



Registration, upper sixth.

"Bell?"

"Present."

Amanda Bell is giggling.

Next to her, Beatrice Moore smiles like the sphinx. She's gorgeous. Top of the girls, no question. Look at her every chance I get. Her parents are Jewish intellectuals from Rhodesia and her father is a leader writer for the Guardian. Beatrice Moore glows with confidence. She's way too high for me.

Amanda, all red hair and freckles, like a sunrise, is second, because she's Beatrice's friend and... Actually, I don't know why Susan of the pointy tits isn't second. Does intelligence or character also count? Confusing.

Anyway, I know the pecking order, right the way down from Beatrice to mumsy, sad-eyed Lorraine, whose Mum is a cleaner and whose Dad is in jail. Everyone knows that Lorraine is in love with Roy Carmichael. But that's like me fancying Beatrice. Impossible.

Roy is Head Boy. Not that his parents are posh or anything. Dad's a bus conductor I think. Roy just works hard. Ever since I got up into the A stream six years ago, Roy's been top of the class. Also, the girls think he's handsome. I don't like him. Always giving me dirty looks when I do things wrong.

"Parvin?"

It's me.

"Yes Sir."

Laughter. Everyone looking at me.

"I mean yes Miss."

"Not entirely present then, Parvin."

Someone is digging a pencil in my back. I ignore it.

"Pssst! Parvin!"

Shit. It's Roy.

"Afterwards Parvin," he whispers.

What's he going to do? Just for saying "sir"? What else have I done? Black cloud descends, frothing with fear, indignation and blind panic. What am I going to do?

End of registration. Mooch out, as if I've forgotten. Wander casually over to the door, through the door and...

"Parvin!"

As Roy strides up, Beatrice appears at his side and slips her arm around his waist, causing me even more confusion. Are they together now? How come? Just because he's Head Boy?

He's talking to me, something about Kit Hogarth having a birthday party. What's it got to do with me? I haven't even been invited.

"I haven't even been invited."

Roy tuts. "I've just told you."

"What?"

Beatrice smiles at me and I can't help smiling back.

"It's a secret," she purrs. "Tonight. His mother's organised it."

I look to Roy for confirmation. He gives a short, brusque nod. I can't believe it. They're King and Queen of the school and they're secretly inviting me to Kit Hogarth's party. I look around, hoping others are noticing.

"So, no one else knows," I whisper.

"Everyone else knows!" hisses Roy, through clenched teeth.

"I don't get it," I confess. "If everyone knows, how come it's a secret?"

Beatrice Moore lays her hand upon my lower arm.

"It's a secret from Kit," she explains.

The penny drops.

"Kit! Right! Got it!"

"Ssssh!"

"No, it's fine. I understand. It's Kit's secret bir..."

Roy leaps on me, throws me to the floor and wraps his hand over my mouth. I'm furious. I can't breath. I'm flapping about, trying to break free when he grabs my hand and yanks me up.

"What did you do that for?" I wheeze.

He jerks his head sideways. Is he brain-damaged? Then I notice Kit Hogarth, not three yards away, chatting with new boy, Jules Marsden-Hunt, a tall, posh, spotty geek with a soft, cultivated voice.

My blazer's all dusty and my asthma's come on. Beatrice dusts me down. She's so kind and beautiful. I fumble for my inhaler, press, suck and hold my breath. When I breathe out and open my eyes, Kit and Jules are halfway down the corridor and Roy's saying something.

"Anyway," he says, "will you do it?"

"I'd love to come. Where is it?"

Roy throws his hands in the air. "I give up. Thick as two short planks. Come on Beatrice. We'll ask someone else."

But Beatrice holds him back. She turns and shines her light on me.

“Andy” she says, her voice like honey, “we want you to do something very special for us, as a favour.”

Wow!

“We want you to waylay Kit after school for an hour - to give the rest of us time to get there.”

My mouth falls open. A special task.

“Will you do it?”

I nod and they're gone.

I float all the way to double English, where Hamlet has to kill the King but he can't, so Ophelia goes mad. When it's my turn, I have to read the lines

Hamlet Get thee to a nuttery, farewell.

“Nunnery, Parvin.”

Hamlet Nunnery. ...Or if thou wilt needs marry, marry a fool.

Laughter.

“Fool.”

I look up. He means me. What have I done now?

“Marry a fool Parvin.”

More laughter, especially Amanda, who's Ophelia. Luckily Mr French gives my part to the new boy, Jules, who whispers. When it's Amanda's turn, she reads

Ophelia Heavily powders restore him.

“Heavenly powers - Bell!”

Amid the laughter, Amanda gives me a wink. Does she think I got it wrong on purpose?

I start getting that frightened feeling. Just formless worry at first. Then it comes to me: How can I prevent Kit Hogarth from going home? Kit's a wiry little artist-type with dark angry eyes. He doesn't suffer fools gladly and that's the problem.

I'll fail. He'll go straight home. The party will be a disaster. It'll be my fault and no one will ever give me another chance.

Change of lessons. Kit is deep in conversation with Jules. I saunter over.

“Do you fancy doing something after school?”

Giving me a withering look that means “What makes you think I would ever spend time with you?” he wanders off with the new boy. I'm stuck in the doorway, unable to think, everyone pushing passed me, when I remember: It's doughnut time.

Running down the corridor, jumping over a heap of rubble where the walls are collapsing, I make my way to the music block. The school's only been up eight years

and already it's falling down. That's why we sell doughnuts at break. To make the music block safe.

There are over two thousand kids at this super-modern, central London comprehensive school and they all want doughnuts. For fifteen minutes I'm busy, serving the sons and daughters of dukes and dustmen.

Clearing up, I remember my failure with Kit and manage to guzzle about twenty doughnuts without anyone seeing, which makes me fart all through double history.

It isn't until lunchtime, in the middle of conducting the second orchestra, that I come to my senses. Here I am - leader of the school orchestra and in charge of the second - I'm not a quivering, cowering nobody. I can deal with Kit.

I bring down my baton and the entire second orchestra strikes up with the glorious opening bars of Mussorgsky's Great Gate Of Kiev.

Or, at least, it should. What actually happens is a horrible racket. Most of them are second or third formers who can't play their instruments yet.

The fiddles are not in tune. The woodwind are neither in tune nor in time and the incredible noises coming from the brass section suggest that they've got the wrong page and are blundering through Ballet of the Unhatched Chickens.

I'll just keep conducting. Maybe it'll come right.

"One! Two! Three! Four! One! Two! Three! Four!" I yell.

No. If anything, it's getting worse. I put the baton down but it makes no difference. The only ones to notice I've stopped conducting are two second-violins who take the opportunity to start a sword fight with their bows.

Kids in the playground are pressing their faces against the windows and visually expressing their response to the music. When I try to tell the brass section that they've got the wrong piece, I'm interrupted by a piercing scream. Corrinna has stabbed Toby in the foot with her 'cello spike and Toby has to be rushed to the medical block.

Takes the full half-hour to get the opening phrase almost right. Nonetheless, being in charge makes me feel confident and able to solve the problem of Kit.

Because Fareham's away, there's no one to do music history with us. Polding tells us to revise Beethoven but I go upstairs to the end music room and practice violin. Czardas by Monti and Elgar's Idyll, both of which I like.

I've just got the hang of making music, rather than simply reading the instructions. Trick is to disappear inside the sounds. Strange, frightening feeling. I'll be leaving school in the summer. It's like a black hole. All my thoughts go into that black hole and none of them come out.

Bang on the door makes me jump. Mr Polding sticks his head round.

"Aren't you going to go home Parvin?"

What does he mean? What time is it? Christ - Kit!

Violin, bow, chin rest, music away. Grab satchel and blazer. Run like the wind. But where? He could've had art.

Through the dinner block, where one of the mashed potato vats seems to be on fire. Up three flights to the art department. No Kit. Only Mr Reece, snogging someone beside the kilns. Christ, it's Susan of the pointy tits.

Into the north playground, pushing my way through the milling, swarming, teeming, footballing, kisschasing, yo-yoing rabble. Past the technical block and out the main gates, wretched with thoughts of failure. I'll never find him. And my asthma's come on.

Out of the gates, it's a different world. Kids out of school, free at last to have punchups, throw stones and cause traffic accidents. They form a gushing river of maroon blazers all the way down the hill.

There he is! Strutting along the middle of the road, long hair flowing behind him, like some angry dwarf genius. Thank god he doesn't wear uniform.

"Kit!"

Some bloody first-year gets his yo-yo wrapped round my arm. In my rush, I pull him over. He starts crying. A great big hairy bloke with tattoos, who used to be at the school, retrieves the yo-yo and punches me in the mouth.

"Kit!" I scream trying to get up from the trampling feet.

"Kit!"

He hears me.

"Stop!"

He sees me.

"Kit!" I wheeze, running up and falling in a heap in front of him.

"What?"

"Er, where are you going?"

"Home, you fat fuck," he replies and bounds off, down the hill.

"Kit!"

Got to delay him. Mustn't fail.

"Kit! Someone said it was your birthday!"

That's stopped him. He turns, glowering.

"Who said that?" he demands.

Mustn't say who. Mustn't say anything.

"No one. I can't remember."

"Do you know what it means?" he asks, suspiciously.

I shake my head. I've stopped him. Now what?

"You haven't remembered my birthday from last year. Who've you been talking to?"

I want to tell him, to gain his trust, but...

"Bbbb..."

"Beatrice? You've spoken to Beatrice?"

"No. Bbbbut..."

"Don't lie to me Parvin. I can see it in your eyes."

My cheeks are all hot. It's no good, I'm blushing.

"What did she tell you?"

"Nothing. Honestly."

"Anyway. She doesn't know."

"Know what?"

He starts walking. I catch up.

"Know what?"

"I'm eighteen. I'm free. I don't have to take any more of it."

"More of what?"

He looks at me, weighing me up. We're walking side by side.

"You wouldn't understand," he says. "Your parents are boring teachers. Everything about you is grey. Nothing you say ever sheds any light. What would you know about freedom?"

"You think I'm a fool but I'm not," I say, bluffing. "You can trust me."

He stops.

"What was Beatrice talking to you about then?"

"Nothing. I can't say. She trusts me. I promised. Nothing about you."

He believes me. He takes me into the park and tells me that his real mother died, giving birth to him. He is an only child. His Dad is in antiques. He hates his

stepmother who shouts all the time and mauls him with her fake love. He isn't allowed to do anything for himself. Anything he wants, she puts a stop to. She and his father argue constantly and threw things. It is unbearable.

He's right. Everything in my life is small and safe. What can I say?

Before I've a chance to think, he's off home again. And not slowly. He's pelting along, gritting his teeth. Shit! What's the time? There must be at least forty minutes to go!

"If you're eighteen and free," I say, "why are you going home?"

"Ah!" he says. "So the penny's finally dropped."

I stare at him.

"You're leaving home?"

He nods.

"You're going home to pack your bags?"

He nods.

"Tell me about it!" I beg and drag him into a cafe.

Inside, he eyes up the waitress with the bright pink lips and the mini skirt, who smiles sweetly back.

"Two teas Linda."

He knows her name. He never ceases to impress me.

"You're leaving home," I repeat, when we're seated.

I can hardly take it in. No one has ever left home.

"Do your parents know?"

"Of course not."

"But won't they mind?"

He gives me one of his looks of total derision.

"They get to sleep about three, after the drinks and the rows. I'll go then."

"Where will you go Kit?"

He shrugs.

"Do you want to help me escape?"

"What? At three in the morning?"

"Better make it four," he says.

"I can't. My parents..."

He's halfway down the road by the time I've paid.

Huffing, puffing, wheezing, gasping after him. Can't catch up. See him climb the steps. By the time I fall through the swing doors into the hallway, his legs are disappearing up in the lift. Got to run up and warn them. Four flights.

End up on his doorstep, panting and spluttering - in front of this ice-cold queen of a woman, her hair frozen, like the lines on her face, her body corseted in sparkly things.

"You're late!" she rasps, poshly. "I specifically asked you children to be here by three forty-five!"

The lift doors behind me open. Out steps Kit. Mrs Hogarth turns her attention.

"Kit!" she screeches, so everyone else will know. "Happy birthday! Darling!"

He avoids her sticky embrace, as the whole of the upper sixth flood out of her flat and surround us.

"Surprise!"

Kit just stands there, fuming, as I squeeze by, into the happy throng. Then he storms along the passage into his room and the door slams shut.

Well!

Mrs Hogarth has cooked hundreds of little pink cakes, like we're eight years old or something. I pick one up. I like anything sweet. Have to spit it out.

She's wearing so much makeup, she looks like one of her glazed vases. She swans about, invading everyone's space, making us eat more of the pink splodgy things and forcing us play blind man's buff, which deteriorates into a snogging session.

Then she introduces the magician. Some sad old geezer with decades of kiddy parties behind him and terrified at the sight of us.

At least five couples have their tongues down each other's throats, hands up each others' clothes. Roy and Beatrice are having it off behind a sofa. My parents don't make noises like that. I'd have heard.

Slurring his words, obviously pissed, plastic budgies, rabbits and cards flopping out of his greasy old suit, the magician performs his routine in a trance.

"Pick a card, any card. You laddie."

I pick a card. Others pick cards. There are cards circulating among us, torn up or lost. Some he's given us, some from a pack that simply falls out of his pocket. We never have the card he predicts. He stares in disbelief. Makes no sense. Magic!

It's really funny. Like the Marx Brothers. The magician stops moving. We're all laughing and he's just standing there, with his mouth open, shaking. I can't believe it. We've won. We've defeated an adult.

"I'm sorry," he mumbles and stumbles back into his own little black table, which collapses.

A look of surprise passes across his face. He clutches his chest. Others must've noticed because the laughter stops. Slowly, in silence, he starts to move towards the door. Several ping-pong balls fall from his sleeve.

"You've lost your balls!" yells Roy.

Beatrice giggles. The magician disappears. We hear a thud. Out in the hall, Mrs Hogarth shrieks at Mr Hogarth to call for an ambulance.

Everyone in here starts chattering, going over what's happened and giggling. I'm a bit upset. The new boy, Jules, puts his hand on my shoulder.

"This is cruel," he says. "Let's go and find Kit."

I follow him out of the room. Mr Hogarth is on the phone and Mrs Hogarth is slapping the magician, ordering him to wake up. As I step over the body, it feels as if I'm stepping over myself.

Jules bangs on the door at the end of the passage but Kit won't answer.

We find a room with a gigantic marble chess set. All the pieces have monstrous heads, like birds of prey.

"Fancy a game of draughts?" asks Jules.

"What? Oh. Yes."

"Did you know Kit plans to leave home tonight?"

"Yes. He asked me to help."

"I think we should. His parents are just awful. He can stay at my place."

"What about your parents?"

"They live on the south coast. Dad works here but he's gone down already."

"Wow."

I notice the pattern of the pieces on the board and, leaping over two of his pieces, demand a king. He roars with laughter. You can't put chess pieces on top of each other like you can with draughts.

We just laugh, until Jules finds out that you can unscrew them. Simple solution.

"Half a chess piece means a king. Right?"

"Right!" I say, happy.

Jules finds a bottle of wine and soon we both have lots of kings.

"You could come back to my place and we could wait up or get some sleep, then come back and help Kit escape."

"My parents would go mad if I didn't go home."

"Phone them," he says, pointing to a ghastly ornate gold and pink telephone.

I'm dubious.

"Your parents won't mind. You're seventeen."

Suddenly this mad, frightening woman is upon us, her arms flailing. It's horrible Mrs Hogarth.

"Oh you wicked children! You've broken my chess set! Look at them! They're all in pieces!" she screams.

“They're supposed to be. They're chess pieces!” Jules explains.

But she keeps repeating “Ruined! Priceless! Priceless! Ruined!”

Kit's ancient, stooping father has us out of the room before I've a chance to see if we've been unscrewing or breaking them.

Jules has a coat, which had to be found, Mr Hogarth hovering over us the whole time. I can hear Mrs Hogarth ordering everyone to “sing happy birthday to the naughty boy in his room” as their front door shuts on us.

Jules gives me a grin in the lift. But, outside, it's dark. We've got to walk all the way to Bayswater in the rain.

“What about if bad people get us?” I ask.

“There are no bad people,” he tells me. “Only good people and a chaotic, unknowable world.”

“That's alright then. Is it?”

Jules shrugs. I follow him along the road. Everything's glittering in the wet. Exciting. We have to climb over the gates of Kensington Gardens to cut through the park. Dark trees whoosh about, full of mysterious danger. As if I've been asleep all my life and now I'm awake.

I love Jules. I'd follow him to the ends of the earth.

Jules has his own flat! Fantastic! What's more, it's as if no one's ever cleaned it. There are glowing hairy things, once food, on scattered plates. Strange green orbs, once oranges, in a bowl.

"Coffee?"

"Thanks."

"Sit anywhere."

I choose a big, old armchair. A spring boings up and jabs me in the bottom. Say nothing.

"It'll have to be black I'm afraid."

"That's fine."

"What are you going to do when you leave school, Andy?"

"Don't know."

"But it's only a few months away. Haven't you thought about it?"

It's never occurred to me that I should be thinking about my future. Mum and Dad do that.

"I'm supposed to go to Music College."

Jules nods. He's accepted it. That's a relief.

"Do you take sugar?"

I nod.

"Two, please, Jules."

He gives me a friendly smile and rummages around for the sugar.

"And what after music college?" he asks.

I don't know what to say. The very idea whisks me away into darkness. I reach out for one of the glowing green oranges in the bowl, which turns to powder.

"No sugar. There's honey. That do?"

"Yes."

He stirs in the honey, passes me the mug, perches on the arm of a chair with his own and stares at me, waiting. What for?

"My violin teacher, Mr Barzac, plays with the London Symphony Orchestra," I say, proudly.

Jules takes it in.

"Is that what you want? To play in an orchestra and teach?"

Teach? No. My parents are teachers. I've never thought about Mr Barzac teaching.

"I went to see him at the Albert Hall. Afterwards I was allowed back stage. We went to the pub with all the other musicians. They got so drunk that some of them couldn't stand up! We had to bundle them into taxis!"

Jules is shaking his head and tutting.

"What a tragedy!" he exclaims.

What does he mean? It was exciting. Me with the London Symphony Orchestra in a pub!

"Why? Why is it a tragedy?"

Jules sighs, as if it's all too sad to explain.

"Well," he says, "I assume that all those musicians were once idealists. I mean, music would tend to attract romantic, passionate young people, wouldn't it? Yet, here they are, playing the same pieces over and over again and getting drunk afterwards."

"I don't think they just play the same pieces..."

"They do. My mother's a musician."

"Is she?"

"Yeah. Pianist. Always flying off somewhere, to do a Rachmaninov or a Beethoven."

His mother's a soloist. Wow! Jules swigs his coffee and leaps from his chair.

"The thing I don't understand, is this: Okay, so you choose a profession and it turns out to be boring. Okay, so anyone can make a mistake. But then, why don't they change?"

Jules perches his mug precariously on the back of the chair and starts pacing. It could fall. I want to retrieve it, put it somewhere safe.

"Don't they realise it's boring, that it will make them boring? Or don't they care?"

His footsteps make the mug wobble.

"Why? It isn't as if the world's sorted. Two thirds of the world's starving for a start. There's a war in Viet Nam which, at any time, could go nuclear."

He thumps the chair, sending up a cloud of dust. The mug clatters to the floor. He ignores it.

"Why?"

I shrug. I don't know why. Or even what.

"I think people are cowards. They're frightened, so they hide. The more boring a job is, the less you need to think. Even my Dad. He's made a fortune in crazy paving, but is he happy?"

"Is he?"

“Well - he is quite happy actually. But only because he's oblivious. Underneath, he doesn't care about anyone or anything. Except money. And that's just for his own protection. He says he cares about his family. But all he does for Mum is to take mistresses, which she invariably finds out about. And all he does for me is send me away to school.”

Jules strides over and flings open a fridge.

“Fancy some bread and cheese?”

I look at his gaunt face in the ghostly light from the fridge, his acne casting shadows like the surface of the moon.

“What are you going to do with your life Jules?”

“I don't know. Yet. But I'm not going to get some boring job and do nothing. Better to embrace the chaos and explore.”

A huge yawn balloons out of me. I don't want Jules to think I'm bored.

“Will you go to university?”

He shakes his head.

“Waste of time. Does John Lennon have a degree?”

I have to admit, I don't know. Never heard of him. I'm tired. Really tired. Don't know if I can keep awake.

“Here's a sandwich.”

I can see the sandwich but my eyes are closing and there's nothing I can do about it.

“Coffee?”

My eyes open.

“You fell asleep.”

I take the mug.

“Drink up. Time to go.”

I'm cold. It'll be even colder out. Only got my blazer.

Three in the morning. Dark, wet, freezing. Rip my blazer on the park gate. My asthma comes on. Wish it wouldn't. Don't want Jules to think I'm weak. Don't want to be weak any more.

Are we really going to spring Kit? In my world, with my family, you're in the mood to actually do something, so you discuss it and discuss it, until the mood passes.

Jules shines a torch up, trying to find Kit's room on the top floor.

“There he is!” he hisses.

I can't see anything. Something. What is it? A bag, swinging about overhead. My heart starts pounding. His parents will wake up. Lights will go on. Police will be called. We're going to prison. My parents will visit. They'll be crying, and...

"Grab it!"

I grab it. Like the old magician, I go through the motions, doing what I'm told, shaking, as bag after bag appears out of nowhere.

"Is Kit going to come down the rope too?" I ask.

Jules hasn't heard. He's in the middle of the road waving his arms about. A taxi screeches to a halt. Kit appears. Out of breath. He's come down the stairs. Sensible.

"Jules has got us a taxi," I tell him.

He ignores me and helps Jules. So should I. Amazing. Doesn't the taxi driver suspect anything? We could be hardened criminals.

"Get in Andy."

Door slams shut and we're sailing across London as the sun comes up. I don't think I've ever been up all night before.

Is Kit really leaving home forever? Is this it? How will he manage? Jules seems to think his Dad, Ralph, will give Kit a room.

"Come down to Hayling with me at the weekend and meet him."

I look at Kit, trying to work out what's going through his mind.

"Sure," he says, like it's no big deal.

I wish I could go.

"You could come too, Andy," says Jules.

I could come too. Except for my parents. My parents! What's the time?

"Let me off here!"

Taxi swerves to the side. I jump out.

"See you at school!"

Where am I? There's an 88. Run. Got to get home before school. It's all I can think of. Sitting on the top deck, begging the bus to go faster. Then half running, half walking down Hartswood Road and left into Wendell.

"Ding dong" goes our front doorbell. "Ding dong."

Dad answers. Mum behind him. Both in tears. Into their arms.

Embarrassing.

"As long as you're not on drugs."

"Promise us you're not on drugs. They're dangerous."

"A girl jumped out of a window only last week."

"Was it a girl? Have you finally got a girlfriend?"

"Was it a woman? A woman of the night?"

"A man in a raincoat?"

"Did he touch you?"

"Where did he touch you?"

"Tell us."

"We're your parents."

"We love you."

"We've been up all night."

"Worried sick."

"Haven't slept a wink."

"Had to phone your friends' parents and wake them all up."

"Had to inform the police."

And so on. Army on full alert.

"And what have you got to say for yourself?"

"Nothing?"

"It's selfish, that's what it is."

My younger brother Colin is sitting on the stairs.

"Where were you?" he mimes.

I mime back.

