towards her flat.

Vanessa smiled. Had he found it different, she wanted to know.

He shrugged: "Some things have changed."

But in *himself*, she insisted, was it any different?

"Older and wiser, you mean?"

She demurred, then nodded.

"I think," he said quietly, "it's better now..."

His voice dipped and rose as they turned into her street. They stopped at the corner, touching.

"Much, much better," he added and kissed her on the cheek, the forehead, and finally with hot-tongued passion, deep into her mouth.