"Tell you later."

School's buzzing. Everyone seems to know about Kit's escape. How? The moment I walk into registration, Roy and Beatrice take me aside.

"What do you know about it?" asks Roy.

Tired but heroic, I want to whisper the whole scintillating story into their greedy little ears and be their friend. But Jules gives me a look.

"About what?" I ask.

"Kit has run away from home!" Beatrice blurts out.

I've never seen Beatrice blurt before. She's excited and that's exciting.

"Kit's run away? But it cannot be!"

I think I'm going to be good at lying.

"Don't act the innocent with me Parvin," say Roy. "You went to the party with him. The moment he arrived, he locked himself in his room. You must've been in on it."

Amanda wanders over. The trouble is, I don't know how much they know.

"Just a minute. How do you know he's left home?" I ask.

"What do you mean, how do I know? I'm Head Boy. Mr and Mrs Hogarth are extremely distressed. They're in seeing the Head Master even as we speak."

"You're kidding!"

"I'm not," Roy assures me.

"But he's dead, isn't he?"

Beatrice gasps.

"Kit's dead?"

Roy pins my neck to the wall.

"Not Kit," I croak. "The Head."

Amanda bursts out laughing.

"The Head's not dead," says Roy, letting me go.

"But after he collapsed in assembly... And he's been absent for months... He is an alcoholic, isn't he?"

"That's none of your business. He's the Head Master and stop changing the subject. What've you done with Kit?"

"I... Hang on. Why should anyone else be involved? If he ran away, he probably did it on his own."

"But he didn't."

"How do you know?"

I'm feeling a bit queasy.

"The rope. He passed his belongings - all his belongings - down, one by one, on a rope. He had help."

We left the rope! I can see it hanging there. We left it.

Fools! Criminals always make one fatal mistake. Roy's looking at me. He knows. I've got guilt written all over my face. I try to smile but it comes out wrong. He lunges for me. Amanda steps in his way. He starts ranting.

"Have you any idea what you've done, Parvin, you fat bastard? How's Kit going to survive? How's he going to pass his exams? What future has he got if he doesn't? Bloody irresponsible! I've a good mind to..."

The tannoy crackles. The room goes quiet.

"Would Christopher Hogarth please come to the Headmaster's study? I repeat..."

Everyone glances about to see if Kit's here. He isn't. Roy looks down his nose at me and walks off.

"Is there any way I can help?" asks Amanda.

Jules is disappearing through the door. I've got to tell him.

"They know he had help. The rope."

"Deny everything," he hisses. "Meet you in the garden at lunch."

It's a long time till lunch. The tannoy will crackle. It'll be my name. "Andy Parvin to the Headmaster's study." Or Jules first and then me. Or both together. Or vice versa. Stands to reason. Only a matter of time. The rope will lead them to us. They'll force Kit to squeal.

Mrs Moody's going on about the French revolution. "Man is born free, yet everywhere he is in chains." Marat in his bath. The devious Danton. The whole situation spiralling out of control, into the hands of the dwarfish dictator, Napoleon.

I'm in trouble! I'm in trouble! I hate it. How can Jules be so cool, sprawled under a tree in the sixth-form garden, smoking a Park Drive? I've had terrible asthma all morning.

"Want one?"

Never had a cigarette before.

Someone appears up by the fountain, sees us and starts down towards us. Hide the fag. No, it's lovely, freckly Amanda. Let her see. She'll tell others. My status is going up up up!

"Hi!" she says, sitting down beside us.

Jules nods. I nod, take another puff. Feel confident. Relaxed. Hang on, I think my asthma's gone. It has. Must be the cigarette. Why don't adults tell you these things?

Jules jumps up. It's Kit!

"What happened?" asks Jules. "Have you seen the Head?"

Kit looks grim. Jules chucks him a cig.

I can't stand the suspense.

"Well?"

Kit and Jules give a sideways glance at Amanda.

"If you want me to go..." she says.

"Well..." says Jules.

"Thought I'd find you guys here! Hi Amanda!"

It's Beatrice. I watch her swooshing towards us. How come she's so beautiful? Is it her dark, lustrous hair, which dances as she moves? Her big brown eyes with their deep, superior sense of humour? Her lips? Her hips? Her breasts? Her thighs? What is it?

Everything. Every bloody thing. The very way she sits down beside us without considering whether she's wanted. I can't believe it. We've attracted the top two girls!

"I don't think they want us here," says Amanda, rising.

"Oh."

Beatrice throws Kit a cold stare.

"No! It's alright," he assures her. "Stay."

Something passes between them. His eyes plead with hers. She looks away.

"The thing is - we must trust each other", Jules suggests. "If someone like Roy finds out..."

"Oh, him!" says Beatrice, as if Roy's the scum of the earth.

Aren't they together any more? They were at registration.

"Well?" she asks. "What happened?"

"I had to go to the Head's study."

"We know that. What happened?"

"Well, the Head was actually there."

Gasps all round. This is really something.

"He didn't say anything though. Didn't move. It was dark. Took me ages to realise that my parents were in the room."

"Christ!" says Jules. "What then?"

"Mrs Rathbone started giving me all this shit."

"Typical!" says Jules, and the girls agree.

Mrs Rathbone is the Deputy Head. She was my Head of House when I first arrived at the school. She was nice then. She must've changed. Everyone hates her now. Dad told me that her husband died and I should be sympathetic.

"She went on and on about how I've upset everyone. Where are my bags? Are they on the school premises? Where've I been? Who else is involved?"

"What did you say?"

"Nothing. Well..."

"What?"

Kit bites his nail. We've all got bitten nails, except Beatrice.

"I told her I never want to see my fucking parents ever again."

"You said that in front of them?"

"My stepmother went berserk, screaming at my poor old stooping Dad to make me come home."

"And did he?"

"No. He couldn't face me. He knows. He asked the Head to clarify the situation and the Head just sat there, propped in his chair, hint of a smile on his lips and a listless look in the eyes."

"Dead?" I ask.

"No. There were dark veins throbbing on his nose."

"So?"

"So Mrs Rathbone told me that, if there was the slightest suspicion that I wasn't in my right mind, I could be locked up in a psychiatric institution. And did I want that to happen?"

"Evil!" whispers Jules, his acne glowing with rage.

"So, are they going to lock you up?" asks Beatrice.

Kit shakes his head. He's been crying.

"I said - I'm eighteen and there's nothing you can do. I'm not insane. On the contrary, it's my parents who are insane, with their rows and throwing things. I said - I'll find a place to live. I'll take my exams. But I won't go home, not ever."

The sound in Kit's voice makes me shudder. Like arrows whistling through the air. I've said things to Mum and Dad, hurtful things and I've made threats. But I've never said anything I've meant or meant anything I've said. With Kit it's irreversible, you can hear it. No one has anything to say. Jules is ripping up bits of grass. Finally Kit shrugs.

"That was it, really. Rathbone tried to make me promise to meet my parents at the gates when school's over. But it was only to save face. There's nothing they can do. I know. I've been planning this for years."

Kit has won. Everyone is jubilant. Only Jules is concerned.

"Will your parents be at the gate, Kit?"

"Probably. Yes."

“Andy, you've got a free period this afternoon, haven't you?”

“Me? I've got English.”

“Yes. But after. You could go down to the High Street and hail a taxi. Meet us outside the caretaker's gate.”

Jules points. There's a gate at the bottom of the garden, between some trees. I've never noticed it before.

“But...”

“Don't tell anyone. The rest of us will be there the moment the bell goes, hop in the cab and over to Beatrice's.”

I'm full of questions and objections. Why Beatrice's? Why a taxi? Why me? But Kit and Jules are grinning. Beatrice positively glows. Amanda gives me an encouraging smile. It's been decided. Everyone's wandering off to lessons.

I'm tired and muddled from lack of sleep. Wish I'd never got involved. Even if I can sneak out of school without being caught, how do you hail a taxi?

Mr Fozil's droning on.

"...De nerkes awychen in de ber..."

Must be Chaucer. Nod off again. Loud bang wakes me up. Dropped my book. Everyone laughing. Stay awake. Can't. Another horrible racket. Grinding of chairs. Eyes blink open. Where's everyone going? Oh...

Race across school to the sixth-form garden. Wander, nonchalantly, past the fountains. Want to forget the whole thing, curl under the tree and sleep. But I can't let them down. That's the worst thing in the world, letting people down.

No one about. Shoot out through the caretaker's gate. Down the hill, puffing. I can do this. I can do these things I've never done before. I can stop a taxi.

There's one, see? Whizzed right by. What's one supposed to do?

There's another one!

"Hello?"

Didn't hear me.

One on the other side. Quick! Wave! Run! Screech! Turn and see a vehicle screeching towards me. Can't move.

Stops. Not two inches away. Driver yelling. Shoppers all stopped and staring.

"Sorry. I was er trying to catch a taxi."

"Well you bloody caught one ain't you!"

Some people laugh. Others are tutting at me and shaking their heads. I'm a stupid boy.

"I say you've bloody caught one," repeats the driver. "Dozy bastard."

I stare at the driver. The penny drops. It's a taxi. He's a taxi driver.

"Would you, er. Would you be willing to, er."

"Op in."

Inside it's dark and leathery.

"Where you off to then?"

"Er, to meet some chaps. Er, friends of mine. And girls. Well, they're just friends."

"Very nice. Where is it?"

"Actually, I don't know how you get there from here."

"The address."

"Well, it's next to the school caretaker's house..."

"Comprehensive?"

"Er, yes."

He's off like a rocket. We're outside the gate in thirty seconds and there's no one there.

"Would it be alright if we waited?"

"You going somewhere after?"

"Yes. We're going to Beatrice's house."

"And where's that?"

"I don't know."

"You got any money on you?"

"Er, no."

"Get out."

He bends his arm backwards and opens my door.

"No. Look, my friends will be here in a minute and they'll have money. Please!"

"I haven't got time to waste, waiting for your..."

Kit appears, leaps into the cab and slams the door.

"You got any money?" asks the cabby.

"Yes. Twenty-four Blenheim Crescent." The taxi moves off.

What about the others? Kit's forgotten. It's all going wrong!

"Where are the others?"

"Meeting us there. Listen, Andy, I want to ask you something."

His voice goes soft, drawing me into his confidence, which is where I want to be.

"You know you said yesterday about Beatrice trusting you?"

"Did I?"

"I wonder if you could have a word with her. For me."

"Oh."

"Yeah."

"What?"

"Tell her how I feel."

"About what? ...Beatrice?"

"I know what you think. Everyone fancies Beatrice. But no one loves her, like I do."

I look at Kit. He loves her. I can see. He's all painful and hurting with it. He's pushed his wiry frame tight into the corner of the seat and become two huge eyes, full of need.

"Don't tell anyone."

"No."

"But tell her."

"Yes."

I have to do this for Kit. It's important. We're going to her place now. I see. He means do it now.

The taxi swerves to the side and brakes. Kit pays and rings the doorbell. Beatrice's mother lets us in.

She leads us into her immaculate living room, curtains drawn, little side lamps and lots of glinty, rich things. The others are already there, sitting nicely, sipping cups of tea out of tiny china cups. Beatrice is wearing a kimono.

Her mother serves Kit and me. Nobody speaks till she's gone.

"I've a vision of this place surrounded by police, teachers and Kit's parents!" declares Jules, pacing. "Who knows what they've found out? Christ these paintings are horrible. Do you like them, Beatrice?"

He stares around the walls in disbelief.

"My mother borrows them from the library," Beatrice explains.

"From the library?"

Everyone laughs. It seems so funny. Though I can't imagine why.

Jules starts going round, turning pictures to face the wall.

"Where are you going to live, Kit?" asks Amanda.

Kit looks to Jules, who explains.

"I'm pretty sure my Dad will sort Kit out with a room. Actually, we're going down to my parents' place this weekend, if either of you girls would like to come along...?"

The hope that springs into Kit's eyes reminds me that I'm supposed to speak to Beatrice. I want to do it for Kit. But how? That's the trouble.

"...It's by the sea. Amanda?"

"Oh, I don't know. My sisters have a gig. I'd like to..."

"How about you, Beatrice? There are loads of rooms and..."

The door opens. Mrs Moore enters, mumbling something about washing the cups. She notices the pictures and stops in her tracks.

"What have you done with my paintings? How dare you turn them to face the wall!"

"I had to," Jules admits. "They're ugly."

"And whose house do you think this is?"

"They're ugly in anyone's house," Kit explains.

There's a bit of a stink. We've got to leave.

"I'm not having you great louts in my house! Furthermore, my daughter will definitely not be spending her weekend with the likes of you!"

She's been listening. Snooty cow. Amanda's leaving with us. Mrs Moore smiles, cheesily.

“You don't have to leave, Amanda, dear.”

“Sorry Mrs Moore. Got to go. Thanks for having us. Byeee!”

Missed my chance to speak to Beatrice.

Out on the street. Door closes behind us. Jules, Kit and Amanda are walking away.

What if I went back now and asked to speak to Beatrice? What would I say? That Kit fancies her? Her mother would be listening. Useless. Forget it. Catch the others up.

Amanda's asking them about going down to Jules' place for the weekend.

"Are all of you going?" she asks.

Jules and Kit nod.

"You Andy?"

I know, I could ask Beatrice to meet me before school tomorrow. Don't want the others to see, in case I fail.

"See you!" I bark, spinning round and strutting off, back the way we've come.

They're yelling at me. Don't care. Pretend not to hear them. Keep walking till they've forgotten about me, then duck down behind a parked car. Now!

Peer through a windscreen. They're still looking. They've seen me. Wave. Walk on. Try again in a while.

How am I going to recognise her house? I could have passed it.

Okay. Casually, look back...

They've gone. Right. Find it. One of these. Twenty-four. That's it. Ring the bell. Never done anything like this before. Mrs Moore answers.

"What do you want?"

"Could I have a word with Beatrice? Just for a moment?"

Beatrice pops her head forward.

"What is it Andy?"

I gulp.

"Would you meet me before school tomorrow? There's something I need to discuss."

"What?"

"Tell you then."

"Okay."

"Great. Well. See you."

I'm turning and waving and walking all at the same time.

"Where?" she calls.

Where? Yes, of course. Where! I'm stumped. Stymied. My mouth goes up and down but my brain won't give me any information.

"By the fountains," she suggests.

I nod. She smiles. The door closes. I skip down the street. I'm meeting Beatrice Moore by the fountains before school. I know it's not about me. It's about Kit. But still, Beatrice Moore.

What am I going to say?

I stop walking. Have to, there's a house in the way. It's a dead end. Turn round. Light's fading. Where am I?

Walk. Find a bus. Got to get home. Got to convince Mum and Dad to let me go to Jules' place for the weekend. Won't stand a chance if I'm late for teatime.

What's my story going to be? I've befriended a new boy. He's invited me to stay for the weekend at his family mansion by the sea.

Yes. Mansion. They'll like that. And what's his name? Marsden-Hunt. Julian Marsden-Hunt. They'll like that too. Double-barrelled.

Use the journey home to perfect it. I may be a fool in the world, but I know my parents. Work out every possibility on the bus. Puff down Hartswood Road, primed, ready. Breeze in through the front door, fling down my satchel.

They're in the kitchen.

"Hi Mum! Hi Dad!"

"Where on earth have you been?"

"The new boy, Julian Marsden-Hunt, has invited me to stay at his family's mansion on Hayling Island for the weekend. Got to pack."

"Just one minute."

"What Dad?"

"You're going away, you say?"

"Yes."

"But have you been invited?"

Christ! I'm going to have to wait while he works it all out.

"Yes. I've told you."

"But do his parents know?" asks Mum, fighting with some vegetables in the sink.

"Oh his parents aren't like that. They're very modern."

Mum spins round, brandishing her chopping knife. I knew she'd hate me saying that. Dad tries to cool things down.

"Never mind how modern they are. The point is, they don't know. You haven't been invited."

"Suit yourself."

Mum starts chopping onions at the speed of light and chucking them in the pan.

"You intend to go anyway. Is that it?" she mutters.

Dad tries to be reasonable.

"Can you at least provide us with their phone number?"

He pulls out his pen and miniature red address book.

"It'll be in the phone book."

"Alright. What are their names?"

"Marsden-Hunt. I've told you."

"Their address?"

"Hayling Island."

"That is not an address."

"No. It's an island. A huge island, full of people all called Marsden-Hunt. You'll never find me."

"There's no need to be sarcastic."

"Typical" hisses Mum.

She's tearful. Dad notices. I tell him.

"It's the onions."

"You can make jokes," he says, bitterly. "But, until you're eighteen, you're our responsibility."

"Oh, so in a few months time, I'll suddenly be able to do anything I want?"

"I'm afraid so, yes."

He shares a look of sad resignation with Mum.

"Then why don't we come to some agreement?" I say, appealing to his sense of fairness and trust and general weakness.

"What do you suggest?" he asks.

"You let me go to Jules' place for the weekend and, in return, you give me some money."

"Damn cheek!" exclaims Mum. "Nothing but cheek and rudeness! Food's ready! Go upstairs and wash your hands!"

Only too happy to oblige. The moment I'm out the door, Dad starts reasoning. Think I'll stay and listen.

"He will need money, Dorothy, if it's down on the coast."

"But we don't know these people! He's too young! He's inconsiderate! He seems to think we're made of money! Oh heck! The vegetables are alight! Quick! Cyril!"

"What?"

"Water!"

"This?"

"No!" screams Mum.

I shove my head round the corner in time to see Dad chucking the entire contents of the washing-up bowl over the electric cooker. There's a huge blue flash and all the lights go out.

Mum's voice wails in the darkness.

"Everything's ruined!"

Dad tries to console her.

"At least we're safe."

There's a knock at the front door. I manage to creep upstairs just in time. Sit on my bed. So tired. Can't pack in the dark. Do it in the morning. And I'm meeting Beatrice before school. Better set my alarm.

Someone finally opens the front door. Dad's voice.

"Mr Bailey."

It's Mr Bailey from next door.

"Oh!" he says. "You're power gone off too?"

Beatrice...

Her name is on my lips as I awake. Still dark. What's the time? Five to five. Alarm's set for five. Turn it off quick, before it wakes everyone. Now pack. Where's my holdall?

What have I got today? English after break. History after lunch. Danton essay. Damn. Do it at lunch. What'll I need for the weekend? Change of clothes. One or two? It's by the sea. Swimming trunks. Will they have towels? Take a jumper. Might be cold. Raincoat, sou'wester. Books to read, games to play. Should I take my train set?

Can't think. Tiptoe out into the passage and feel my way down the stairs. Know every creaking board and avoid them all. Can't resist having a peek at the devastated kitchen but can't see a thing. Try the light. It works. Kitchen's perfect. Pristine. Like nothing ever happened. They must've spent hours cleaning up. There's some money on the table and a note. It's to me.

"ANDY. Here is some money for your journey. Please call us with your phone number when you arrive - so we won't worry. (You can reverse the charges!) Love Mum and Dad."

Upstairs a door clicks. I freeze. Someone's padding down the stairs. Mum in her dressing gown.

"I thought I heard you down here."

"I've got to go Mum. Thanks for the money."

"Where are you going at this time?"

"I'm meeting somebody."

"What have you got in that bag?"

"Stuff for the weekend."

"You've got enough for a year. Show me. Perhaps we can lighten your load."

"Please Mum. Don't."

"Alright. Give me a kiss then."

"I can't Mum. I'll be late."

I'm hurtling along the road. It's drizzling. Maybe too early for buses. Maybe I'll have to walk all the way. Beatrice'll say "Where were you?" and never speak to me again. Nor will Kit. He won't want me to go with them for the weekend.

Bus comes straight away, headlights beaming through the rain. Sit alone on the top deck, twigs brushing the windows all the way up the avenue.

If I can tell Beatrice how Kit feels about her, perhaps she'll find a way to come with us to Hayling Island. Then Kit will have a place to live and the girl he loves.

School gates are locked. Don't want to be hanging about here like a twerp when people start arriving. Wish I knew what the time was. She could be waiting. Have to climb over. Could get hurt. What about the garden gate? If it's open.

The rain's stopped, but, as I open the gate, it twangs the ivy, which splatters me with rain. Push my way between trees and bushes. Everything I touch sheds its water. By the time I reach the bench by the fountain, I'm drenched.

Sit down. Little flurries of wind through the trees. Branches in silhouette waving about. Not that I'm scared.

Jules thinks I should consider my future. Educational qualifications are a waste of time, he says. Jack Lemon hasn't got a degree! I suppose if I had a talent. If I was Mozart or Van Gogh or someone. But they die poor and bitter, like my Granddad.

He had a talent. He could hold an egg up to the light and tell you if it was good or bad. He was famous. Everyone brought their eggs to him. Then, one day, they invented a machine that did the job in half the time and that was the end of it. No one brought their eggs to Granddad anymore. He was a forgotten man. Tragic.

Purple clouds whoosh across the sky. It's supposed to be spring but it's freezing. I wish Beatrice'd show up. Stand up. Walk about. Keep warm.

Just a talent for making money would do. Like Marks. Or Spencer. How do you make money? Get a job I suppose. Filing things in an office. Building a bridge. Come home of an evening. Have tea, watch telly. Nice enough.

Jules won't settle for a boring life. Why should I? I don't want to be inferior to anyone anymore. I've got teachers at school, teachers at home... I don't want anyone to tell me what to do, ever again. If I want to learn something, I'll do it on my own!

Ssh! There's a little old man not ten yards away. Caretaker? He's shaking a teapot in front of him and mumbling. Shit. I've caught him in some weird, secret ritual. Keep still. Don't let him see me. He's seen me.

"What are you doing here?"

"I'm waiting for someone."

"School's not open yet. You shouldn't be here."

"Sorry."

"Well, just make sure I don't come back and find things missing."

"Yes. I won't. I mean, what things?"

"Never you mind."

He empties the teapot on a flowerbed and shuffles off between two ghostly bushes. Bonkers. Jules is right. A boring life makes you boring. But what if you're boring to begin with? How do you change?

All my life I've been bottom of the pecking order. At junior school they beat me up because I was posh. When I got into the A stream here, I wasn't posh enough.

If I do what Mum and Dad say, I'll end up like them, working like slaves, tired, timid, frightened of everything they don't know and venting their frustration on each other.

I've got to be successful in some way. But what does that mean?

Does it mean do something wonderful? Or make a lot of money? Or have power over others? Do you have to use tricks or can you get there on merit? My parents are full of merit but they're nowhere.

How can I consider my future, when I don't know anything about anything? Jules doesn't treat me like a fool, but I am. I won't even get to be a teacher. I'll fail all my exams and end up down the mines.

Despair. The wind has dropped. Silence. Half-light, almost silver. The bark of a tree turns from black, to deep soggy brown. Leafbuds glow, like tiny, green candles. There's a bird on one of the branches. A robin. Wow! Little brown bird, glowing red breast, just like on the Christmas cards. Makes me gasp to see it sitting there, in the flesh. Such a famous bird.

Mum used to take me to the park and tell me the names of trees and flowers, how to tell birds by their songs, like "a little bit of bread and no cheese". Forget which bird says that.

She told me that, once upon a time, the birds were tame. But then men shot at them with guns and now they won't come near us. Perhaps progress isn't always progress. If that's so, maybe success isn't always success.

Blue sky reflected in the fountain. Patches of bright yellow on the lawn. Suddenly the garden's full of chirping, twittering, squeaking, whistling birdies. Pigeons coo. Crows caw. Blackbirds and magpies flap about. Tits and finches whiz between boughs. Sparrows splash in the water.

Garden on fire. Trick of the light. Whole sky shot with gold. Across the sunbeams, wherever I look, flocks of birds on the wing. Arrow formations of swallows, squadrons of swifts, wave after wave of warblers, house martins. The birds of summer are flying in. It's a vision.

Never been too keen on nature, but this takes my breath away. Some swallows peel off from the flock and swoop down to us. Birds in this little garden go mad. Dazzling music.

Freedom. Never mind success. Been a prisoner all my life, at home or in school. Liberty. Nothing else matters. Freedom to soar or fall flat on my face. Jules knows about freedom. Learn from him. Yes. That's my plan. Sussed.

Footsteps behind me, thudding down the path to the main buildings. Gates must've opened. Kids laughing, chattering. Two thousand school children swarming in.

Beatrice isn't going to turn up. Why should she? It's only me. I knew this would happen.

When I was seven, a pretty girl called Philippa rang on our door and asked if I'd like to accompany her home. Dad took me aside. He thought she was taking advantage of me but I wouldn't hear of it.

He was right though. I carried her books all the way. She said goodbye and disappeared into her house. Taught me a lesson. Girls can trick you. Especially beautiful girls like Beatrice.

"Andy."

Beatrice? No...

"...Amanda."

She's coming over. Disaster. If she's here when Beatrice turns up...

"What happened to you last night?"

"Nothing."

"We saw you hiding behind that car, you know."

She giggles and, without warning, kisses me on the cheek.

"What are you doing?"

"Flirting with you."

"Well stop it."

"Okay."

"Who put you up to it?"

"No one."

"Well then."

"You coming to registration?"

"No, I..."

"Come on. We could talk. Oh, you're wet through."

What's she doing, touching me? I look up and we're face to face. Such a friendly face. Freckles like gold dust. Does she know how lovely she looks? Or is she just lovely? Stop it. Anyway, I'm on a mission for Kit.

"You haven't seen Beatrice have you?"

"No. Did you go back to see her last night?"

"No."

"That's what Jules thought you were doing."

Amanda hangs about, but I'm not saying any more. Mustn't betray Kit's trust. Finally she gets the message and goes. Phew! That was a near thing.

Amanda's always doing that, standing too close. Makes me feel clumpy and lumpy. "I'm flirting with you," she says. Huh! Who does she think she is? What's more, she'll tell everyone that I'm sitting in the garden, soaked through, waiting for...

"Sorry I'm late."

"Oh. Beatrice..."

It's her!

"Amanda told me you were here," she purrs. "This morning's been such a rush. Sorry."

She's all gorgeous and mysterious like the sphinx. Puts me off.

"Never mind," I reassure her. "You're here now."

"So, what have you to tell me, Andy?"

"It's not about me actually."

"Oh no?"

She blesses me with one of her sumptuous smiles. Helplessly, I beam back.

"It's about Kit. He loves you."

"Did he tell you that?"

"Yes."

"Did he tell you to speak to me?"

"Yes."

She seems cross.

"Why couldn't he tell me himself?"

"I suppose because he's in love with you."

She considers this.

"Well, now you've told me. Coming to registration?"

Beatrice turns and strides away. I'd no idea it would end so soon. So much I was going to say. Tag along. Try to say everything fast.

"Kit's very intelligent," I puff, trying to keep up. "I know he's a bit on the short side, not traditionally handsome, but his soul shines. He's original, interesting..."

"He's creepy."

"Creepy? Kit isn't creepy. I've never heard of such a thing! ...No, he's deep, compared to the other boys you ever see... ...I really think he loves you. ...Not that he's weak..."

Beatrice isn't responding. It's going all wrong. Can't just end like this. What am I going to say to Kit?

"What am I going to say to Kit?"

"Tell him you told me."

"But what about you? What shall I say that you said?"

"If I have anything to say to Kit," she snaps, "I'll say it to his face."

"Oh... I'm sorry if I've handled this wrong, Beatrice."

"You've done nothing wrong, Andy. You've been sweet."

...I've been sweet. Praise indeed! Watch her delicious bum disappear up the stairs. Can't stop beaming. Face hurts.

Jules has a plan. We've all got the first two periods free so we're going back to his place. It'll save Amanda and me lugging our weekend stuff around all day. Beatrice is coming. I wonder if Jules'll convince her to come to with us to Hayling Island. Where's Kit got to? He wasn't at registration. Ask Jules.

"Where's Kit?"

Beatrice answers.

"Is Kit your best friend Andy?"

Jules sniggers.

"No. I just wanted to know, that's all."

Jules and Beatrice walk ahead.

"I like Kit," says Amanda.

"Do you?"

"He's sensitive."

I look at her to check that she's not being sarcastic.

"Remember when he read us that Eliot poem? Prufrock?"

"What?"

"I think it was in the fourth year. He started ranting on about how it was the only truthful poem in the whole world and what did we think? And you said "Bonkers". So funny."

"I don't remember."

"Yes you do. Kit was furious. He hit you."

"I'm sure I didn't mean to upset him. I probably just didn't understand the poem."

"...Oh, Andy..."

She's gone all gooey on me.

"I watched you conducting the second orchestra the other day. They're awful, aren't they? What a racket!"

She giggles. Maybe I'm supposed to share the joke, but she's insulted my orchestra.

"They're just learning."

"Oh I know. You work very hard with them."

"Do I?"

"I really like you Andy."

"Do you?"

"Really, really like you."

"Oh. Why?"

"I don't know. You're funny."

"Am I? I don't mean to be."

"No," she agrees. "You just are."

"Thanks a lot! What you're saying is that I'm a fool, which I know already."

"Not a fool. Funny. Good-natured. And intelligent."

"Pff! There must be something wrong with you."

"You just live beneath the surface. I mean, when you play the violin..."

"When have you heard me play?"

"Every year at the concert."

"Oh, yes."

"But the best was last year when we did that show at the old folks home and Mrs Johnson ended up playing songs from the thirties and you joined in. It was great."

Jules turns the key in the lock. We pile in. There are drawings all over the place. I recognise Kit's style. When I draw, I can't even get the eyes to look the same way. With Kit, you know what they're thinking. There are sketches of Jules, looking gaunt and intense.

But most of the pictures are of Beatrice. Beatrice in poses I'm sure she's never been in.

"Christ!" she gasps, seeing them.

Jules clears them away.

"Who wants a drink?" he asks. "I've got coffee, tea. If you want, there's some whiskey my dad's carelessly left."

"Coffee," says Beatrice.

Amanda's cradling the whiskey.

"We can't drink this, can we? He'll notice."

"I know a trick."

Jules takes the bottle and pours whiskey into mugs.

"We drink what we want," he explains, passing them out. "Then top up the bottle with water."

He raises his mug.

"To our fabulous futures!"

I wait for the others.

"Down the hatch!" grins Amanda, swigging hers back.

Beatrice sips hers. Jules gulps his. It's my turn. Never had whiskey before. Swallow. Fire! Throat in spasm. Eyes feel like they're going to pop out. I'm going to explode.

"Hic!"

They're laughing at me but I can't stop.

"Hic!"

Amanda gets me some water and sits me down on the couch. Slowly I learn to breathe again.

"You've got to learn how to knock it back. Like this."

I've no desire to drink whiskey anymore, ever. Don't want to be a wimp though. Knock it back. Fire! Got to control it. Salivate furiously. Oh God...

"Well done," says Amanda, retrieving the bottle from Beatrice and Jules, who are cuddling on the bed.

She replenishes my glass and drinks from the bottle herself.

"Do you like me Andy?"

"What sort of a question is that?"

"Well, do you?"

"Of course I like you Amanda."

"In that way?"

"In what way?"

"You know."

"Well, I've never thought of you like that. I mean, I'm not much of a one for..."

"Would you do me a favour?"

"What?"

"Kiss me."

"Oh, I don't know..."

"Go on. Just once, on the lips."

"Just once?"

"Yes. See if you like it."

She closes her eyes. Can't do any harm to kiss her once. Here goes. Move in too quickly. Our teeth clash. She giggles but her hand guides me back to her lips. Can't breathe.

"Did you like it?" she asks, finally letting me go.

"Alright I suppose."

"You can trust me, Andy."

"Can I?"

"Yes. So, did you like it?"

"Yes."

We kiss again. And again. The more we kiss, the nicer it gets. I can't believe I'm allowed to sit here, kissing this beautiful, beautiful girl.

Looking is one thing. Touching is something else. In amongst the red hair and the freckles... Shock to the system. Can she love me? She's so passionate, her eyes closed, her face open. I love her face. I love her. Oh. Oh. Oh!

Oh, I've had an accident. Don't let on. Say I need to go to the loo.

"I need to go to the loo."

Stumble out of the room and up the corridor. Front of my trousers is wet, sticky. What am I going to do?

"Andy?"

Kit's on his bed with the door open. I can't just ignore him.

"Have you spoken to Beatrice?" he asks.

"Oh, yes..."

"What did she say?"

A loud "Oh!" sound echoes through the flat. I've left the door open. It's Beatrice's voice.

"Oh! Oh! Oh!" she goes, just like me.

Kit gives me a look of disbelief and rushes off along the hall. He stops in the doorway. Jules is on the bed. Beatrice is underneath him. They don't notice us. Kit turns to me.

"You fucking traitor!" he hisses and marches out of the house, slamming the front door.

Jules leaps from the bed. He sees me.

"What are you doing?" cries Beatrice.

"Oh, sorry," he tells her. "I thought it was my father. Was it you, Andy?"

He's angry. I shake my head.

"Kit."

"Christ!" yells Beatrice. "Look at the time! We've got to go!"

She's pulling her tights up, her skirt down and heading for the door when Jules calls.

"Stop!"

He points at Amanda. She's draped, half off the couch. Is she asleep? Jules picks up the whiskey bottle. It's empty.

"She's drunk all the fucking whiskey. We'll have to leave her here."

"No!" I insist. "She'll get into trouble. Let's wake her up. She'll come round. Amanda? Wake up Amanda."

She does wake up. Her eyes open and she tries to kiss me.

"Come on Amanda. We've got to get back for lessons."

She looks around, notices Jules and Beatrice. Slowly, with my help, she gets to her feet.

Out on the street, I keep my arm around Amanda, partly for support, partly to egg her on. Beatrice is impatient. She stomps off. By the time we turn the corner into the market, I can't see her for fruit stalls and shoppers. Jules keeps turning, giving me "hurry up!" looks.

Amanda misses a step. My supporting arm tightens around her soft waist until she regains her balance.

"Are you alright Amanda?"

She grins at me.

"I feel sick," she says.

"You'll be alright," I assure her. "Breathe deeply. The more you walk, the better you'll feel. By the time we arrive at school, you'll be fine."

She stops, smiles at me, full of golden freckles, sunshine and love. Her lips form a kiss, slowly moving towards me. A look of sudden surprise in her eyes, she slides to the ground.

"Jules!" I shriek.

He's beside me in a second.

"Get her to the flat!" he barks, exasperated. "You take one side. I'll take the other."

A crowd has formed around us. We manage to hoik her up between us and start back, arm in arm in arm.

"I told you we should have left her there!" hisses Jules, aware of faces staring at us as we struggle along, trying to pretend that Amanda isn't unconscious, even though her head's lolling about.

People are oggling and I can hardly hold her up. She's a dead weight. Keeps slipping out.

"Onto the pavement!" hisses Jules. "Now!"

"What?"

Too late. Amanda's feet catch on the curb and she falls forward, out of our grasp, cracking her head on the pavement. I stare down at her. Got to do something.

Someone yells.

"Drugs!"

More shouts and cries.

"Bastards!"

A great big beefy market trader punches Jules in the face. People converge on us. A lady with blue hair announces that she is a nurse and kneels by Amanda.

A fist cracks into my ear so hard, I fall over. Blinding pain between my eyes. Stagger to my feet. Look down at Amanda. The nurse looks up.

“You've killed her!” she rasps and proclaims to the crowd. “This girl is dead!”

How can Amanda be dead? We were just...

Men come at me with fists, women with vegetables.

"Fucking murderer!"

Fat lady standing over me, whacking me with a bag of spuds. Others kicking. Try to shield my head. It's all I can do to make my body into a ball and hope to goodness they stop.

Sirens. Voice through a megaphone.

"Stand clear. Make way."

Kicking stops. Dare to open my eyes. Massive headache. Policeman striding through. Ambulance draws up. More police. Everything in a faraway bubble. Try to get up...

"Stay where you are."

Stretcher appears. I'm lifted into the back of the ambulance. Jules is next on. Lift my head and see Amanda beside me.

"Lie back."

Hear the engine start up. We're moving. Hurt all over. Am I injured? Suddenly remember. She's dead.

"She's dead!" I wail. Can't help it. "She's dead!"

"Be quiet. Lie still. I'll see to you in a moment."

She can't be dead. Got to check...

"What are you doing? Get back down!"

Hands pressing me down. Needle in my arm. Hear my voice gurgling.

"Dead..."

Stop struggling. Disappear.

"Name."

Policeman staring down at me. I'm on some trolley in a cubicle.

"Name," he repeats.

"Andy."

"Surname?"

"Parvin."

"Andrew Parvin. That it?"

"Yes."

"You've been truanting from school I believe."

"Have I?"

"So your friend tells us."

"Friend?"

"Julian Marsden-Hunt. He is your friend, I take it?"

"Yes."

"On drugs were you?"

"No."

"No? What then?"

"Well, we started back for school but then Amanda fell and..."

Shaking, sobbing. Can't control it. A nurse is called.

"Now Mr Parvin. No one's dead. Quieten down Mr Parvin. She's alright. Calm down."

"But the nurse said..."

"Amanda Bell has suffered only mild concussion. You'll be able to see her later. Now please allow the constable here, to do his duty."

Amanda's alive. I answer the questions without thinking. Like filling in a form. She's not dead. No one's dead.

Doctor appears. I'm free to go.

"Free to go?"

"Any time you like."

"Actually Doctor, we need him to go now," explains the nurse and starts conferring about another patient.

Wandering down corridors. No idea where. Heartbeat pounding in my head and I ache all over. What am I doing? Everywhere I go there's frightening ill people.

Find myself in a white room. Someone on a trolley. Amanda? It's a bloke. His skin's all melted. I scream. Someone rushes in.

"What are you doing in here? Get out!"

Run out so fast, I bump into a body in bandages.

"Sorry."

Too scared to pick him up. Need to get out of here now. Keep coming to dead ends. There's a whole ward full of screeching babies. Another full of withered heads in beds, not one of them less than a thousand years old. All the corridors are lime green, like the inside of a gangrenous body.

"Andy!"

"Jules. Thank God."

"What did you tell the police?"

"Er..."

"You didn't mention Beatrice did you?"

"Um... Where's Amanda?"

"They won't let you see her."

"You know where she is?"

"There's no point."

"Show me."

"Okay..."

Jules leads me.

"...But I've already tried. We're not family. Apparently her mother's on her way in.

Here we are. Go ahead. Ask."

There's a nurse at a desk.

"I need to see Amanda. Amanda Bell."

She looks up, sees the dirt and bloodstains down my clothes and gives me a nasty look.

"I'm sorry but that's impossible."

"Oh. How is she?"

"I'm sorry. I'm not allowed to give any information unless you are a relative."

"But..."

I can feel I'm about to cry.

"...Is she dead?"

"I'm sorry."

Jules starts shouting at her.

"She isn't dead. Tell him! Can't you see he's upset?"

The nurse stands up.

"You're the boys who got her drunk, aren't you!"

"What?"

"You ought to be ashamed!"

Jules' acne is throbbing. He's going to attack her.

"Come on," I say.

We make our way out of the hospital and up the hill.

"Too late for school now," he says. "Might as well go back to my place. Clean up. Okay?"

The skin around his left eye is swollen and black.

"Have you got a headache too?" I ask.

He nods.

A car screeches to a halt beside us.

"Get in!"

It's Mrs Rathbone, deputy head. She leaps out. We're bundled in the back. Returning to the driving seat and slamming the door, she lets rip a stream of invective, whilst launching the car into traffic without looking.

She's had police, hospital and parents ringing her all day. Who the hell do we think we are? She's beside herself. She's never known anything like it. Wicked, that's what it is. We're wicked. Where is she taking us?

"Where are you taking us?"

"I'm taking you home!"

"But..." I query.

"But?" she shrieks. "But what?"

"I'm supposed to be going to Hayling Island with Jules," I bleat.

"We'll see about that! Your parents are livid!"

"Do our parents know that you are taking us home?" asks Jules.

Mrs Rathbone ignores him. She's driving like a maniac. She cuts in front of a lorry. The driver roars up alongside her in the outside lane, screaming abuse. She ignores him too.

When the lorry driver looks at me, I poke my tongue out and raise two fingers. He's so furious, he doesn't look where he's going and slams into the central isle, completely flattening the traffic lights. Behind us, cars screech and honk. Mrs Rathbone takes no notice.

"Your silence suggests that you don't have our parents' permission," says Jules. "In which case, what you are doing is illegal."

Mrs Rathbone swerves up onto the curb, narrowly missing a pensioner, slams on the handbrake and whips round at Jules as if she's going to hit him.

"You entice a girl out of school, ply her with drugs, for what purpose I can only guess! She's next seen with a great gash across her face, being dragged through the streets and when decent people try to stop you, you start a fist fight, during which ambulances have to be called and the girl is rushed to hospital! Have I got it all, or is there more?"

"Less!" snarls Jules. "No enticement, no drugs. We didn't hurt Amanda and we didn't start the fight. Come on Andy."

Jules steps out of the car. By the time I've shuffled along the seat to join him, Mrs Rathbone is barring our way. Her frizzy white hair and skinny white face are shaking. I've never seen anyone look like that, except in cartoons.

"If you lay a hand on me, I shall take you to court," says Jules, impressively.

Before she can decide what to do, a fist appears from nowhere, smashes into the side of her head and she falls.

It's the lorry driver, and I'm next.
"Run!" yells Jules.
We scarper.

Escape! On the run! No going back to Jules' place to get our bags for the weekend. Straight to Waterloo and onto the crowded, Friday-night train. Just one step ahead of the law, all the way down to Hayling. Bound to get caught. Every passenger who gets on, gives me the look, as if they know something.

"What's wrong" asks Jules.

"I'll probably go to prison. The lorry driver will testify that I gave him the V-sign and that's why he smashed into the traffic lights and caused a pile-up."

Jules buckles up with laughter.

"Did you do that?"

"It's not funny."

"Andy, listen, it was the driver's job to look where he was going. Nothing to do with you. As far as I'm concerned, two adults decided to use their vehicles as weapons and we were lucky to escape with our lives."

Is Jules right? Are we heroes? I'm just imagining medals being pinned on us, when another thought invades. Amanda. She kissed me. She's in hospital. Oh dear. I think I love her.

"Andy, why did Kit storm out of the flat like that?"

"You were on the bed with Beatrice."

"What? I don't get it."

"Kit's in love with Beatrice. He asked me to tell her and I did, this morning before school."

"So, does he think you told me, and I got off with her, just to spite him?"

"I don't know. I suppose so."

Jules tuts and looks out through the dirty brown window at the suburbs flying by. Millions of homes full of people as insignificant as me. I wonder what Jules' family are like...

"What are your family like?"

"Have you heard of Marsden's Patios and Porches?"

"I'm not sure."

"Oh, anyway, that's Dad. Does his own adverts on the telly. Comes on surrounded by ornamental fountains, brickwork and hideous grinning girls in swimsuits."

Jules leaps to his feet and does an impersonation of his father for everyone in the carriage.

"Good evening. I'm Ralph Marsden-Hunt. They call me the Krazy Paving King! And here's why!"

He sits down again.

“Oh,” I say. “And is he the King of the paving things?”

“More like King of the Crazies. If you hear loud banging during the night, it’s Dad. Never stops. If he isn’t chopping down trees or smashing sheets of concrete to make it go ‘ka-razy!’ he’s out on his yacht with the beloved Rachel.”

“Is Rachel your mother?”

“My brain-damaged sister.”

Jules has a sister? And she’s brain-damaged?

“Is there really something wrong with her?”

“Yes. Dad gives her everything she wants.”

“Sounds great.”

“No it isn’t. When you’ve got everything, your wanting-things motor goes mad. Drives you ka-razy!”

“So you don’t think it’s worth trying to get rich.”

“It’s not a proper use of life.”

“What is?”

“To contribute. Do something that matters. I mean, look at the world you and I have inadvertently been born into. Half the people are venal and grasping, the other half are starving. I mean, it’s monstrous, isn’t it?”

I nod. I suppose it is monstrous. I just don’t know what to say.

“So, is your mother ka-razy?”

He looks at me a bit sharpish. Oops.

“No. She’s very bright, intuitive. Leaps of the imagination. Worth listening to.”

“She’s a pianist, isn’t she? Will she be there?”

“Mum’s at an Ali Kazur concert tonight. Do you know who he is?”

“Not really.”

“You study music don’t you? I thought you’d know.”

“I know who Beethoven is.”

“Oh, they teach you about the dead but not the living, do they? Typical.”

“Ali Kazur’s a composer, is he?”

“He’s the world’s greatest tabla player, played with everyone from Menuhin to the Beatles.”

“He’s played with Yehudi Menuhin?”

“Yes. Anyway, he and Mum are friends so she’s gone to watch him play. She may turn up later.”

Jules goes on about his Mum as the sun sets. He continues, as the train pulls into Havant, as we trudge down the endless road, over the bridge onto Hayling Island.

She sounds amazing. Not only is she a pianist, she's also got a *métier*, which is the main thing. When you've got a *métier* it means you don't have to lead a dull, repetitive life and mix with dull, repetitive people. It's fantastic. I want one.

Jules leads me off the road, along a path, between shadowy trees. Cold wind. Stars flickering between the branches. The path brings us out beside the glittering sea.

"Wow!" I say, staring at it.

I can hardly believe that this is my life, these experiences no longer created or controlled by Mum and Dad. Thrilling to feel so lost in such a big world.

Jules cuts down by the shore. He knows where he's going. I can hardly see a thing. Concentrate on my feet. Don't want to step in something nasty or lose my footing and arrive covered in mud.

Almost trip on some uneven steps, Jules' feet disappearing above me. Reaching the top, I step into dazzling light and glance up.

Hundreds of glowing orbs illuminating acres of patio, all crazily paved in browns, reds and yellows. An odd-shaped swimming pool surrounded by tubs of shrubs. Ornamental chairs, benches, little concrete fountains and, beyond it all, a huge, modern mansion lit by arc lights.

Jules enjoys watching me gape.

"Isn't it the most tasteless thing you've ever seen?"

Far to my left, something moves and I turn to see a magnificent, cream-white yacht - the sort of thing you get in Cary Grant movies - anchored beside a crazily paved jetty.

On the jetty, a girl, wearing only jeans and a T-shirt, is coiling rope. She could be Grace Kelly for all I know. Immersed in her work, she doesn't notice us. Younger than me. Maybe sixteen?

"Dad," mutters Jules.

A tall, athletic, Swedish-looking man has appeared from French windows in the distant mansion and, glass in hand, is striding off in the direction of the jetty. He's followed by a young woman in a tight, shiny dress, that forces her to shuffle to keep up.

"Is that your mother?"

"No. Girlfriend probably."

There's a shriek from the woman. We've been noticed.

"Julian, dear boy!" bellows Mr Marsden-Hunt.

He heads towards us, followed by the shuffling girlfriend.

“Don’t mention anything about today,” murmurs Jules, just in time before his father is upon us.

“So you made it down okay. Good. And you must be Kit, the one with the awful parents. Ralph Marsden-Hunt!”

He plunges his hand into my chest. I manage to grab it, before it pierces the rib cage. He crushes my fingers instead.

“Don’t worry Kit, I’ve heard all about it. Of course you can have a room. Nominal rent. Couldn’t do it for nothing, you understand. Say a fiver a week. Get yourself a paper round or something. Agreed? Awful to have parents like that. I sympathise. Still, you’re independent now and you can look to the future. What is it Julian?”

“This isn’t Kit. He couldn’t come.”

“Oh.”

He looks blankly at Jules, then notices the woman, smiling tightly at us.

“Suzy! Silly of me. Suzy, this is my son Julian and his school chum Kit.”

“Hello,” says Suzy, in a tiny, high voice, adding “hee hee!” from sheer joy.

Mr Marsden-Hunt clears his throat.

“Suzy’s my business representative. Er, one of them. Anyway. What can I get you lads? You must be tired after your journey, end of a long week and all that. Something to drink? Scotch? Aegean tea?”

The mention of scotch reminds me that we drank his whiskey. My mind flicks through the day from Beatrice in the garden to kissing Amanda, being drunk, the punchup, the hospital...

I’m guided into the Marsden-Hunt mansion, mesmerised by everything my eyes behold. No headache now. Feel great. Been through hell and woken up in heaven.

Aegean tea is nothing like tea, more like lemonade. Ralph Marsden-Hunt serves us as if we are young princes.

"So, how was your journey down?" he asks.

"Fine," says Jules. "Mind you, we haven't had a thing to eat all day."

"Well that's no good. Suzy, be a sweetheart and get the boys something, would you?"

Suzy smiles. She's very pretty and eager to please. She has to walk miles to the kitchen door. Ralph and Jules are watching her leave. Just before she disappears, she wiggles her bum. She must have known. Embarrassing but rather nice. We grin at each other, like men.

This dining room is vast and so modern. Little lights glimmer from the walls and one whole wall is glass - sliding glass doors and floor-to-ceiling windows - looking out on the endless patio, pool and yacht. I can live like this.

"I had some neurotic woman call up this afternoon claiming to be your Head Mistress, Julian. As far as I could make out, you've been caught brawling in the streets. Eh?"

Jules shrugs, shakes his head.

"Not me, Dad."

"I must say I was surprised. Always taken you for a bit of a coward. Still it's not on. One rule in life. Don't get caught."

The phone rings. Ralph strides over to answer it. Jules and I share a nervous look.

"Marsden-Hunt. ...Oh it's you. ...When? ...But I thought you were staying up in London this weekend... ...Because you told me you were."

"It's okay, it's Mum," Jules informs me.

Suzy appears, bearing a mountain of little sandwiches with the crusts cut off. Cheese and cucumber. Jules and I guzzle them. Mr Marsden-Hunt is having an argument with his wife. I don't like to listen.

"...It wasn't last weekend. I distinctly remember. ...What? ...Yes, he's here with me now. Brought his school chum, Kit..."

Jules tuts at his Dad still thinking I'm Kit.

"He never listens."

"...Of course I'm listening. It's just bloody inconsiderate!" barks Ralph, into the mouthpiece. "...Yes. ...Got it. ...Rightee-ho. ...Yes. ...Bye!"

He slams the receiver down.

"Action stations! Sonia's on her way back. Suzy, you prepare the meal. You lads give me a hand getting this table out beside the pool."

He strides over to a long dining table. Suzy seems confused.

"But Ralph..."

"What?"

"How many people?"

"Sonia, Julian, Kit, Rachel, myself and you. Six."

"But if your wife's coming back, shouldn't I...?"

"Honestly Suzy. This is no time for a committee meeting. We've only got an hour. Julian! Kit! Grab one end. I'll take the other."

Ralph is out through the glass doors with the table, dragging us along.

"Lift!" he yells. "There are two of you your end. There's only one of me."

"Thank goodness," mutters Jules as we struggle to avoid the table crashing into a tub of plants.

The cucumber's repeating on me. I've been up since five this morning. All this sudden moving about could bring on my asthma.

"Put it down here. Little to your right. That's it. Now..."

Phew! Catch my breath. Look at the pool. Lights under the water.

"Julian? Mats, cutlery, candles and serviettes. Jump to it! Kit? Oh. Nice pool, eh?"

"It's amazing. Everything here is amazing."

Without meaning to, I've said the right thing. Ralph beams down at me. He looks like a Swedish skier with a sweet, slightly mad twinkle in his eyes.

"Started with nothing, you know," he confides.

"Wow!"

"Yes. Inherited a small masonry firm from my father and it just seemed to take off."

"Amazing."

"Of course Sonia claims to have thought of the home improvement angle. But the war was over. Natural for people to want to improve their homes. Obvious really, when you think about it. Eh?"

"My mother's built a rockery."

"In any case, it was me who ran with the idea. That's the secret, Kit."

"Andy."

"Ralph actually. That's the secret. Take one idea and run with it. Of course, it's not that simple. Has to be the right idea."

"How do you know it's the right idea?"

"Money. Profit. If people are buying it, it's the right idea. Right?"

“Right.”

“And if it works, don’t fix it. Right?”

“Um, is your wife really a concert pianist?”

Ralph glares at me.

“My money that made it possible. Now, of course, she pisses on all that. Venal, she calls it. Materialistic, banal, kitsch, crass, and all the other trendy nonsense she gets from her artsy-fartsy friends. Damn it! Rachel’s still out there. Rachel?”

Rachel doesn’t hear.

“Do me a favour, Kit. Nip over and tell Rachel to come in and change for supper.”

Rachel’s on the jetty. She’s blond like her Dad. Blond, blue-eyed and busy. Doesn’t notice, even when I get up close. There’s a small boat on a trailer. She’s pulling and pushing at something inside. I’m nervous. She doesn’t even know me. Still, have to go through with it. Clear my throat.

“Ha-hmm!”

She still doesn’t notice.

“Er. Your father asked me to ask you a question.”

Is she deaf?

“You’re supposed to come in and change your clothes for eating in.”

“Tell Dad I won’t be at supper.”

“Oh. ...But, ...is that the message then?”

I shuffle uneasily. Don’t want to fail in Mr Marsden-Hunt’s eyes. Not that it would be my fault but, as Dad says, two wrongs don’t make a right.

“But won’t he be cross?”

“If he asks, tell him it’s his fault. He’s the one who put the new spinney chute on.”

What’s she talking about?

“Why he should think he could mount a spinney chute I don’t know but Dad seems to think he can mount anything. Look, bloody great gap.”

I peer into the boat.

“Every time you pull on the spinnaker halyard, the sail’s going to get caught round the forestay. My crew’s going to have to go up on the bow. It’ll cost us the race. Grab this.”

I help. There are pulleys, blocks, jammers, cleats, and vangs. Rachel assumes I know all about boats. Perhaps she’s never met anyone who doesn’t. I don’t even know why they float.

“It isn’t as if I care about tomorrow. Frostbite series is almost over anyway. But next week we’re off to France for the start of the season. No time then to get things right....”

"Don't you go to school?"

She looks at me for the first time.

"Are you from London?"

"Yes."

"All my family are involved in London life, one way or another. Mum has always made it clear that, at some point I'll have to let the sailing go, or at least the competing, and choose something serious. What do you think, er...?"

"Andy."

"Andy. Should I come to London? What do you think?"

"Why?"

"Dad says you've got to have one idea and run with it. I want to find out what my one idea is."

"So do I."

"Why would you be interested in my idea?"

"No. I mean, my idea."

"Your idea? What's your idea then?"

"No idea."

Rachel notices the state of my clothes.

"Why have you got paint all down you? Is it paint?"

"No, it's..."

Suzy, in her shiny dress and heels, is tapping across the paving towards us. Rachel's face changes colour. We wait for Suzy to reach us.

"Mr Marsden-Hunt says you're both to come in and change for supper."

Rachel turns her back on Suzy and starts thrashing about in a box of bits.

"Are you coming in, Rachel?" asks Suzy, determined to be heard.

"No!" hisses Rachel.

Suzy looks at me.

"Are you coming in? Only it's freezing..."

"I suppose so."

Suzy and I leave Rachel tinkering with some boaty bit and head for the house.

What am I going to wear? I left my weekend bag at Jules' place. Not that I packed anything special for supper. My family doesn't dress for supper. We don't even have supper. We have teatime.

"I've got nothing to change into."

"Oh. Perhaps Julian can lend you something."

"That won't work. Nothing of Jules' will fit. I'm too fat."

Suzy giggles.

"Don't worry. You can't help it. You've probably got something wrong with you."

"Oh. But won't Mr Marsden-Hunt be angry?"

"Ralph's bark is worse than his bite. He's a very generous person underneath."

"Is he?"

"He got me a patio, free."

"Wow!"

"I wish I had somewhere to put it, only I live in the flats."

"Why not ask him for a house?"

"No, Ralph's alright."

But Ralph isn't alright, he's furious.

"Where's Rachel?"

Without waiting for a reply, he rushes past us.

"Rachel!" he calls.

Jules bounds down the stairway.

"She's here!"

"Quiet!" orders Ralph. "I think I hear something. ...Car is it?"

"Yes Dad," Jules replies.

"Sonia! Christ!"

He dashes back through the dining room and heads along a corridor.

Jules follows his Dad. I follow Jules. It's exciting.

Front drive. Bentley pulls up. The driver leaps out and opens the back door. A large woman emerges, followed by a tiny Indian man in a white nightie. I feel we should be applauding.

Jules steps forward to greet his mother. She allows him to kiss her cheek, before turning to the little Indian gentleman.

"Ali, this is my son Julian. Julian, this is Ali Kazur."

"I am so pleased to meet you. Have you inherited your mother's musical genius?"

"No," says Jules, "but Andy here is a musician."

Mr Kazur is about to greet me when Sonia Marsden-Hunt leads him away.

"This is my husband."

While Mr Kazur suffers Ralph's crushing handshake, Mrs Marsden-Hunt glances from Suzy to me, then ignores us both.

"Let's get in out of the cold, shall we?"

Ralph has a word with the driver.

"Julian, be a dear and show Ali to his room so he can freshen up."

Jules leads Mr Kazur upstairs.

"Where on earth is the dining table?" demands Sonia Marsden-Hunt, looking at me as if I've eaten it.

"You might have told me you were bringing Ali," roars Ralph, storming through from the hall. "Honestly, first you're not going to be back at all, then you turn up with..."

"I did tell you, Ralph."

I'm caught in the crossfire. I wish I wasn't here but I don't know where to go.

"I made it perfectly clear on the phone. You just don't... What on earth...?"

Sonia has noticed the dining table out beside the pool.

"You don't expect us to eat out there do you?"

"I thought it would be..."

"Don't be ridiculous. It's freezing."

She disappears upstairs. Ralph stares at the table.

"Do you want a hand?" I ask.

We manage to get the table in without upsetting anything. I'm puffed, but Ralph is grateful. We've used a bit of muscle and we're men together. Seize the moment.

"I haven't brought any clothes to wear for supper."

"Julian will sort you out."

"Yes, but..."

“He’s probably up there changing now. I better see to the food. I have an idea Ali’s a vegetarian.”

Ralph strides off to the kitchen.”

“How are we doing Suzy?”

I don’t want to go upstairs. There are all those people up there I don’t know.

“What do you mean, all the dishes have meat in them?”

Sonia was cross with Ralph. Now Ralph is cross with Suzy. I’d better go up and get it over with.

The stairway curves, from floor to ceiling, with nothing to hold it up. What’s more, there’s a gap between each step and no banisters.

Concentrate. Mustn’t put a foot through a gap, or fall off the side. Still puffed from carrying the table. Hope my asthma doesn’t come on.

Relax. Dare to look down at the dining table. Look out through the glass wall to the swimming pool. Out on the jetty, Rachel is still at work.

This is an amazing place. I bet they can have anything they want. Don’t seem happy though. All privately angry with each other and arguing, just like in our family.

“Can I help you?”

Sonia Marsden-Hunt is standing above me on the landing. I puff up the last few steps, as if it’s no problem.

“Mr Marsden-Hunt said to change for supper but I don’t think Jules is my size,” I explain.

She stares at me. I can’t stop wheezing.

“Honestly! What does it matter what we wear? The man’s living in the 19th century! What’s your name?”

“Andy.”

“Are you from Julian’s new school, Andy?”

“Yes.”

She smiles at me. I feel privileged.

“Julian has always presented a problem for the so-called educational establishments. He’s original, you see. Why is everybody so threatened by talent?”

“I’m not sure.”

What’s she talking about? Luckily Ali Kazur appears, now dressed in deep blue robes.

“Ah, Ali!” coos Sonia. “This is Andy. He’s at school with Julian.”

I don’t know if I should shake his hand or curtsey. He smiles.

“I believe you are a musician, Andy.”

“Oh!” exclaims Sonia, charmed and interested. “What instrument do you play?”

"Violin. And piano. Not as good as you, obviously."

"Ah, violin... The most expressive of all instruments. Of course, Ali here works with the greatest violinist of our times. Yehudi Menuhin."

Ali smiles, shyly.

"What are your musical tastes, Andy?" he asks.

"I quite like classical."

"Oh, but Andy," says Sonia, "India has its own classical music."

"Perhaps you are more interested in popular groups like the Beatles or the Rolling Stones," Ali suggests.

"I've heard of the Beatles but my Mum and Dad won't have it in the house as it isn't proper music."

Sonia beams.

"Absolutely. Let's go down, shall we?"

"There are many musical traditions," says Ali, as we descend. "Are they not all legitimate?"

"Legitimate perhaps, but equal?" she queries.

"Surely there cannot be a hierarchy in music, Sonia? Beethoven's themes are taken from folksong and what is folksong but popular music?"

"It's what Beethoven does that transcends. Ah, Ralph! I'm sure Ali would like something to drink."

So saying, she sweeps off towards the kitchen.

"I'm ashamed to admit I've never been to your concerts Ali," Ralph admits, guiding him over to the drinks. "What'll you have?"

"Just a glass of water, please."

"I believe you play the tablas," Ralph continues, pouring two whiskeys and passing one to Ali. "What exactly are tablas?"

I don't want to hang about here. Ralph will notice that I'm still in my muddy school clothes, with the embarrassing stain on the trousers. I follow Sonia.

"A drum?" booms Ralph, behind me. "Must be a special drum then. I mean, a drum isn't a proper instrument really, is it? Not that I know anything about it."

Suzy's in the kitchen, fishing bits of meat out of the vegetables. Seeing Mrs Marsden-Hunt enter, she wipes her hands and steps forward to greet her.

"Hello. My name's..."

"I'm not interested in who you are. It's enough for me to know what you are. Betrayal's one thing but to be so blatant. I'd have hoped you'd at least have the decency to leave before I arrived."

Suzy freezes. She looks at me. Mrs Marsden-Hunt realises I'm behind her.

“Andy? Is there something you want?”

Suzy rushes by me.

“Er, no,” I admit, turning and creeping away.

“Suzy!” calls Ralph as she rushes past.

He rushes after her.

Ali Kazur and I smile politely at each other.

We hear the front door slam, but neither of us can find anything to say.

Rachel runs in. It's started raining. She closes the sliding doors behind her. Jules appears at the top of the stairs. Brother and sister pass each other. Rachel goes up. Jules comes down. His mother pokes her head out of the kitchen.

"Dinner is served. Julian, give me a hand."

"Would you like some help?" asks Ali.

"No, no, no, no, no!" sings Sonia.

Jules gives us a sheepish grin and goes to help his Mum. He's all toggled up like a butler anyway.

"A remarkable family," observes Ali.

"Yes," I agree.

"They pursue such different interests, yet with such passion."

"Er, yes."

His eyes are twinkling. Perhaps I'm to say more.

"All my family do, is watch old films on telly and mark homework."

"Your parents are teachers?"

"Yes, worst luck."

"But it is the highest calling. To teach, to enlighten..."

"They don't get paid much."

"How will you serve, Andy?"

"Me? I'll probably end up down the mines or something."

"You are interested in mining?"

"No but I'll probably fail all my exams and have to do whatever horrible job I can get."

His wiry little hand reaches out and grips my arm just as Jules and Sonia appear with the food.

"Don't be frightened of life, Andy. It is cowardly. Discover where your passions lie. Will you do that?"

"Yes."

Ali lets go just in time for me to grab a large tureen, which Jules is thrusting at me. Turns out to be full of soup, some of which flops out and dribbles down my front. I manage to rub it in.

Nobody's noticed, because Rachel is descending the stairs in a short black dress with her blond hair gathered up at the back.

"Ali, this is my daughter Rachel."

Ali Kazur moves nimbly to the foot of the stairs, takes Rachel's hand and kisses it. Sonia, watching, gives a tight little smile.

"Must you wear all that coal around your eyes, Rachel?" she asks. "It makes you look so old."

The sliding doors behind me rattle violently. Mr Marsden-Hunt is outside. He can't get in. He's drenched. Oh my god. What can we do? Ali opens them and Ralph strides in.

"Didn't you hear me?" he bellows. "I've been out there five minutes, yelling and screaming. Look at me! Bloody soaked through."

"As I recall, you wanted us all to eat out there," observes his wife.

He looks at her, angry and hurt, before sloping off towards the stairs.

"Where are you off to?" demands Sonia.

"To change," Mumbles Ralph.

"But the food's on the table. We have guests."

He rejoins us, mumbling, sits down opposite and notices the dirt and blood stains down my front. Everyone else is dressed up like royalty. He's about to say something, when a raindrop falls from his nose. He's wet and as dishevelled as me. I smile, to be friendly.

He juts out his chin and turns to talk to Ali Kazur beside him. But Ali, Sonia and Jules are talking about art. He turns to his daughter.

"How's the new spinney chute, Rach?"

She continues sipping her soup, without a flicker.

"Rachel? How's that spinney chute I fitted for you?"

She ignores him.

"Rachel!" he yells.

Everyone stops and stares. Rachel looks up. Her face is red. The tips of her ears are white. She glares at her father.

"If you must know, you left a bloody great gap round one side, which I can't fix and which has totally scuppered my chances tomorrow!"

Ralph glows with rage. Rachel returns to her soup. I realise I haven't been given any soup. The only thing we've had all day were those cheese and cucumber sarnies Suzy got us.

Jules is dipping bread and popping it in his mouth. Ali is spooning soup in with the speed of a humming bird's wings. I wish I had some soup. I stand, stretch across and grab the ladle.

Ali gives a little shriek. He's holding a pink curly thing between thumb and finger.

"What is this?" he asks.

"Looks like a prawn," observes Jules.

"But I am a vegetarian," says Ali, trembling.

"How dreadful, Ali," cries Sonia, removing the prawn.

With her next movement, she removes the tureen, leaving me stranded with a dripping ladle.

"How did a prawn get into the soup, Ralph?" she demands.

He doesn't seem to hear her.

"Ralph?"

He's staring at my trousers.

"My god! What on earth is that white stain around your crutch?"

I sit down quick. Never mind the soup. I know exactly what the stain is. It's the accident that happened when Amanda was kissing me.

"Ralph!" screams Sonia.

"No!" snarls Ralph, confronting his wife and scaring the life out of me. "I'm just about to rent a room to Kit here. I don't want someone who can't even keep himself clean. And what is that?"

He reaches across and pokes me in the chest.

"Looks like dried blood. Is it? What have you got to say for yourself, Kit?"

"It's not Kit, it's Andy," explains Jules.

Ralph looks at his son.

"And you've got a black eye, Julian. Have you boys been fighting? Come on, out with it!"

Ralph pins his eyes on me. I can't even refer to Jules.

"We were attacked."

"Oh my dears!" cries Mrs Marsden-Hunt.

Jules takes over.

"All that happened is, a girl in our class fainted in the street. We went to help her. Bystanders misunderstood the situation and attacked us for no good reason. We ended up in hospital. Mrs Rathbone, the Deputy Head, got completely the wrong end of the stick, forced us into her car and drove so dangerously she caused a lorry to crash."

"Nonsense!"

"It's true, dad. The lorry driver came up and punched her in the face."

Ralph looks at me.

"What do you say Kit?"

"He isn't Kit, he's Andy," hisses Rachel.

But Ralph won't be put off.

"Is it true?"

I nod. Ralph looks back at his son.

"Alright. So there was an accident. The police were called, I presume?"

"I don't know. We just ran."

Ralph looks as if he might explode.

"Ran? Like a coward?"

"No dad. I remembered your advice."

Ralph tries to remember his advice. Jules reminds him.

"Don't get caught!"

"Oh. Yes. Good lad."

The phone rings. As Ralph goes to answer it, Sonia quickly removes all trace of the soup.

"Would you like some wine, Ali?" asks Jules.

Ali puts his hand over his glass and shakes his head. He seems a bit queasy. Jules looks at me.

"Yes, please."

He hands me the bottle. Only time I ever had alcohol, before today, was when a friend of dad let me sip his beer. Dad was furious with his friend, which suited me as it tasted worse than medicine.

But this wine is alright. Maybe I'm just thirsty. Or perhaps, when you're an adult, you like different things. I've learned more in the last three days. These people here in the glowing evening, talking about art. Amazing house.

"Vegetarian goulash!" announces Sonia Marsden-Hunt, entering with an enormous dish.

Everything she does is so stately and important. Jules hovers about her, easing her passage, providing plates and passing out portions of bright red stew. It's full of carrots, onions and things I don't normally like, but I'm starving.

There's a growing noise in the room. From Ralph. I can't quite make him out. I must be tipsy. Nice feeling. He's yelling down the phone.

"I've told you once - Marsden-Hunt! ...What?...Are you accusing me? ...Who the hell's Andrew?"

Andrew? My name's Andrew.

"...Well he isn't, so you can bugger off!"

Ralph slams down the receiver and strides back to the table.

"Bloody moron had the wrong number. Kept insisting I had his son, Andrew. More or less accused me of abduction."

He appeals to Ali Kazur.

"We're bloody ex-directory and the Great Unwashed still manage to get through!"

Ali's jaw drops.

"Ralph!" bellows Sonia.

"What?" barks Ralph.

"This is Andrew."

Everyone looks at me.

"Nonsense. His name is Kit."

"It's Andy, Dad," says Rachel, calmly.

Ralph turns to his wife. Sonia shakes her head.

"Honestly Ralph. Do you mean to tell us that you have just told this boy's father to bugger off?"

It was my Dad on the phone. I get it. I'm in trouble. Don't know what to do.

I notice Ali Kazur out of the corner of my eye. He is choking. As I watch, he puts his fingers into his mouth and pulls out a little string of fatty gristle.

"Answer me Kit! shouts Ralph. "Are you Andrew?"

I open my mouth and this stream of yellow, red and green stuff shoots out, sprays the table and the people. Oh god. I open my mouth to say sorry and it happens again. Can't stop it. Retching and retching till there's nothing left. So weak, can't move. All these people, dripping with sick, staring at me.

I'm in a moving car, lying on the back seat in the dark with a blanket over me. No one but me and the driver in the front.

"You awake?" he asks.

I sit up. I'm in the Marsden-Hunt Bentley.

"We're already in the outskirts of London. I decided to steer west via Kew on account of the roadworks at Richmond."

"Oh."

"You'll be home in no time at all. Your soiled clothes are in a carrier bag on the floor beside you."

I see the bag. I remember being sick. I even remember my body following it onto the table. Now I'm being driven home.

"What's the time, please?"

"Just gone two thirty."

"Two thirty at night?"

"Well it's not two thirty in the afternoon is it! How many two thirties are there? No. I was just going off to bed when Mr Marsden-Hunt asked me to... Hang on, I've missed the turning, haven't I?"

"I don't know."

"Bloody nuisance. Anyway, he asked me to take you home, as a favour. Know where you are yet?"

"Yes! That's Turnham Green station!"

"Right here, is it?"

"Yes."

I need time to think. What do Mum and Dad know? What have I actually done wrong? Jules managed to tell it like we were heroes.

"Left here, is it?"

"Yes."

How did Jules tell it? A girl got drunk. No, we weren't with her. She fell down in the street and we saw her. But was it during school time?

The Bentley swerves right, into my road.

"Blimey, you could've told me it was coming up," says the driver.

Mum and Dad are standing at the gate. The driver leaps out, opens my door, grabs my bag of clothes and hands them to my Mum. I climb out.

"Next time," says the driver, "tell your parents where you're going!"

"Oh Andy!" wails my Mum.

Lights go on in the Bailey's house next door.

"Inside!" hisses my Dad and turns to shepherd us in.

"Aren't you even going to thank me?" yells the driver.

Dad turns to the driver.

"Oh yes, of course, I'm sorry... We're very grateful to you for bringing our son home."

"Don't bother mate! Mr Marsden-Hunt told me you were rubbish."

"I beg your pardon?" exclaims Mum, outraged.

But the driver ignores her. He jumps in, slams his door and glides off in the Bentley.

"Anything the matter?" asks Mr Bailey, standing in his doorway, in his pyjamas.

Mum pushes me inside. Every part of me aches. My head throbs. I just want to sleep. Instead I'm in the kitchen where every shiny surface reflects the striplight. Mum tips my soiled clothes into the sink, throws on the taps and starts ranting.

"For seventeen years we've done nothing but give give give and you've done nothing but take take take and this is the limit! Don't think we don't know! Alicia Rathbone has been in constant communication. Drink! Drugs!"

"We didn't..."

Mum turns on me, plastic gloves dripping.

"Don't you dare say a word! Not a word! You understand? Police! Ambulances! Hospitals! You start a fistfight involving members of the public! You cause an accident in which Alicia herself is injured! You're caught dragging a girl through the streets in a state of disarray! Did you rape her? Did you?"

It's all wrong but if I speak...

"You said not to say a word."

Mum's wet, pink glove slams into my cheek. I go mad.

"You fucking touch me?" I scream. "I'll smash your..."

As I leap at Mum, Dad grabs my wrists and twists them high behind my back. I'll fucking kick him in the shins.

"I was trained for this," he growls. "Don't move or I'll break your arms."

Mum jabs me in the gut.

"You!" she snarls. "...You've disgraced your school!"

She jabs me again.

"You've disgraced us!"

Her jabs are beginning to hurt.

I feel like blind Samson and the walls are my parents. I know I have the strength to bring them down. I could twist free, toppling Dad into Mum.

"Thanks to you, we have had to go cap in hand to your school to beg them not to expel you!"

"Expel?"

"Yes. Expel! I happen to know that both Amanda Bell and Julian Marsden-Hunt are to be expelled. Being teachers ourselves, we have managed, on condition that you... - Are you listening to me, my lad?"

I nod. I am listening. I just can't hear. She says Jules is expelled. And Amanda? All the energy drains out of me. Dad senses it and lets go.

"Well, if they're expelled, I'm expelled too," I mumble.

"No! You're not getting out of it that easily. Tell him Cyril!"

Dad clears his throat.

"Your eighteenth birthday is coming up. Technically, then, you could leave school without taking your exams. Dorothy and I have discussed it and, should you decide to leave school, you would also have to leave this house and proceed without any help from us."

I gulp. What would I do? I look to Mum. Would she really chuck me out? Her face says she would.

"Personally," Dad continues. "I believe that you will choose to stay on and complete your education. Am I right?"

I gulp. I can't believe it. I didn't think they could still scare me.

"I thought so. That being the case, Andy, you will attend every lesson."

"Without fail!" adds Mum.

Dad nods.

"You will not see friends..."

"What friends?" I blurt.

"Quiet!" snaps Mum.

"...Either before or after school."

They lean in on me from both sides, spitting their rules louder and louder and pinning me against the Formica boiler enclosure.

"You will not receive pocket money!"

"You will not watch television!!"

"You will not go out at weekends!!!"

"Or evenings!!!!"

"Or invite anyone here!!!!!"

"Or anywhere else!!!!!"

"You will do nothing!!!!!!"

"Nothing!!!!!!!"

“Except!!!!!!!!!!”

“Revise for you’re a-levels!!!!!!!!!!”

“And practice for your grade eight violin!!!!!!!!!!”

I can’t bear it. I slump to the floor, hiding my eyes, sobbing. Jules gone. Amanda...

The front doorbell rings. I hear it through my snuffling. Dad’s gone to answer it. Who can it be at this time? Mum is staring, nervously, out into the hallway. A voice I don’t recognise starts speaking.

“I am very sorry to disturb you but there have been a number of complaints from neighbours concerning noise apparently coming from this premises...”

Seeing me get up, Mum glares, white with rage.

“Upstairs!” she hisses.

Head down, I walk out of the kitchen, along the corridor, past the policeman and Dad on the doorstep, and climb the stairs.

My brother Colin’s on the landing, keeping out of sight.

“Have you heard?” he whispers.

“What?”

“I’m going to South America.”

“Are you? Do Mum and Dad know?”

He shakes his head.

“When?”

He shushes me. The front door has closed. Colin nips back into his room. Someone’s coming up the stairs. I fall into my room, kick the door shut and flop on the bed.

Violin practice. Third finger in third position on the A-string. Slow vibrato. Slower. Let the bow glide. Now, slide the note down into first position. The beginning of the piece matters. Don't dig in.

Try again. Start the note as if it were playing already. Then, just as the note establishes itself on the air, slide down to the D.

Good, but make the slide softer, as if a finger were tracing the curve of a glass bowl. The reflection rather than the thing itself.

I wonder if I could find harmonics? Try. Release all pressure. I barely brush the string on the way down. A series of silvery harmonics rings out. Beautiful.

Outside in the sunshine, Mr Bailey is washing his car. A bunch of kids from the flats pass by on the opposite pavement.

"Hiya Mr Bastard!" calls one of them.

"Hoppit!" he retorts.

Endless Sunday. What am I going to do? Not allowed out. No TV. Supposed to revise. Can't face it.

Surround myself with notes and phrases. Build myself an ice palace within Elgar's Idyll. Every pattern, every message, every change of bow. Over and over. Till night falls, and the next. And the next week, the next month...

I don't like anyone anymore. Who is there to like?

"Andrew Parvin to the headmaster's study. I repeat, Andrew Parvin to the..."

Mrs Rathbone sits at the Headmaster's desk, glaring at me. The only sunlight in the room falls on her. Her left arm is in a sling. Around her right eye and cheek, a purple bruise is sweating through the makeup. In fact, her face is so plastered with makeup that it's cracked at every wrinkle. Why does she make herself look so ugly? Or is she like that?

"As I am sure your parents will have informed you, your continuing attendance at this school is strictly conditional. Is that clear?"

I nod. She begins a series of dos and don'ts that would make a Bach fugue seem simple. Phrases such as "good behaviour", "self discipline" and "ample revision" repeat like themes, counter-themes and she's giving me the whole symphony. Exposition, development, recapitulation, not to mention coda after coda.

I can't listen anymore. She's just crowing. The words mean nothing. The terrible, crackling music of her voice says everything. And it matches the lines on her face. Like a fingerprint. That's what she's like. That's who she is.

“Well?” she demands.

She must have asked a question. I’ve no idea what it is.

“Is it true that you’ve expelled Jules and...”

I want to say “Amanda” but I’m afraid it’ll come out emotional.

“Mrs Marsden-Hunt and I have agreed that Julian would be better off elsewhere.”

What shit! Her words speak of care for Jules but the sound of her voice revels in having crushed the opposition. Still, I have to ask.

“Is Amanda..?”

“Amanda Bell has not been expelled.”

Mrs Rathbone smiles.

“Not expelled?” I gasp, full of hope.

“However, she has decided not to return of her own volition.”

Can’t help it, my jaw drops, quivers. Alicia Rathbone gloats.

“Where should you be now, Parvin?”

“History.”

“You may go.”

I rise and leave.

I’m not part of this school anymore. I pass through it like a ghost. Hot empty corridors smelling of mashed potato and custard. Hundreds of children locked up in crowded rooms all day long for the benefit of the adults. It must be the end of something, when you see it for what it is.

Mum has a record of Stephane Grapelli. He’s a violinist who plays in the swing style of the nineteen thirties. He’s fantastic, like a crazy man, running his fingers up and down the strings, chucking in chords and plucked notes, flicking and bouncing his bow. And what’s more, what’s truly unbelievable is - he makes it up as he goes along!

I’ve got the volume turned up so it fills the whole house. Mum and Dad are out at their schools. I should be revising.

It’s all based on simple tunes with names like “Sweet Georgia Brown”. At first he plays the tune. It isn’t hard to learn.

Then he starts doing variations. All you have to understand are the chords underneath. They tell you the different notes you could play at any given moment.

I can’t copy him on “Sweet Georgia Brown” yet. He’s too fast. I can invent my own way through it. Just. By playing very long notes.

There's a slow piece called "Honeysuckle Rose" though, in which almost any note I play, seems right. I can harmonise with Stephane. I can do twiddly bits while he plays the tune, then play the tune whilst he dances around me.

I'm supposed to be revising but surely this counts. I've got my grade eight coming up. Learning to improvise will improve my playing. They'll be amazed.

"Kit?"

He glances up from his painting.

"Just a minute."

Warm sunlight is flooding in through the artroom windows. I waddle round to have a butchers. Blimey, it's a picture of me! Well, not just of me. But I'm in it. Why's he made me look all blobby? Shouldn't just be looking at me. Kit'll think I'm vain.

Beatrice is in the centre, emanating heavenly light, like the Virgin Mary. Her hands rest lovingly on Kit's shoulders in front of her. Kit has an intense, thoughtful expression. Obviously a genius.

Around them, Roy, Jules and I look enviously on. Lorraine stands in the shadows, ignored by Roy. Amanda, on the other side and also in shadow, smiles up at blobby me.

I can't remember us all being together like that...

"When did this happen?" I ask.

He squints at me, realises I'm not joking.

"It's a painting, Andy."

I nod, sagely.

"Makes me feel so sad," I admit.

"Why?" he asks.

"Dunno. You still living at Jules' place?"

"Yes. Do you want to come round one evening?"

He's never invited me anywhere before. Not since we were kids anyway. Perhaps he's lonely. But I can't.

"I can't. I'm not allowed out."

He ignores me. There's no emotion. He simply returns to his painting. I suppose there is no reason, really, to talk.

There's so much music on the radio. I can flip between the stations and play along with anything from country and western to the Red Army Choir.

And there are people I know on the radio. A Schumann recital by Sylvia Marsden-Hunt. Yesterday afternoon the BBC transmitted a performance of Indian classical music by Ravi Shankar with Ali Kazur playing tablas.

I also heard three pieces of Celtic folk music by the Bell Family. It made me think of Amanda because her second name is Bell. Fiddles, harps and flutes playing jigs and reels so fast it was a strain to keep up. Airs so mournful I wanted to cry. Afterwards I looked up Bell in the telephone directory but there are so many of them.

There is a guitarist called Jimi Hendrix who plays blues. He bends notes. I can bend notes on the violin, either by pushing the string sideways or by rolling my finger forwards. Also, by overdoing the vibrato so that the note actually changes by up to a third, I can get the wild shaking effects he gets on his guitar.

When I try these techniques on Elgar's Idyll, it sounds fantastic. I can almost hear the applause. I know that this is not the real world but it offers so much more freedom.

Roy Carmichael, the Head Boy, thinks I am a disgrace. He tells me.

"My Dad works on the buses. He can hardly read or write. He works all hours to make almost nothing. And what does he do with it?"

I shake my head. No idea.

"He pisses it all away! Mum has to do early morning cleaning in offices. The only way I'm going to make something of myself, is by studying hard and getting to university. But you don't understand that Parvin. Your parents are teachers! You take it all for granted. You lazy sod! You're a bloody disgrace!"

Lorraine, who has a round, doughy sort of face and big, sorrowful eyes, comes over and puts her arm around Roy. She's always fancied him. He twists free of her.

"A bloody disgrace!" he repeats and storms off.

"Don't mind Roy," coos Lorraine. "He's under a lot of pressure. My Mum knows his Mum. He never stops working you know. He's making himself ill. All he wants is to go to university so his Mum doesn't have to do cleaning anymore."

I sit alone on a chair in one of the hallowed halls of the Royal Academy of Music, waiting my turn. Mr Barzac, my violin teacher can't be with me. Never mind, I'm old enough.

It's fine. I'm not nervous at all. I've played nothing but violin for months.

The door opens. I'm admitted. The examiner is a small dapper man with glasses. When I've placed my music ready on the stand, he asks me to play certain of my

scales and arpeggios. Simple. The E major is so effortless, I play it a bit fast. So I take the F# minor real slow, creating a kind of stillness, like the stillness in the room with dust hanging in the air where rays of sunlight come in through the window.

The Vivaldi Concerto takes on an almost Stephane Grapelli flavour. I find myself giving it a dotted, jazzy rhythm, until the transposition, which is so glorious that my fingers fly up the fingerboard into exultant improvisation.

When I finish - with harmonics and a plucked chord - the examiner gives a look of utter astonishment. But he ain't heard nothin' yet!

Elgar's Idyll is an astonishment, even to me. I wish Jimi Hendrix could hear this. Somehow all my feelings about Amanda and Jules wash through me, leaving me empty, almost unable to stay on my feet as the examiner leads me to the door and calls for the next person.

Last A-level GCE, History of Music. Last question. Last sentence. I'm flying, past hundreds of younger kids, down the hill, away from the school, shouting -

"I'm free and I'm never coming back!"

I arrive at the bus stop before anyone else. Where to now? Home I suppose.

Mum attacks me with the Hoover.

"Ouch! Leave it out Mum."

"Serves you right. You sit here all day long, doing nothing. When are you going to start to make something of your life? When? Answer me that!"

"In a minute, Mum."

"I'll tell you when. Never. That's when. Because all you're ever going to do is sit there on your fat backside, playing that horrible violin."

"I thought you liked my violin playing."

"Not with pop music. That isn't practising you know. Thump thump screech screech. You could have gone to college!"

Dad pokes his head around the door.

"Anything wrong?" he asks.

"Wrong?" she barks, Hoovering insanely. "We feed him, clothe him, help him in every way we can. We give him the best years of our lives. And what does he do? He fails all his exams!"

"But he can retake his exams," Dad assures her. "Can't you Andrew?"

"Go back to school? You must be kidding."

"Come on," he says, cheerily. "I'll help you revise."

"You? Help?" she yells. "When have you ever helped?"

She zigzags between us, tying us up in the Hoover lead.

"I'm the one that knows the French revolution backwards. I could take those bally exams myself."

"Then why don't you?" I murmur, grumpily.

"Listen, my man. All we've known is war and depression. We've done our bit and a jolly sight more. We don't go out. We don't enjoy ourselves. Oh no. All we do is work work work. And what do we get for it? A great ugly slug-of-a-thing! That's what."

"Give him time," Dad suggests. "My family are all late developers."

"Late?" she snaps. "More like never!"

The Hoover seems to go out of control. It swerves and hits Dad in the shins.

"Little did I think when I was helping my Father build the rockery at home. And the whole of the neighbourhood were friends and relations and looked upon my Father..."

Her blessed Father. For a moment the Hoover hovers and Mum seemed to swoon. Then she turns on us.

"...That I'd be cooped up in this pokey little house, waiting on useless men, day in day out."

"Year after year," I add, helpfully.

She glares at me, fire in her eyes.

"What?"

"You said day in day out. I said year after year."

"Yes. Day in day out, year after year and for the rest of my life!"

She's almost in tears. Dad reaches out to embrace her.

"And up and down," I add, chancing it.

"Up and down?" she screams, throwing an armchair across the room to clean underneath.

I dodge. Dad checks the paintwork.

"Up and down, son? What exactly do you mean?"

"Day in day out, year after year, for the rest of her life and up and down," I explain.

I've gone too far. Dad's blood boils. It sometimes happens.

"How dare you make fun of your mother!" he fumes.

What's he going to do? Hit me? He takes a step forward, trips on the Hoover cable and falls over.

"It's alright, I'm not hurt," he assures us, picking himself up.

Mum ignores him and attacks me.

"You're cheeky, lazy, sneaky, not to mention rude. You never lift a finger to help!"

"I've got heavy fingers."

"You see? Rude!"

"I thought you said you wouldn't mention it?"

"Listen my lad, if you're not going back to school, it's down to the labour exchange with you and get a job."

"What job?" I ask. "There are millions unemployed."

"That's true," says Dad, thoughtfully.

"Don't be ridiculous Cyril. He hasn't even tried to get a job."

"What would be the point?" I reason.

"Ah. Now that isn't logical," observes Dad, wagging his finger.

"Tell me what's not logical, Dad. Go on, blind me with science."

Mum raises her eyes to the heavens, produces a cloth from nowhere and whirls about the room, dusting, wiping, polishing.

"Well," he says. "I have to agree with your mother."

Mum stares at him. It's unheard of.

"Yes Dorothy," he says, gravely. "I think we should all sit down and discuss Andrew's options."

Mum hits the roof.

"Talk talk talk that's all you men are good for. You discuss it. I've got work to do."

Yanking the plug out of the wall, she viciously ties the Hoover up in its own lead, mumbling.

"Men, lazy, good-for-nothing men..."

"Your father was a man," I remind her.

"Don't be crude!" she hisses and storms out of the room, leaving it all tidy, quiet and sparkling with rage.

Dad waits until the dust has settled back on everything.

"She's especially upset because of Colin," he confides.

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

"Your mother feels that you must, at least, have known something."

"Nothing!"

I'm outraged at the accusation.

"Not a word! Well, to be honest, he did mention it, but I had no idea..."

Mum whirls in, white with rage.

"There you are Cyril. I knew it!"

She whirls towards me, her hand out, ready to slap.

"I didn't know! Honestly!"

She freezes.

"You didn't know he was going?"

"Well I knew that, but..."

I duck to avoid the slap.

"...I didn't know he was going now. ...I thought he was just thinking about it."

That works. And it's the truth. All the fury drains out of her. Dad sidles up and puts his arm around her.

"So you know nothing, son," he checks.

"Nothing."

"He seems to be telling the truth, Dorothy."

Mum looks up at me.

"Where has he gone?"

"Er, South America, I think."

I'm not expecting the slap, which sends me reeling back onto the couch, as Mum rushes out, pursued by Dad.

I start strumming the fiddle again. I can hear them upstairs. Mum explaining to Dad the magnitude of their failure as parents. They, who survived depression and war to give their children the very best, have had it thrown back in their faces. Where is Colin? Where is he? South America is a very big place. He's too young. I'm the reason he's run away to South America. I'm the elder son. I've been a bad influence. I've told Colin that education is a waste of time. I'm lazy. I'm good for nothing. I'm useless.

Had enough of this. It's so unhappy here. I'm going out. Put the violin away.

I've decided. I'm going to be a postman. When you're a postman, you have to get up ever so early. I don't like the sound of that much. But our postie, whose name is Mike, says that once you're out of bed it's easy.

There's hardly anyone about at that time, except the twittering birds. Peaceful, like you're in the countryside. Mike would move to the countryside but for the wife's mother. I could move there, be a village postie, like Mike wants to be. Fulfil his dream.

Anyway, you tootle down to the sorting office and collect your sack of letters. Then you deliver them, avoiding large unfriendly dogs. Simple as that. And the thing is, you're finished by lunchtime. You can lounge about, watching all the other poor bastards coming home from work, or play a round of golf.

I've been making lists of jobs. Firemen get burned. Policemen get hit over the head by bandits and joining the army is against my politics. My parents are against the army, even though they were in it. Well, Mum was in the Wrens. But she didn't agree with the war.

"What have the Jews ever done for us?" she asks.

Dad isn't against the Jews. In fact, I think he is one.

"Be fair," he reasons.

"If it wasn't for the Jews," she insists, "there wouldn't have been a war and my brother would still be alive today."

Then she bursts into tears and tells Dad he has to find Colin or she'll go mad. Dad hasn't been having much luck on that score. All he's found out so far is that Colin's savings account has been closed and the money taken out.

Finding that out, has only upset Mum more. She can't even speak to me. I'm like a shadow at home, a shadow on the streets. No one knows me.

Except Mike. He lets me post all the letters down one side of the road, while he does the other. I'll become a postman. I'll move into a bedsit and have my own TV.

It's baking hot today. Air full of petrol, noise and dust. Girls wearing almost nothing. Hips, lips, shoulders, thighs. So close and yet as far away as the burning skies.

Here goes. Big dark hall. Hundreds of us filling in application forms and sweating. I've got to put down all my details, date of birth, exam results, everything. It's very confusing and so hot. I'm melting like a bar of soap in the bath.

"What on earth is this?" asks the official, waving my form at me.

"I'm sorry. The biro leaked," I tell him.

Something catches his eye.

"Six O-levels? You don't want to be a postman."

"I do."

"Hang on a jiffy."

He returns with a lady.

"This way," she says.

"What's going to happen now?"

"Ssh!"

We enter a room where people are in their shirtsleeves, working quietly. The lady hands me a piece of paper. It's a test.

"You have twenty minutes," she says.

I sit down and read. The first bit's about a bloke who starts out with a quid. He goes to a butchers where he spends seven and sixpence on some lamb cutlets. Then he goes next door to the grocers and buys some veg. Then he goes somewhere else and finally goes home. It's an incredibly boring story. At the end, he can't even work out how much money he's got left. What a dopey bloke! The answer's obvious. He should take his money out of his pocket and count it. I write this down.

It's just an intelligence test really. Obvious to someone like me, with six O-levels. Not so obvious to some of the others here, wiping their brows and writing intensely. The next question's simple too.

"Which is heavier a ton of lead or a ton of feathers?"

Shouldn't laugh. Some of the others are Indian. They may not know how light feathers are.

Everyone else has to put down their pens, hand in their papers and wait outside for their results. I've got five minutes more. The last question doesn't even make sense.

"If the sides of a pyramid are equal to the sum"

What sense does that make? It's only when the lady whips my paper away that I see there's a load more questions on the back.

"Never mind," she assures me. "Wait outside."

I'm hardly outside, waiting with the rest, when she appears and, beaming round, informs us that we've all passed.

"In a minute," she confides, "Mr Briggs will take you to the classroom where you will begin your seven weeks training as counter clerks."

I don't understand her.

"Counter clerks?"

A few of the others giggle. Do they think I'm stupid?

"But I want to be a postman," I inform her.

Everyone laughs. An Indian chap smiles at me and whispers.

"More money."

I nod and follow on as Mr Briggs leads us to our classroom. What is a counter clerk?

"Add up these columns of figures," says Mr Briggs.

And that's all we do. We add up columns of figures. None the less, I've got a job. I may not know how much I'm paid or what the job is, but Mum and Dad are thrilled.

"You must have been to a post office, Andy?"

"Yes?"

"Well, counter clerks are the people who serve you."

"Oh."

Mum stifles a sob and leaves the room. Perhaps my job isn't good enough for her. Or perhaps she's still worried about Colin. I don't know why. We know he's with Sam and Becky, his friends from school. Sam Langley's Dad has all the details.

It occurs to me that what Mum can't stand is that Colin and me are leaving home. I'm stunned. She's always been so cross with us. I'm living like a hermit in this house. Creeping in late. Hearing Mum and Dad argue. Tiptoe up to the little box room and shut the door. Creep out early.

At work, we learn about postage stamps, postcards, parcels, letters, first class, second class, recorded delivery, registered mail, airmail, telegrams, tax disks, postal orders, pensions, dole cheques, sickness benefits, savings bank deposits, outpayments, electricity bills, gas bills, dog licences, TV licences, forms from every government department from passports to the Ministry of Fisheries and Foods. And it isn't like school. You have to do it.

If any of the staff notice my misery, it is with a kind of glee. They've all had to go through it. They've had to knuckle down and earn their living. So will I. They know what Mum knows. Life is hell and you better get used to it.

An instructor stabs at my page of calculations.

"See?" he says. "You've got it wrong. You weren't listening. Now you're going to have to do it all over again."

I look up, horrified. He is smiling. I've made his day.

Lunchtimes I hang about shops, trying not to look like I'm loitering with intent. Staring in windows, at washing machines, lampshades, anything but the bodies, parading the streets, reflected like ghosts in the glass.

First a pie, then a coke, then a wander, then back to learn the airmail rate for a three ounce letter to some fictional address in Rio.

Turning the key in the lock, our front door opens and Dad pulls me inside.

"Ssh! We're on the phone to Colin," he explains.

He's in La Pas. That's in Bolivia. Finally I'm told to speak to him.

"Colin?"

My voice echoes down the line. After a while his voice echoes back.

"Hi."

"Are you okay?" I ask.

"Are you okay?" my echo repeats.

"Yeah. You?"

"Yeah. See ya."

"See ya."

I hand the phone to Dad but the line's gone dead.

"At least he's safe," says Dad.

"Safe? We don't know anything," Mum insists. "You could have found out more Andy."

"How come it's my fault?" I ask.

Dad gives me the sign, which means drop it.

"We know where he is, Dorothy," says Dad, soothingly. "We can phone him whenever we want. It means we don't have to worry. We can go on holiday as planned."

"On holiday? Are you mad? I'm not going on holiday."

"But we've got to," Dad informs her. "The Goldbergs are coming."

"Who?"

"You remember. Jack Schtum's daughter is getting married and, since we always go away in august, we arranged for them to honeymoon here."

"Well I'm not going on any holiday so you can jolly well unarrange it."

"It would be very embarrassing. The groom is Ira Goldberg. He is a prominent New York conductor."

"What? I'm supposed to go on holiday just so your Jewish friends can stay here? It would be different if the boys were coming. This was going to be our last holiday all together. But Andy's got this awful job and Colin's..."

Her voice fades away. Her eyes spring with tears.

"I don't want to go on holiday with you!" she snarls at Dad and runs upstairs into the bedroom and slams the door.

"How's work?" asks Dad.

"Fine," I reply.

“I’d better go up,” he says.

I want to go up to my room but don’t fancy sitting there listening to them arguing. Go for a walk.

How come Colin went off like that? I’m the elder brother. I should have done something daring, amazing, frightening... But I’ve got nothing positive that I want to do. The only thing I know is that I’m not going back to retake my exams. I’ve got no friends, no life. No way forward and no way back. Fine. I’ll be a counter clerk and no one can stop me.

What I like best is walking the streets or lying on my bed, imagining I’m on a tropical island and there are all these girls with grass skirts.

Mr Briggs is pleased. I’ve never seen him look pleased before. Not the whole seven weeks.

“Well done,” he says. “You’ve all passed. You are now fully qualified Post Office Counter Clerks. From Monday you will each be starting work at different post offices.”

I’m going to be working at Maida Vale.

Out into the real world. Maida Vale Post Office. Everything in its place, on my place at the counter. Time to start clerking.

The Manageress, Mrs Pickles, opens up. People surge in. Hoards of them.

Suddenly the whole seven weeks training goes out the window. I don't know anything. My eyes glaze over. I can't even find an inpayment slip, or remember what one is. It's an out-of-body experience. I can see myself in a mess but can't join myself to sort it out. All I can think is "they're going to kill me - they're going to kill me," over and over again.

When someone thrusts a pension book at me, I go into convulsions and date-stamp my own hand. I'm haring about, looking for forms that don't exist, for people who've gone by the time I get back. Or, in a high twittering voice, I'm begging some other member of staff to tell me.

"What do you do when a a a you get given a a a one of these?"

"I've got a customer Parvin. Look in the book."

What book? Where? There was a book. We had it in training. The Post Office Bible. Thousands of pages of impenetrable code and I'm never going to find it anyway. I stare at the form the customer has given me. Something clicks in my brain.

I return to the counter, thrust the form back at the customer.

"You have to get one of these signed by a Justice Of The Peace."

"But I was told to come to the Post Office."

"Next!"

Things get easier. Dole cheques are simple and I soon got the hang of postage. But if there is something nightmarish, like a tax disk or a premium bond, or if I just feel the panic rise, I say "You'll have to refer this to the Mayor" or "I'm sorry but this is out of date. You'll need to apply to the government of France."

Moments cluster together into hours, hours fuse into days. Blind panic. Sometimes customers argue. Most of them simply wander away. I'm in such a state that I tell some poor old biddy she'll have to send her pension book to the Queen.

"But I get it here every Thursday," she complains.

"System's changed. Now it's the Queen. She gives out coins to poor folk, every Michaelmas morn. So go away."

"I want to see the manager."

"Go away," I repeat, wondering if I can bundle her into a mailsack without anyone noticing.

Suddenly she starts shrieking. I grab her book, stamp it and give her a hundred quid. Next bloke just wants an envelope. It's going to be alright.

It's going to be alright because it's going to be all the same, always. The smell of potatoes and gravy from the dark room upstairs where the staff eat lunch. The queues of people like columns of figures, standing in silhouette, sun coming in behind, endlessly waiting.

If it all gets too much, I pick my nose. You've no idea how quickly you can clear a queue if you get into some really contorted picking.

At the end of the week, Saturday afternoon, we have to tot up our figures. Every transaction each of us, personally, has made.

Takes me hours. Everyone else has gone home, except Mrs Pickles, who's waiting for me. When I finally add up the pages of ins and outs and subtract one from the other, I'm £419.7.2d short. She says "This is very serious" and makes me do it all again.

Next time I'm £933.7.2d under. Then £2894.7.2d over. The Manageress is sitting there, getting angrier and angrier and it's arbitrary. I can't do it. I'm just guessing. Then it comes to me. Rub out the 'in' total and make it the same as the 'out'.

"I've got it down to seven shillings and tuppence," I announce.

On Monday I'm summoned. None of my accounts make any sense. Mrs Pickles has never seen anything like it. Why have I date-stamped each of the dole cheques hundreds of times?

"I wasn't sure which was the right place."

"I see. And why have you ripped up the cashed postal orders?"

"So they can't be used again?" I ask, not so sure.

"Really. And what possessed you to collect all your customers' savings books? Is there something wrong with you?"

By the time I get back on the counter, I'm blistering with rage.

"I'm afraid I can't issue this unless it is signed by a reputable pharmacist. Furthermore it will need to be countersigned by an official representative of the Horseguards."

I hear a little giggle from somewhere in the queue.

My customer looks bewildered.

"What?" he asks.

"Yes," I insist. "You'll find their address in your diagonal handbook."

"What handbook?" he asks.

"Also, you will need to affix a photo of your mother here."

Again the giggle. Some girl down the queue is waving at me.

"A photo of my mother?" asks the customer.

"Yes," I say, authoritatively. "Or someone else's mother."

The girl gives a laugh. She's on to me, whoever she is.

"But it's just a dog license," says the customer.

"Then where's the dog?"

"At home."

"I'm sorry but I must see the dog."

The girl has pushed her way up to the counter. I know the face. A long-lost beloved soul mate. And so pretty. All wavy hair, freckles and twinkling eyes.

"Andy," she says.

"Amanda," I say.

"You were funny," she says.

"You look nice," I say.

I ask her what she's been doing since she got chunked out of school. I thought she'd got a job in a florist's. Beatrice told me as much. So I've imagined a boring life, rather like my own.

But no. She regales me with tales of folksongs and festivals, video labs, wholefoods and marching for causes. Save the whale, stop the bomb, back to nature and up the spout.

She looks just like one of Joni Mitchell's Ladies of the Canyon. The tops of her cheeks suggest shyness and yet she is happy, full of energy and so open, her whole body animated by thoughts as she talks... - I have to stop looking at her. I have to concentrate on what she is actually saying. What is she saying? I look away to listen and notice that the post office is full. Why?

Amanda has stopped speaking. She is staring at me. Christ! She must have asked a question. I smile, to cover my confusion.

Seeing me hesitate, she adds, a little nervously, "We could go together after you finish work."

"Oh? Could we?"

"Yeah. Can you?"

"Yeah."

"Wow!" she says, her face flushing.

"Wow!" I echo.

There is light coming out of her eyes.

"I'll be back later," she promises.

She's gone. In front of me stretches a long angry queue. In my ear I hear the scream of a Manageress.

“What the hell do you think you're playing at Parvin?”

I start going through the motions of serving customers. It's okay. I'm enjoying it. I give them everything they ask for and more. They are human beings after all. And human beings are full of goodness. I give them kindness, concern, love and a few extra fivers here and there.

Warm afternoon in Maida Vale Post Office. Where's Amanda taking me? I'm supposed to know.

Outside Maida Vale Post Office. Blindingly sunny street full of people weaving through each other, freed from work, each with their own destinations. So hot. Airless.

Was Amanda really in the post office earlier? Did she say she'd come back? Hollow feeling in my chest. Maybe I imagined it. Being a counter clerk does strange things to the mind.

Honk of a horn. Peer between pedestrians. Pink mini. An armful of red beads waves me over. Amanda. Jump in beside her. Slam the door shut. Turn and meet a kiss.

Lips together. Open my eyes. Strands of russet hair, blurred freckles. Can't breathe.

"I never expected to see you again, ever," I admit, feeling emotional.

Second kiss. Twisted round in our seats. Arms about each other. Handbrake sticking into me. Complete bliss. All the time in the world. Relaxing apart. Shyly, grinning at each other.

"Do you still play the fiddle Andy?"

She's wearing a short, summer dress with flowers on it.

"No, not really, that is, I haven't..."

Arms bare, tanned, freckled. Long fingers, nails still bitten.

"But you still have your fiddle?"

Broad shoulders. Long neck.

"Yes."

Halo of hair like a sun-burst, and her face ...oh.

"Where?"

Slim nose with a bump in it. High, broad cheekbones.

"Home."

Strange, lovely girl.

"Where's home Andy?"

Bathe in the light of her eyes.

"Hammersmith."

I watch her hands and feet working the controls, her eyes flicking between mirrors as she launches us out into the angry traffic.

Whizzing over Ladbroke Grove on the flyover. No idea what we're doing or why.

"What's the fiddle for?" I ask.

"To play for the kids."

"Oh. What am I supposed to play?"

"Don't worry. I've got my guitar. We'll make it up."

As we pull up outside my house, I notice that the front door is open. Mum and Dad are greeting people. Christ! Must be the Goldbergs, arriving from New York. I'm supposed to be here for the meal. Forgotten all about it.

Mum sees me, then Amanda. Mum's polite smile doesn't flicker but she's thinking that I've brought someone else to the meal - and how's she going to set another place, and is there enough food, and how could I? And I am thinking there's no way we're staying for this meal.

The Goldbergs are still taking their coats off, baggage everywhere in our little hallway. Ignoring introductions, I charge past, up to my room for the fiddle. No way am I going to miss my evening with Amanda. Just have to brazen it out.

Back downstairs, they're in the sitting room, Amanda asking Clara how the flight's been. Dining room beyond, all set out with candles and stuff.

I just want to apologise and leave but Ira Goldberg jumps up and shakes my hand. An orchestra conductor, he's as small and neat as a baton. Clara, his newly wedded wife, also resembles her instrument, which is a cello. More like a double bass actually.

"Amanda tells us you're not able to stay," says Dad, wedging himself between Amanda and Clara on the sofa and immediately putting his arms around both of them.

Normally his behaviour is just embarrassing. But I'm outraged. He's touching my Amanda.

"Where are you two off to then?" he asks, caressing her.

"I do a class with the mentally handicapped on Thursdays," she replies.

News to me. Dad shows interest.

"And what do you teach them? - Assuming of course that you're the teacher and not one of the er handicapped folk."

It's supposed to be a joke.

"We're all handicapped in one way or another," she explains, fending off his advances with a firm little smile, as Mum enters.

"No but I'm serious," he insists, holding his hands in the air to show that he's not touching her. "What can you teach these people?"

"We sing songs mainly."

"Yes. I'm supposed to play fiddle," I add, turning to Mum and trying to make it sound like a career opportunity.

"How can you, Andy? I've cooked specially."

She's curiously un-cross. Her eyes pass from me to Amanda. There's a plaintive note in her voice. I know how much family things matter to her.

"Sorry Mum."

"I thought we were all going to be together. We're away on holiday first thing tomorrow. We won't see you."

I shrug, but she can't let it go.

"Ira and Clara have just arrived. They'll want to meet you."

"I'm sure we'll have plenty of time to get to know each other over the next few weeks!" booms Clara.

We jump out of our skins. She's got an incredibly loud voice. I'm surprised the house is still standing.

"You play violin Andy?" asks Ira.

"I got an idea!" bellows Clara. "You play violin. I play 'cello. Ira plays piano. We can play the Beethoven sonatas together! Perfect!"

Luckily the doorbell rings. It's Mr Bailey. At first I think he's come about Clara's voice. Cracks have appeared in his walls or Mrs Bailey's had a stroke. But Amanda's car is the problem. He needs to get his own car out and the mini is in the way.

Hurried goodbyes in the hall.

"Nice to have met you," says Amanda to Mum.

"Have a good evening Andy," says Dad, with an all-too-obvious wink.

Clara grabs me and I'm petrified she's going to whisper in my ear. Instead I get an explosively wet kiss on each cheek.

"Enjoy your holiday Mum, Dad!" I call, backing out into the twilight.

In the mini, Amanda turns the key, the engine roars and we're off. One moment I'm looking at my mother's face in the doorway, the next I'm suppressing a scream, as we leap over pavements, to cut corners. Can't speak. Rigid with terror. Can't think.

Into the busy London streets. Clutching the sides of my seat. Don't want to fall into Amanda as we turn. Or fall out. Wish my door was locked but don't dare let go to lock it.

Flying across town at nightfall. Red lights ignored. Pedestrians scattering. Wish the police would stop us. Suddenly Amanda twists the steering wheel, plunging us into a wall so fast I don't see the opening.

We're in a school playground where others have parked. Screeching to a halt, we dash across the asphalt, clutching our instruments, up stairs, along corridors and straight into the class.

Room full of tiny monsters. Some with gigantic heads, others with heads smaller than their necks. Some with too few bits, others with too many. A few, grey adults patrol.

Faced with these mangled human children, another kind of terror seizes me. I wish I was back in the car, hurtling to my death.

Amanda gets out her guitar and sits on the teacher's desk. I hide in the chair behind it. Her songs are accompanied by howling and braying. I concentrate on the way her hips and bum sway as she plays.

"Fiddle, Andy?"

I open the case, remove the bow, tighten it. Needs rosin.

"My friend Andy is going to play his violin for us tonight. Have any of you ever seen a violin before?"

The frightening little creatures surge forward, crowd around. Start tuning up. The sound sends some of them bonkers. They start screeching and wailing. Amanda smiles reassuringly.

"Ready?"

I sit beside her on the desk, clamp the fiddle between jaw and shoulder and raise the bow. The minders are shushing the kids. What am I going to play?

The bow crashes down, F# on the A string. I'm playing. I'm playing Elgar's Idyll a la Jimi Hendrix. Why, in God's name have my fingers chosen this? Every slide, every trill is met by crazy yelling and screaming.

One pinhead keeps edging forward. Is it the sound of the violin, or does she sense my fear? Strange beaked face with a single expression. Rage. I know she's going to attack me.

She edges towards the front of the kids, staring. Why does nobody else notice? It's in her eyes. There's nothing to stop her from ripping my lungs out.

She leaps. Hands reach out to grab her. Should I stop playing? Can't defend myself. She'll take a great bite out of my face. Keep going, smiling, hoping.

Inches away, two minders pounce and hold her off, pull her back. My fingers skid down the final arpeggio onto the final chord. Silence.

Whistling and whooping. Amanda beams at me. I stare round the room, dazed. They liked it. They're happy. The music worked. Amanda announces "Little Boxes".

"Little boxes, little boxes," she sings and everyone joins in.

Words will not describe the sound. Dare myself to study the faces. So upsetting. I could be one of them. What must it be like? Minders are saints. And Amanda. Why don't I do anything to help others? Just sit on the desk and watch as the kids are led out.

A woman, with a huge frosty hairdo and a young face painted on an old one, barges in and sets up a gramophone. A man in a mauve sequinned suit, with a face like a punctured tyre, starts shunting chairs and desks up against the walls.

We have to fight our way out, as spectres in sequins, ballgowns and quiffs, pour into the room.

“Ballroom dancing,” Amanda explains and leads me back to the car.

“Would you drive very slowly and carefully?” I ask.

She giggles.

“Of course. But where?”

She kisses me and everything’s completely alright. I don’t care where.

“Do you want to come to my house?” she asks.

I grin, foolishly happy.

I recognise this street.

"I didn't know you lived here."

Amanda turns off the engine.

"Only since May, when my parents left."

"But it's just around the corner from Jules' flat - where Kit was staying."

"I haven't seen them."

We get out. Rows of dark, terraced houses. Place called "The Mangrove" all lit up on the corner. Lots of people about, even though it must be past ten. Hippies and Rastas mainly. Exciting, if a bit sinister.

I follow Amanda to the front door. Wonder if there's anyone inside or if we're going to be alone.

"Did you say your parents have left?"

"They went to live in Canada so they bought us a house."

"You own this house?"

"Eloise, Gracie and me. We've each got a floor."

"Oh."

Amanda opens her front door. There's nasty nasal folk-singing ringing through the corridor.

*"Ma lad's a canny lad
He warks doon the pit"*

Amanda gives a yelp.

"Their album must be out!"

She drags me along the hall and into a room lit by candles. Four flickering humans sit cross-legged on beanbags around a low glass table. Their faces stare up at us. They all have long hair and peaceful looks in their eyes. One rises and hugs Amanda.

"Andy, this is my sister, Gracie. Gracie, this is Andy."

"Hallo Andy."

Gracie has freckles and ginger hair like Amanda. Maybe a year or two older. I put my hand out to shake hers. She giggles, throws her arms up and wraps them around me. I'm grateful for the candlelight, only my cheeks are hot and I'm sure I'm blushing.

"And this," announces Gracie, "is our big sister Eloise. Eloise, meet Andy."

Eloise is the eldest. Should I shake her hand? I put my hand up, palm out, like a Red Indian.

“Hi!”

She swoops forward, flings her arms around me and plonks a big, splashy kiss on my cheek. I can do nothing but grin.

“We heard the music,” Amanda explains. “Is the album out?”

“September,” replies Eloise. “This is the first pressing. Do you want to see the artwork for the cover?”

“Hi, I’m Adam,” says a tall droopy bloke with sentimental eyes and a huge grin.

I put my hand out but he too embraces and kisses me. Is this what everyone does round here? Is it a religion? I wish I was alone with Amanda. The bloke I haven’t been introduced to yet, is sitting at the glass table, rolling a cigarette. He looks up at me.

“Clive,” he says.

He has mad, staring eyes.

“Andy,” I say.

He returns to his task. No hug from him then.

“Have you seen this, Andy? It’s amazing!”

Amanda pushes the artwork at me. Everyone’s shifting up to make room for us at the table. Sitting cross-legged is uncomfortable. I change to kneeling and study the artwork.

“The Bell Family Album” features traditional folksongs, with titles like *“Wake Up Willie My Love”* and *“The Near-Fatal Coal-Pit Explosion at Nitshill”*.

There are snapshots of Gracie, Eloise, Adam and Clive, set out like a family photo album. Clive with a bunch of miners. One of the girls with a harp in the countryside. Is it Eloise? I look up to check. She’s in mid-flow.

“Of course astrology is true. When Mars and Saturn are rising, you get doctors. It’s been proved.”

So Eloise plays harp and Gracie, who’s openly cuddling Adam, must be the fiddle player. Is Eloise with Clive? Impossible. He’s got a long, twisted nose and eyes like saucers. Ought to be locked up, just in case. Yet she seems to hang on his every word.

“Did you know that plants feel emotions?” he asks.

“You’re kidding!” says Eloise, excited.

Amanda pours me some wine.

"No. Some yank discovered it. He linked up a rubber plant to a polygraph machine and then dunked shrimps into boiling water next to it. Everytime he killed a shrimp, the polygraph needle jumped violently."

"What a bastard!" exclaims Gracie.

"There's another possibility," I say, "one that's even more amazing. Suppose the polygraph machine itself can feel emotions."

They gape at me for a second, then ignore me.

"We should listen to what nature is telling us," says Eloise.

As I look up and down, checking photos against real faces and wishing that everyone, apart from Amanda, would turn into a shrimp, it occurs to me that I heard a group called the Bell Family on the radio.

"I think I heard you on the radio. Is that possible?" I ask.

"Yes!" exclaims Gracie.

"When was it?" asks Clive, suspiciously.

Have to think. It was when I was improvising to any old pile of rubbish while I should have been revising.

"Mid-June, maybe?"

"You heard our BBC session!" confirms Eloise, brightly.

Everyone's excited that I've heard the broadcast. Clive passes me a cigarette.

"What did you think, man?" asks Adam.

I puff on the cigarette, to buy time. Don't want to lie but, on the other hand...

"It was tremendous. I particularly enjoyed the nasal singing."

What?"

Clive looks daggers at me. Obviously he's the singer. I smile to reassure him.

"Yes, it's so traditional. And the pipes and bells," I recall. "So cute."

"Cute?" he snarls. "It's real, man. That's the point."

"Exactly," I concur. "Real. Like this picture of you here with these dirty fellows."

Amanda giggles. Adam tuts.

"They're miners man."

"Or this one of you, Adam, sharing a jar with some country bumpkin."

"He probably knows more than you and me put together, man."

"Right. And that's what's so great about your music. It appeals to everyone, from miners to simple country folk. It's commercial."

Clive bristles. This is better than winding Mum up.

"We're not bloody commercial!"

"Aren't we?" asks Gracie.

"I'll tell you what's commercial," spits Clive. "Those bastards who come up through folk and, first chance they get, go electric!"

"Like that bastard Dylan," adds Adam.

"Yeah. Him and all those so-called singer-songwriters, expressing how they feel all the time, as if we bloody care!"

"They're all breadheads," confirms Eloise.

"But Amanda writes songs," says Gracie.

Everyone turns to Amanda. The moment I look at her, I go all trembly. Everything seems to float. She's the really pretty one. She's the prize. I didn't know she wrote songs.

"Do you?" I ask.

Before she can reply, Clive chimes in.

"You should join the Bell Family," he tells her.

"She is part of the Bell family," retorts Gracie, sharpish.

"I mean the group," says Clive.

"Yeah," agrees Adam. "Three ginger chicks - be fantastic!"

Clive gives Adam a withering look.

"Not that, man. The point is, everyone's just out for themselves, when what we need is solidarity. It's serious."

"You mean Amanda shouldn't write songs if she wants to?" asks Eloise, daring to question her boyfriend.

"I mean, if we don't learn how to live with each other, we're going to blow up the world!"

"All of us?" I ask. "Or you personally?"

"Not me man! Some mad Hitler!!"

I wonder if he would attack me, if his brain would go as crazy as his eyes?

"I agree with you about Hitler," I say, puffing on the cig. "Everyone's always so down on Hitler but he was a good-looking man."

There's a nasty mumbling in the room. I swig some wine so as not to laugh.

"Are you a policeman or something?" asks Adam.

"Fascist!" hisses Clive.

"Yeah," agrees Adam. "And he's smoked the whole joint!"

I look down at the cigarette I'm stubbing out. What was it? Drugs? Christ I feel strange. Want to tell someone that I've never had drugs, that I'm scared. But I can't. Can't speak. Everything's whirling around me.

I can hear Amanda far away, telling them that I'm not a fascist.

"On the contrary, he's a brilliant fiddle player. We're thinking of starting a band.

Do you want to hear some?"

Clammouring voices.

"Great!"

"Wow!"

"Yeah!"

Violin open on the table in front of me. Has it been there all the time? Concentrate. Which hand holds the violin and which the bow? Neither way works. Don't panic. Know the strings should be on top and the bow goes across them. But how? Can see it in my mind but my hands won't do it. Can't even play the violin! I've been drugged!

Someone's playing a guitar, strumming. Big, orangy-brown chords. Most beautiful chords ever. I'm hungry. Follow the strumming arm up to the shoulder, the neck, the face. Amanda. Her mouth is moving. Is she eating? No, she's singing! But her voice is coming from the whole room!

*"I'm going to sit beneath a tree
Let the sun shine down on me
I'm going to take things easily
All summer long"*

Her words become pictures. I'm underneath that tree. I'm there in the sunshine with her. Just the two of us. And the tree of course.

*"All my emotions are spent
But my mind will not relent
Let nature experiment
All summer long"*

Wow, it's profound. She's a goddess. Her lovely mouth moves perfectly in time with the words. So clever. And the others watching from the shadows, stretched out, resting on each other like in a magazine (except you'd have to replace Clive if you didn't want to lose readers). And yet it's really happening. We're all here together, young and totally profound.

*"Don't know what happened
Things were going so well
Must have run out of energy
Oh - what the hell..."*

Little look, little frightened look in Amanda's eyes. Fragile human being, just like me. Wonder what she looks like without her clothes on...

*"...When autumn comes I'll energise
Like a phoenix I shall rise
Until then I'll watch the skies
All Summer Long"*

My bow comes down on a low trill like a bee, buzzing on a summer's day. Little flurries of air, arpeggios fluttering up and down the D string and back to the trill.

I can hear Amanda strumming chords, bounding along. But I'm hovering, out of time. Vaguely aware of others watching. Tease out the moment.

Raise the note a semitone. It clashes. No matter. Need space. Slowly rise to my feet. Still trilling ominously. Up another note. And another. Wait for it.

Now. My fingers fly into a series of rising arpeggios, spiralling up to a high, screaming trill. Squeeze my eyes shut. Starburst. There, in the midst of a million shooting stars, is Amanda. Beautiful and free. Naked, but not in a rude way.

I launch myself into her rhythm and we're off. Dancing like dragonflies above a sparkling stream, knowing that life is short and so are we.

Melody vibrating beneath my chin. Up the octave. Down the octave. Embroidering it. Fiddle playing itself. Nothing I can do to stop or change it. If this is what drugs do, I'm all for them. Never dared let go like this before.

Look down at the bridge, where the bow sweeps across the strings. Amanda dancing on the fingerboard. Fingers matching her, step for step.

Strange feeling. Someone looking at me. Turn. A face, all blotchy and freckly, grinning right at me. The real Amanda. She's real! My fingers go berserk and run amok all over the strings...

Want to look away, catch my breath. But our eyes are locked. Aware that we are not in control. Our instruments are playing us. Her whole body shaken by the guitar, pounding on towards its final chord. Fiddle, performing all sorts of crazy double-stoppings, chords and octaves, lifts me a foot above the floor.

Just before the final chord, she stops. Leaves me zigzagging about, uselessly on my own. Feel my hand, jerking up and down the fiddle neck with no concern for harmony whatsoever.

Amanda raises her eyebrows. Yes? Last chord crashes down, violin and guitar as one. Blimey. Stunned silence. Whoops and gasps.

“Groovy!”

“Amazing!”

“Freaky!”

“Funky!”

“Fab!”

All the energy drains out of me. I sag. A huge beanbag breaks my fall. Dark red blobs before my eyes. Someone sawing wood inside my head.

“Andy?”

Amanda peering down.

Where am I?

“Have I been here long?”

“You were snoring. Come on.”

She grabs my hand, hoiks me up and leads me out of the room, like mummy did when I was young and it was bedtime. I hope it is bedtime.

“Night-night.”

Follow her up creaky stairs. Sssh! Whole house is swaying. More stairs. Somebody wheezing nearby.

“Lie down Andy.”

Flop down and awake in shock. Whole bed is made of water. Arms and legs flailing, sloshing about. No use. Can’t get to the side. Above, a window to the midnight sky. Must be at sea.

Someone’s pulling my trousers off! Stop it! Amanda! Oh god. She’ll see my horrible wobbly white body and run screaming. Nothing I can do, tossed about on the water, trousers, shirt and socks whisked away until I’m stark naked and can see my own stomach, rising out of the ocean like a huge sand dune.

Beyond it, a ghostly moon in the shape of Amanda’s head.

“Help!” I cry. “I’m lost at sea!”

The moon giggles.

“It’s only a waterbed, Andy. Shift over.”

Her weight lands beside me. A tidal wave hurls me into the air, flips me over and I land belly-down on top of a log, hurtling down the rapids. I’m clinging on for dear life. My pelvis has gone into spasm.

“Stop! Andy! You’re hurting me!”

My eyes blink open. Amanda’s face, inches away. I’m on top of her. And something between my legs has found a home inside her. It’s sex. I’ve heard about it. But how did it happen? And what now? I look at Amanda. She has a dopey smile on her face.

Oh...

Alarm clock bouncing about noisily beside me. Reach out automatically and bash it on the head. Silence. Shafts of cool sunlight hitting the shelves opposite. History books, music books left over from the exams.

Any other year this would be the last couple of weeks of school holidays. After four weeks of getting up late, going to the park, meeting friends, days would be floating by. Happy late-summer oblivion, made all the more potent for the secret knowledge that, soon, school would start again. Either that or we'd be off on holiday, rattling round Europe in the car, in a state of continuous family bickering.

They are away on holiday. Well, Mum and Dad, anyway. They've left me here and gone off to France to argue without me. I've spent most of the week at Amanda's, so I've hardly noticed that my family has left me.

Pick up my fiddle and put it back on its shelf, along with schoolbooks and everything else that is mine and I'm never going to need again.

This isn't like any other year. The endlessness of summer holidays seems like splashing around in a pool when now I'm faced with an ocean.

You don't get six weeks holidays as a post office counter clerk. Lucky if you get two and you have to take them on a rota. No more fixed points.

And it's Saturday. What am I doing, down in the kitchen at seven thirty, grabbing a cup of tea and scuttling off to work for Christ's sake? It's an unbearable injustice.

I ought to be off on some tropical island somewhere with time on my hands. Time to think. Decide sanely what I'm to do with all these years ahead of me.

Would I take Amanda? She says she loves me but I feel like I'm floundering about in the water and all she's doing is kissing me. I don't need kissing. I need saving.

"Andy!!!"

My soul leaps out of my body and disappears down the sink. I turn to see Clara Goldberg standing hugely in the kitchen doorway wrapped in a tiny gossamer dressing gown. The Goldbergs are here. I'm not even alone.

"Where are you off to?" she shrieks.

I hold onto the kitchen table and do some heavy panting to get rid of the ringing in my ears.

"Work," I whimper.

"You work on a Saturday?"

Bitch.

"Halfday," I mumble, trying to recover.

"Will you be back this afternoon?"

Who does she think she is, my mother?

"No. Pop festival."

"Pop festival? You don't like that kind of music Andy!" she screams. "All that loud twanging! It's bad for your ears!"

"Got to go," I mutter, desperate.

"We've seen so little of you!" she bellows, standing in my way.

"Well, I know you're on your honeymoon, so I haven't liked to disturb," I reply politely.

She plonks a vasty buttock on the side of the table, almost upending it, and leans into me.

"You want to know a secret?" she booms.

"No," I beg.

Her sheer volume has a strangely weakening effect. Can't move. I'm scared she'll awaken the airforce and they'll fly over and bomb us.

"Ira and I don't have that kind of marriage."

What's she saying?

"What?"

"No, it's strictly platonic. He doesn't like it."

She takes my arm. If only I could move.

"I like it," she rumbles.

"Like what?"

She places my palm on a huge bosom. What is she doing? We're related, aren't we? I bloody hope so.

"Sex!" she hisses, wrapping her arms around me, tits rising between us like two bubbling cauldrons.

In the nick of time, my spirit leaps up through the plughole and repossesses me. It whisks me out of the kitchen, along the hall to the front door. But before I can get it open, a little, dry voice whispers.

"Andy..."

I look up and there, standing on the stairs, is a small hairy piece of wood in white woolly knickers. Ira Goldberg.

"Has Clara told you?" he demands.

I flood with guilt. She has told me. I've had my hands on his bride and he knows. Does he?

"About you not having sex?" I stammer.

"About the Turangalila concert in Oxford tomorrow."

"Oh," I gurgle. "S-sorry."

“We got the tickets!”

He waves tickets. Three tickets. One for me. I vaguely remember something but I’m still burning from my awful mistake.

“Tomorrow morning, ten am sharp,” he informs me.

Clara appears from the kitchen. I manage to get the front door open.

“You will be here!” she screams as I pelt off down the road.

What is it with people, that they think they can impose themselves upon you, just like that, without any shame? They’re all the same, whether it’s Clara Goldberg, or the bus conductor who holds out his hand for my money, or customers at the post office who queue in front of me with an endless supply of demands, or Mrs Pickles, who hovers over me the whole time I’m totting up the week’s accounts.

“I’m not having you keep me here till all hours this week, Parvin!” she reminds me.

I don’t even want to be here. I’m supposed to be at a huge rock festival now, where the Bell Family are playing. For the fourth time, I try to balance my ins and my outs. It’s no use, the columns of figures blur and ripple. Finally Mrs Pickles gives up and does my sums for me. Turns out I’ve got over five thousand pounds more than I should have. She’s furious. I try to reason with her.

“It means we’ve made a profit!”

“It means nothing of the sort, Parvin. It means you have made hundreds of transactions for which we have no paperwork!”

I don’t understand. Why would she want more paperwork? I’m beginning to believe that most people are clinically insane.

The taxi driver, whom I ask to get me to ‘Saint Mary’s The Boltons’ as quickly as possible, dawdles for hours in traffic jams. When I beg him to find an alternative route, he starts telling me that black people should be sent back to their own country. I wish I had an own country. I’d be back there in a jiffy.

When we finally arrive, it turns out that ‘Saint Mary’s The Boltons’ is a church in some gardens in the middle of a quietly posh road. And the huge pop festival that Amanda’s sisters were banging on about, is a bunch of mainly old folk sipping tea and chatting with the vicar.

The Bell Family are already playing. I recognise Clive’s ghastly nasal singing and picture him, even before he comes into view, his eyes bulging, his hand covering one ear to achieve just the right degree of out-of-tuneness for traditional folk. The group are playing in front of a small refreshments marquee, watched by a scattering of sad, probably Christian hippies.

Why am I here? Feel like running away from everything.

I find a cemetery on the other side. Dark and warm within its trees. Come upon some kids playing football. Their ball spins towards me. I kick. Straight between two gravestones. A kid leaps to catch but misses. Goal!

Pure fluke, but suddenly I'm part of the game, rushing around, tackling, dribbling, getting tackled, falling over... Although the kids are only twelve or thirteen, they're much better than me. The moment I get the ball, some wiry little bastard throws himself head-first at my tummy. Completely winded. The kids form a circle, peering down.

"You alright mate?"

"Andy?"

The circle parts. Amanda's face appears, upside-down, above me. Why does this always happen? A minute ago, she would have seen me scoring a goal. Instead she finds a pathetic wheezing heap.

"Eloise saw you. Apparently you walked right up to Clive while he was singing, looked at him and stomped off. He was a bit peeved."

My head's bursting. Don't want to admit that I can't even breathe.

"Hate all that music," I grunt, trying to salvage some pride, trying unsuccessfully to get up.

"So do I," Amanda admits, helping me off the pitch and sitting me down on a cold stone slab. "Why don't we start our own group? Original music. Fiddle and guitar. And we can sing. Shall we?"

Don't much like the idea of singing in public. I'd feel like a prat. I manage to look at her without wheezing.

"As far as I'm concerned, the violin was something I had to do while I was at school. I never want to see it again."

Amanda says nothing. She watches the kids playing football. My asthma subsides. She seems upset.

"Well that's that," she murmurs, rising. "We better join the others."

An angry thought bangs about my head, demanding to be let out.

"Are you just going out with me so I'll be in your band?"

She turns and glares.

"No!" she spits.

Never seen her fierce before. Bit scary.

"Well then!" I reply, standing my ground.

She tuts, walks away, stops, turns back.

"I thought you were an optimist, Andy. I thought, because of your sense of humour, because you were always an outsider, I thought you'd be more adventurous."

I shrug, not willing to admit anything, either way.

"The point is, what are you doing with your life?"

"I've got a job."

"The Post Office? Are you really such a coward?"

She's calling me a coward. What can I do? What would Dad do? Employ reason.

"Do you mean that anyone who settles for working in the Post Office is a coward?"

"No Andy. I mean you're a coward. You've studied violin and piano, you've conducted orchestras. What about that?"

"That was at school. And school was everything I hated!"

"It's nothing to do with school. Jesus said use your talents."

Jesus? If she's going to spout Jesus at me, we can end it right here and now.

"Are you a Christian?"

"No. But that doesn't mean he was wrong. Does it?"

"No..."

I've lost the thread. Misery clogs up my veins and thoughts. I'm a useless lump. Another stone in the graveyard.

"...It's just, I haven't even got my bearings yet," I burble, expecting Amanda to walk away between the trees and out of my life.

But my pathetic weakness seems to sting her.

"Nor have I."

Is she as lost as me? Is there hope?

"Haven't you?"

"No. No idea. But," her eyes twinkle, "it's a matter of trying things out isn't it?"

I nod. Is it?

"Yes. So you've got to start somewhere. Well, all I do is write songs and you play violin. You're brilliant at it."

Am I?

"So why not try?"

She gives me a happy squeeze. Does this mean I've said yes to the music? Is she really as lost as me? Or just pretending, trying to trick me? She can take me out of the graveyard but she can't take the graveyard out of me.

The Bell Family are gathered in the marquee, with their soppy, hippy friends, guzzling the vicar's punch. Clive fixes me with his mad, staring eyes, then ignores me. Well he can fuck off.

I'm not having any punch. No more drink, no more drugs. Don't want to be merry and say stupid things. Don't even want to be here. Don't fit in. Don't want to. I'm right to be grumpy.

"I got you a glass of punch, Andy," Amanda sings, sweetly.

"Actually, I'd better be going. Bye."

"Andy?"

I can hear her calling after me. But she doesn't follow. Wouldn't do any good. I want to be alone and watch telly.

Bus to Hammersmith. Walking. Waiting. Another bus. More walking. It's okay. Oblivion beckons.

Twilight as I turn into Wendell Road. What? There are lights in our lounge. Are Mum and Dad back? Oh no. The Goldbergs are in and they're watching TV.

Sneak upstairs. Fall on the bed. Want to sleep. Can't get Amanda out of my mind. Does she love me? Or is she trying to control me? Why won't anyone leave me alone?

Someone kisses me.

"Time to get up, darling,"

It's Mum. She doesn't normally wake me up with a kiss. More like with a crowbar.

"What is it?" I ask.

"Time for school," she replies.

"I don't get it. I thought I'd left school."

She laughs.

"You've been dreaming."

A wave of relief hits me. I'm late for school. I've got my real life back again.

"What's for breakfast, Mum?"

"Never you mind Thomas."

Who's Thomas? I look at Mum and gasp.

"You're not my mother!"

"No," she says, "and you're not Thomas!"

My eyes flick open. Light burning through the windows. Like a furnace in here. Must have been dreaming. Wish I was Thomas. Kick off the bedclothes.

Got that sudden, awful feeling, as if someone's in the room. There is. Ira Goldberg, staring at me.

"We're running late," he says, tapping his watch.

Is this a dream too? I blink, but can't get rid of him.

"The concert," he insists.

He's staring at my privates. I jump up and run around, searching. Why can't you find a pair of underpants when you need them?

"When are we leaving?" I puff, making do with a soiled pair.

"Now. Clara's already outside."

Now? I start pulling on my clothes.

"Something more formal," he suggests, still eyeing me up and down.

Is he telling me what to wear?

"After all," he continues, "we are about to witness the British premiere of a major work by a major composer."

He is telling me what to wear. I've only got my work clothes.

"Are you familiar with Messiaen's music, Andy?"

It's Sunday and I've got to go to some posh concert in Oxford wearing my work clothes. How did I let this happen?

"Aren't you interested?"

I realise that Ira has been talking to me. His voice is almost inaudible.

"Yes, I'm sorry. Do go on."

"It would be hard to overstate the significance of his work and of the Turangalila Symphonie in particular," he witters, putting his arm around me and almost pushing me through the door. "His influence on composers such as Pierre Boulez and"

"Just a moment."

I stop. What have I forgotten? Money. But I have no money.

"What is it?" hisses Ira. "We'll be late!"

He's twitching. He's beside himself.

"Oh. Nothing."

The Goldbergs will have to pay for me. I allow myself to be pushed downstairs and out the front door.

When my eyes adjust to the light, I see, among the usual Morris Minors and Consuls, a gleaming black and chrome Rolls Royce. What's more, Clara Goldberg is at the wheel.

"Is this yours?" I ask, coming over, ready to be impressed.

"Rented!" she screams.

Oh my god, my ears! Ira bundles me into the back and scrambles in beside me. Why isn't he up front with Clara?

Suddenly the Rolls lurches forward, like a tiger leaping, and slams straight into the back of Mr Bailey's Morris, which sort of folds up.

Clara gives it a further, glancing blow as she spins the steering wheel, swerves out of the parking place and streaks along the road, managing to scrape every single parked car we pass.

"F-g-lam! F-g-lam! F-g-lam! F-g-lam! F-g-lam! F-g-lam!"

Oh my god, she can't drive!

"I'm getting the hang of this!" she shouts.

She manages to turn the corner at approximately the right time but, unfortunately, not at the right speed. I'm flung against the inside of the door just as the outside of the door crashes into one of these instantly-imploding inferior vehicles. Ira's body crashes into mine. I'm squashed, shaking, frightened but still alive. At least we're not moving.

A man appears from the corner house. He's in a right old state, lumbering towards us, hurling abuse. Clara revs the engine and we roar away.

I'm terrified, though, to my amazement, she doesn't hit any of the cars in Hartswood Road.

"Do you think we ought to go back?" she screams.

"Never," I reply.

I look at Ira to see if he's as scared as me. He's talking to me. Have to get very close to hear him.

"...are just some of the influential people who may be present..."

"Ira is hoping he might secure a position as conductor for a very major British orchestra if he plays his cards right today," booms Clara.

Oh god, no. She can barely drive, don't let her talk as well.

"...Daniel Barenboim..." confides Ira, placing his hand on my knee and leaving it there.

"We may even get to meet your Queen!" bellows Clara.

What is she on about? The Queen's not going to attend some modern concert. Not unless one of her horses is playing oboe. Could be of course. Corgis on congas. What do I know?

"Whaaah!" I yell as Clara goes the wrong way round Chiswick roundabout, sending the oncoming vehicles scattering and parping.

She doesn't even notice. She's mad. So's Ira.

"Jacqueline DuPre," he says, mysteriously.

There's a kind of pent-up hysteria in his eyes. Actually, for a Jew, he looks a lot like Hitler.

He's still talking. I nod now and again. He obviously feels that everything is riding on today. The question is, is he really likely to become conductor of a major orchestra, or are his ambitions verging upon the bonkers? Not that I care. Just wish he'd get his hand off my knee.

I look up. We're zooming along the M4 in the slow lane. Clara's hooting at lorries that won't get out of the way.

"Geddadada fuckin way you asshole!" she shrieks.

I'm petrified. We're going to crash. No question. For god's sake let the police stop us. Hang on, everything's gone silent. I'm not hearing anything. Hold my hands to my ears to check if there's blood oozing out.

Sign to Oxford. Swerve off the motorway. Still she doesn't slow down. Shadows of vehicles whipping by. Articulated lorry trundling towards us and no way back onto our side of the road.

Squeeze my eyes shut and wait for the head-on collision. - Tunnel vision. - The type of tunnel when you're dead and you've got to go into the light. ...Passing out. Snug, warm feeling. Safe.

Extreme pain. Arms being pulled out of their sockets. Flick my eyes open. Ira and Clara each have an arm, hauling me out of the car and into the light.

Born again. But into a silent world. I can see Clara's lips working but can't hear her. God has made me deaf. It's a miracle. We're in a courtyard. All around me are spires. Little churches and castles. Have we travelled back to medieval times? Are we at the court of King Arthur?

Clara and Ira are walking away. I follow them. No one is in medieval gear. I'm given a programme. We enter a large ancient hall full of modern-day people.

On stage an orchestra tunes up. I search for the Queen. Doesn't look like she's made it.

The conductor, Olivier Messiaen himself, appears, bows, turns, and raises his baton. The baton comes down and starts thrashing about. Immediately bows whip up and down, percussionists leap about. Absolute silence. Can't hear a note.

Shut mouth. Hold nose. Blow! Sound returns with a rush. Screeching cars, vehicles crashing into each other. Thousands of drivers wilfully, gloriously committing suicide in the name of the Lord. Is this music, or some weird aural flashback?

Stare at the stage. Organised mayhem. Gongs crashing. Brass blasting. Messiaen conducting the traffic as it comes screaming to a climax. Massive pileup. Everybody dead. Fantastic!

A weird lurching rhythm rumbles out of nowhere. Close my eyes. Sound into light. We're rampaging through an oriental jungle on an elephant, snakes slithering down lianas, fierce insects dive-bombing us.

Scene change. Purple skies. Great fiery gash in the earth. Huge slavering monsters rising from the deep. Scene change. We're in a cave, walls dripping...

Oh my god. Something slimy has landed on my knee. Hardly dare open my eyes. It's a hand. A white hand. Sensation tingles up through my groin, my chest, into my throat. It's Ira's hand. Slowly it squeezes my knee.

I want to scream, join the mad music and go caterwauling through the concert hall. But a little voice in my head says "Don't move a muscle". Freeze. What if Clara should see? Pretend it's not my knee. Concentrate on the music.

Something ghostly begins. An unbearably slow and endlessly soaring melody, played on an instrument I can't identify. Piercingly emotional. Love and unbearable desolation. Absolute peace and...

...There's a hand on my other knee. Don't have to look. Know it's Clara's hand. Move my eyeballs from side to side. Both Ira and Clara are staring at the orchestra, unaware of each other. What to do? Don't panic! Hide my head in the programme.

Apparently the whirring, soaring sound is made by an electrophonic machine called the 'ondes martenot'. Invented in 1928 by Maurice Martenot, it is most frequently used in films to represent the sound of flying saucers.

Apparently the solo pianist is Messiaen's wife, Yvonne Loriod. Apparently the ondes martenot is played by her sister. First performed in 1948...

No use. Can't concentrate. Clara's hand is squeezing the inside of my right knee. Every time a gong crashes or the ondes martenot soars, she digs her nails in. Am I supposed to like this? At least Ira's hand is gentle. Do I prefer his hand? Am I queer?

The Turangalila Symphony has become a soundtrack to what's going on between my legs. It's a nightmare. Both hands are angling their way up towards my willy.

They won't find it. It's disappeared miles inside my body. I think it's hiding in my lungs. Can't breathe. What if some innocent member of the audience should happen to look across and see?

Movement follows movement, but I daren't move. Scenes of bewildering confusion. Battle between ice-cold love and fanatical terror.

Something brushes the back of my neck. Flick my head round. Find myself face to face with a man's trouser flies. Look up to see this angry, bushy face glaring down at me.

"Disgusting," he growls.

An ugly posh lady rises beside him. She too stares at me with absolute fury. I want to tell them that it's not my fault. I'm not responsible for where the Goldbergs put their hands. But they push along the row, bumping into people's knees and march off, up the isle.

Someone else notices. A wizened old man on the other side of Clara. He catches my guilty eye and storms out. I can't stop shaking.

"Disgraceful!" cries a voice behind me.

"It's an outrage!" bellows another.

A woman with the face of a duck, shields her fledglings, two little boys in matching school uniform, from the awful sight and bustles them out of the hall.

Don't Ira and Clara realise what's happening? Don't they even care? How can they continue to rummage about in my lap whilst all around us, people are jumping up, screaming abuse and alerting others? Can't believe it. I'm ruining the British premiere of a major orchestral work.

"This is just noise!" shouts an angry fellow.

What? What noise? Slowly an idea surfaces in my mind. It's the music. They're angry with the music. It's nothing to do with me, or the Goldbergs. When Mrs Messiaen goes barmy on the piano, more get up and go. It's happening all over the hall.

Never been at a concert before where people left in disgust. I read of a riot in Paris at the first performance of the Rite of Spring. But I just thought people must've been stupid then. Can music really do this? Amazing. To upset so many people. Has to be a great work.

Last slithering chords. Last stretched painful melody of love that doesn't even know how to love. A tour-de-force of such sawing, waving and flapping as if the orchestra believes it can rise above us all and fly to heaven.

As drums roll and trumpets scream, the two hands land on the place where my willy used to live, discover each other and scuttle away in shock.

Stunned silence. Olivier Messiaen turns to us and bows. Along with the scattering of maybe a hundred of us left in the audience, I leap to my feet, cheering and wondering if my willy will ever come out again, or I'll just have to piss internally.

Ira Goldberg grabs my arm. I try to resist, but his bride barges into me.

"Follow him!" she yells.

We're barging along the row and down the aisle. Screams of pain as Ira treads on people's toes or elbows them out of the way. I watch their outrage turn to panic as they see Clara bringing up the rear. We stop abruptly in a doorway, our way barred.

"May I see your invitations?"

Ira whispers something to the doorman.

"I'm sorry sir, but this reception is for performers and their guests. If you..."

"My husband is a famous New York conductor!" bellows Clara.

Her voice is so loud that the doorman gives a short, involuntary cry and leaps to one side.

We enter a large room, glinting with chandeliers, and each receive a glass of champagne. Tables of small-eats line the walls. Clara drags me over to pies and potato salad and starts Hoovering them into her mouth.

Ira is already mingling. I marvel at the way he manages to invade conversations, pass out business cards and move onto the next.

Clara, meanwhile, has started yelling the names of famous folk she recognises, presumably for my benefit.

"Bernard Haitink!"

People move away to protect their ears.

"Yehudi Menuhin! - He looks so old!"

The doorman is talking to three burly men in suits. He's pointing at Clara. With a bit of luck, they'll drag her off.

"Natalia Scorovojeva! - She's tiny!"

I'm going red and panicking. Got to escape.

"Leonard Bernstein! It's Leonard Bernstein! I can't believe it's Leonard Bernstein! Oh no, it isn't..."

A waiter tops up my drink.

"Help!" I mime.

With a tight, little shake of his head, he moves on.

Ira appears.

"Change of plan," he hisses. "Stay the night. Book into a hotel."

No. Anything but that.

"Can't," I blurt. "Got to get back for work."

He's furious. I'm scuppering his chances, destroying his career.

"It's okay, I'll catch a train. There's bound to be a station."

Is there?

"I'll drive him," booms Clara.

"No!"

She looks at me as if I might be insulting her driving.

"It's just, I'd rather walk."

As Clara starts ranting at Ira that they can't just let me go back on my own, I notice someone across the room. Someone I recognise. What's her name?

"There's Sonia Marsden-Hunt," gasps Ira.

"That's her. She's Jules' mum."

Ira and Clara gawp at me.

"You know Sonia Marsden-Hunt?"

She'll save me. My feet are already walking over to her.

"Excuse me, Mrs Marsden-Hunt..."

She hasn't heard me. What's worse, Clara and Ira are breathing down my neck. Got to get away from them.

"Excuse me. I'm a friend of your son, Mrs Marsden-Hunt. I was wondering if you..."

It's no use. She's listening to someone else.

"Shuddup!" shrieks Clara.

Everyone in the room and for miles around shuts up. Everyone, including Sonia Marsden-Hunt, stares at her.

"So pleased to meet you Sonia," squeals Clara, suddenly sticky with charm.

"We're friends of Andy. My husband here is Ira Goldberg. He conducts the New York State Collegiate..."

"Who's Andy?" demands Sonia Marsden-Hunt, loudly.

Shocked to find someone else using volume as a weapon, Clara rises to the challenge.

"This is Andy!" she announces, pushing me forward.

Mrs Marsden-Hunt peers at me. I try to smile.

"Never seen him before in my life," she declares.

I wither.

"Andy?" demands Clara.

"I do know Mrs Marsden-Hunt," I bleat. "You're Jules' mum,"

“Oh, a friend of my son. That explains everything.”

Mrs Marsden-Hunt understands, God bless her. I can get a lift back in her Bentley. She smiles at the assembled throng and they smile back.

“My son Julian is always bringing home strays. He’s in London at the moment promoting the work of young artists. A rare spirit, such a talent. So you’re a friend of Julian. How nice to have met you again.”

Before I can think, Sonia Marsden-Hunt has turned and evaporated into the crowd. Ira slithers after her.

Clara and I are surrounded by heavies in suits who frog-march us out of the building. Clara’s screams of indignation are bloodcurdling.

The moment we're alone in the dark courtyard, she plonks a glubby kiss on the front of my face and drags me back to the car.

"You genius!" she shrieks gaily, throwing the Rolls into reverse and making instant scrap metal of the Mini behind us.

"What? What do you mean?"

She beams at me.

"Now we can be alone!"

Simultaneously, the Rolls lurches forward, up a slight incline, straight into a Bentley. Its driver leaps out and surveys the damage.

"Back off! Back off! Blinkin lunatic!" he cries, waving at us to reverse.

We roll backwards, gently pulling off the Bentley's grill.

"Look what you've done now," he moans.

I know who he is. He's the Marsden-Hunt driver.

"Excuse me!" I call, sticking my head out of the window. "You're the Marsden-Hunt driver, aren't you? Hi. It's me. Andrew Parvin. You drove me back from Hayling. Remember? I'm afraid I threw up. Yes. It's me. Only I was wondering. Er, you couldn't give me a lift to the station, could yoooooooooooooooo..."

We're hurtling out of the carpark into complete darkness. It's all I can do to get my head back in through the window frame. She hasn't got the lights on.

"Lights," I croak.

Clara finds the lights. Ghostly lampposts flashing by us. Does she know where the station is?

"Do you know where the station is?"

No reply. She's fiddling with something. Suddenly this horrible opera music comes on, full blast. Sounds like they've all been taught to sing and vomit at the same time.

Hang on. We're leaving Oxford. We're on the road to the motorway. No. Not all the way to London.

"Let me out!"

She can't hear me. It's the music. Suddenly she starts singing along in a huge, wobbly vibrato. The volume! I think I'm going mad.

We swerve to avoid one car, narrowly miss another. Can't just let this happen. Got to think. Cling to the seat, brace my legs. Try to breath. Breathing. Terrible grating sounds. Daren't look.

Oh God Oh God Oh God Oh God Oh God Oh God.

Something crashing down on me, again and again. It's another body. Pushing against my chest until I can't breathe. Open my eyes, see a mountain of white flesh tumbling into me. Then tumbling out. Then tumbling in. It's got a face. Its face is Clara!

We're at home. We're in Mum and Dad's bedroom. We're on their bed. We're naked. I do hope this isn't happening. I do hope I'm in a fatal pile-up and this is just a dream.

Doesn't feel like a dream. She's bouncing about on top of me, gurgling like a drain. How did she get me out of the car? Did she drag me upstairs? Did I sleepwalk?

How did my willy get inside her? Did she poke it in? Or did it go there by itself? How could it? Why didn't it consult me? I'd have told it not to. Never, under any circumstances.

Don't know what to do. Horrible, oh God and painful. Only one way to stop it. Clench your teeth, close your eyes and pump like crazy till you come.

Oh God Oh God Oh God Oh God Oh God Oh God.

Clara flings herself off and lands like a great throbbing gland beside me.

"Wasn't that just the best fuck of your life, Andy?"

"No."

"No?"

"No. It was just..."

"Just?"

"Just horrible."

"Horrible?"

She bursts into tears. Oh dear.

"Don't cry. I'm sorry."

She rears up at me.

"You found sex with me horrible?"

"Not horrible. I mean, I wasn't even awake."

The front doorbell goes. It's the middle of the night. Who could it be? We stare at each other. My parents? Colin, back from South America? Ira?

Clara's getting dressed. Good thinking. Bell rings again. She goes downstairs. I hover on the landing. Door opening. Men's boots.

"Hammersmith CID."

The Police! Have they found out what Clara and I have been doing? How could they? Hidden cameras? Christ, they'll tell my parents. I'll have to tell Amanda.

"Sorry to bother you at this time," says another gruff voice. "May we step inside?"

"No!" screeches Clara.

Can she stop them? I'm shaking like a leaf.

"Very well but there are rather a lot of irate residents..."

Irate residents? Has everyone been watching us?

"Whaddaya want?"

"We are trying to ascertain if are you the owner of the Rolls Royce parked outside?"

There's an eruption of noise from behind the Police.

"That's her!"

"That's her! I was out, walking my dog."

"Crashed into every single car she did."

"My Morris is a write-off."

That's Mr Bailey's voice.

"I saw her from my window."

Penny drops. It's about Clara crashing into their cars. Exactly how many irate residents are there? I scamper to the box-room window.

Police car, beacon flashing. Lights going on in houses all the way up the street. Doors opening. Mrs Bailey at her gate with all the little Baileys.

Figures in the road, converging upon our house. Men in pajamas, dressing gowns, some with torches. They've come for her. They're going to lynch Clara.

I'm not getting caught up in this. Dart back to the landing. Police are inside. Front door is still open. Enraged neighbours will pour in, pillaging and looting.

Got to escape. She smashed those cars. I'm not taking the blame. Escape. Definitely. No way downstairs. Climb out the back. Have to. Grab my jacket.

Edge myself out of the window and lower myself onto the conservatory roof. I can hear Clara howling.

"I want to speak to my lawyer!"

Hold the drainpipe. Slide along. Never done this before. Jump! Yes. Now what? Too dark to see. Could be Police hiding in the shrubbery. Have to chance it.

Over the back fence, into the allotments. Are there any big wild animals that come out at night? Are there bears in this country? Should've paid more attention at school.

All quiet in Hartswood Road. Nip up Flanchford Road to the 88 bus stop, following the route I'd take to school. Remember going to meet Beatrice in the school gardens. Six months ago. Then there was Mum and Dad to come home to. Where can I go now?

Suppose I'm going to Amanda's. Don't want to. My privates'll be all smelly with Clara. What will I say to Amanda? Feel dirty.

Could go to work. Stand outside Maida Vale Post Office till it opens. What's the time now? Midnight? Later? No buses, that's for sure. Just walk.

No need to decide yet. Amanda's is on the way to work. But what about after work? Have to go somewhere. Can you stay in hotels? Can you just walk in out of nowhere and they let you stay?

A nice, friendly person will show me a beautiful room. It's got a TV. I've never seen such luxury. The hotel person will say 'Is there anything else you want, sir?' and I'll say 'Yes, I'd like an alcoholic drink. Make that two. And some fish and chips.'

Or do you have to have luggage? 'No luggage, sir?' he'll say, getting suspicious. 'Do you have any money?'

That's going to be the trouble. Every week my cheque from work goes into my bank account, which Mum and Dad started when I was a boy. But how do you get the money out?

Or maybe the hotel person will ring my parents and get through to the police and they'll say 'Hold him till we get there' and throw me into jail with Clara. Better stay away from hotels.

I'll end up living at Amanda's. But then I'll have to do what she says instead of doing what I want. What do I want? Don't know. Don't know what there is. Wish there was somebody who could tell me.

Perhaps something will just happen. An old lady will run out into the street and I'll save her and be on the front of a newspaper and everything will turn out right. Have to wait though. No old ladies around at this time of night. Just a few black people who look scary.

This is the road where Jules and I got beaten up after the whiskey. If I turn the corner, I'll be at his old flat. Hang on, didn't Mrs Marsden-Hunt say that Jules is in London? Does that mean he could be here?

There's a light on in the hallway. Doesn't mean anything. Lots of people leave their hallway lights on to scare off burglars. Can't stop feeling excited though.

What if I ring the bell and someone I don't know answers? 'Who the hell are you?' he'll thunder. 'It's the middle of the night. My wife is sick and now she's dead.'

Or the door will open and before you can say Jack Robinson these ghouls with slitty eyes and arms like skeletons will drag me in and hack me to bits with their knives.

Can't chance it. Can't go to Amanda. Can't go to work. I'll just stand here. Freeze to death. Then they'll be sorry.

It is a bit nippy actually.

The door opens. A bloke peers out. He's my age, my height, with long curly black hair, big gentle eyes like a dog and wearing a sorcerer's outfit.

"Oh, I'm sorry," I mumble, backing away.

"Why are you sorry?" he asks. "Is it because of your clothes?"

"Clothes?" I repeat, looking at his.

Black robe with sun, moon and stars emblazoned in gold. Scary.

"Oh. No. I thought you were somebody else."

"I am," he replies.

"Who is it?" calls a voice further down the corridor.

Could be another sorcerer. I'm about to make a dash for it when I see Jules' face.

"Andy!" he says, with that soft, cultivated voice of his.

He looks the same. Tall, gaunt, acne a bit worse. All I can do is grin. He comes loping towards me. We hug. Out of the corner of my eye, I notice the sorcerer climb a pile of boxes in the hall which instantly collapse.

"Shit," mutters Jules. "Walt? Are you alright?"

Walt's alright. I don't think much of his sorcery though. We have to climb over the boxes to get to the room. Halfway across, I realise I haven't shut the front door.

The room is even more of a wreck than it used to be. Jules and Walt are sitting bolt upright on a sofa, staring straight ahead.

"Would you like a cup of tea, Andy?" asks Jules.

"Yes thanks, two lumps please."

"You'll have to make it yourself, only we can't move."

"Can't you? You were moving a minute ago."

"Well we can't move now," insists Walt.

"What's happened?"

I'm alarmed. Is Walt really a sorcerer? I go over to see what the matter is.

"Try to move. Look, I'll move your arm Jules. Tell me if you feel anything. - Can you?"

Suddenly I hear this insane cackle behind me. I turn. A small, wiry bloke is doubled up laughing. It's Kit! His face is wreathed in smiles.

I find myself going straight over to him, arms wide open. Normally I'm a bit scared of Kit but he flings his arms around me and we hug. I've known him nearly all my life. I'm quite overcome. When we break apart, we stand smiling at each other.

"Well," he says, "do you want to see?"

See what? I look at where he's pointing. It's a picture. There's Jules. And Walt. I get it. He's painting them. That's why they can't move.

Walt's drawing and painting has always amazed me. Out of my league. He was drawing sketches of teachers when I used to sit beside him when we were eleven.

He's painted Walt so sweet and simple. Is he like that? I look at the real Walt. Yes he is. A bit shy and muddled. He's alright then. Nothing to be scared of.

Kit is painting Jules' face like the surface of the moon, his eyes, haunted, driven. But quite handsome though. I wish I looked like that, instead of blobby.

And Kit. Kit is painting himself in the middle, although in real life he couldn't be, seeing as he's the painter. Clever.

"What made you decide to come round here tonight, Andy?" asks Jules.

I don't want to tell them.

"I was just passing."

"Strange. If you came round tomorrow, we wouldn't be here."

"Wouldn't you?"

"No. We're moving."

"I thought you said you couldn't move."

Everyone laughs at my joke, which makes me happy.

"So how come you're moving?" I ask, going to the sink to find a cup.

"Amazing Arts."

"Right. ...What's that?"

Can't find any cups. Oh, there they are. All dirty. Where's the kettle?

"It's our new company."

Fill the kettle. How full?

"Does anyone else want tea?" I ask.

"Coffee," says Jules.

"Tea, please," says Walt.

"Tea," says Kit.

What do I want? Coffee. Two teas, two coffees. Got to remember. Two teas, two coffees. Wash the cups. Start humming to myself. Where are the teabags? What a mess. I don't care. I'm happy. I'll make drinks for them all night. Two teas, two coffees. It's like coming back to a home you never knew you had.

"Are you listening Andy?"

Realise Jules has been talking to me.

"Sorry?"

"I'm telling you about Amazing Arts," he says, slightly narked.

"Sorry Jules."

Got to give him my full attention.

"The point is there must be thousands of young artists out there with talent. But the establishment doesn't care about them. Galleries are still churning out all that ancient abstract crap. Magazines are into this hand-me-down, art deco, hippie muck. There's been a poster revolution. Everyone can have art on their walls. But what do we get? The fucking Haywain! I mean, look at Kit's work."

Jules flings his arm out at Kit's pictures, leant against boxes, walls. Jules wanders about, adjusting their positions so we can see. I've never seen Kit so happy, excited. He loves Jules and so do I. Wonder what Walt thinks. He's putting on a gasmask. Shit, I'm not listening to Jules.

"...this turd at one of the galleries who said 'But they're just photographs'. Felt like punching him in the face. I said 'They're far more detailed than any photograph you ever saw. Look at them - almost hallucinations, they're so intense. Look at the faces. You can read their thoughts.' And all this snobby turd could say was 'Portraits don't sell!'"

Jules strides about in a fury.

'Well I want them on my walls. I don't care who they're of. They're superb. And I'll bet there are loads of other artists who can't get their work across because the galleries and publishers and fucking trendy poster companies have a stranglehold on what we see. How do they know what the public want? They only show them shit! That's why we're going to have to do it ourselves. That's why we're starting Amazing Arts!"

"Hooray!" I cry.

Kit grins at me. Walt does a cartwheel and knocks the lightbulb, which swings about, changing the shadows. Kettle's boiling. But Jules isn't finished.

"It means we have to set up a whole network of businesses."

"I hate business," hoots Walt from inside his mask.

"So do I!" spits Jules, quick as a flash. "But if we're to print posters, we'll need a print shop. We'll need to set up our own distribution because Athena Reproductions aren't going to take them. Then there are galleries, publishers, advertising companies to approach so we'll have to act as an agency. We may even have to set up our own gallery."

"Wow!" I exclaim, passing out the drinks. "It's like an empire!"

Jules sips his coffee.

"Thanks. Also, I've been thinking, we ought to get addresses of famous people and ask them if they want portraits done."

"Just hang around Apple. Lots of famous people down there."

“Brilliant Walt!”

Walt does a forward roll.

“I don’t want to paint pop stars.”

“I know Kit but if it makes your name?”

Kit shakes his head and returns to his easel. Without a word, Jules and Walt glide back into place on the sofa.

“So, anyway, that’s loads of enterprises, businesses, whatever you call them,” says Jules. “Printshop, distribution, agency... What else did we say?”

“A gallery,” I remind him.

“Artist colony,” adds Kit, peering into his canvas.

“We should start a circus,” Walt suggests.

Jules looks a bit doubtful.

“But how can you do all these things?” I ask. “Are they free?”

“That’s where Walt comes in,” announces Jules.

He smiles at Walt, who smiles at me.

“Walt has this trust fund. It’s terrible really. Walt’s grandfather cut his son out of his will. The entire fortune was held over in trust to the grandchildren. That’s Walt. Walt is the only offspring. He inherits when he’s twenty-one. Unless, and this is the devilish part, Walt is declared insane.”

Jules turns to Walt.

“Your dad’s always trying to get you sectioned, isn’t he?”

Walt nods. His face is still smiling but his hands shake.

“He j-j-j-just w-wants me to g-g-get my hair cut.”

“Yes and he wants you to stop driving round picking up parking tickets. You left it parked across a zebra crossing once, didn’t you?”

Walt beams.

“Did I?”

“Walt has this amazing vehicle. It’s an old red cross ambulance only he’s painted it pink. And along the sides, in green and yellow gloss, it’s got ‘Walt Weirdness Total Weirdness 5 Flavours Strawberry Vanilla and Shit’.”

Kit chimes in.

“Instead of a driving seat, there’s a huge old armchair. If you pull away a bit sharpish you go sliding backwards.”

“And it’s an ambulance!” adds Jules.

Hasn’t he just said that?

“There was a traffic jam on Westminster Bridge so we just sounded the ambulance siren and everyone got out the way. We went sailing through.”

"Did you?"

"Yes," agrees Kit. "I was on the bonnet."

"Yes you were!" remembers Jules.

Walt is giggling uncontrollably. Is he bonkers? I look to Jules, who explains.

"Luckily the executor of the trust fund is this old chap, Mr Grebe. He's the family lawyer. You get on with him, Walt, don't you?"

"Mr Grebe, the flimbling fleeb!"

"Yes, alright, anyway, the thing is, Walt can get access to his trust fund through Mr Grebe - as long as it's a sound proposition. And that's Amazing Arts!"

"Oh. I get it."

"So, what are you up to Andy?"

"Me? Oh well. This and that. Actually I'm in the service of Her Majesty at the moment."

"Civil Service?"

"Post office."

This makes Jules roar, Kit chortle and Walt bang the floor with his head. I knew they wouldn't be impressed.

"And where are you staying? Have you got a flat?"

"Still at home, unfortunately. Actually I'm thinking of moving out. Do you remember Amanda?"

"You could move in with us."

"What?"

"We've got these flashy offices in Goodge Street, west one. We're moving in tomorrow, that is, later on today."

"What? And I could stay there?"

"Christ, look at the time. Yes. There'd be space. You're working, you can pay rent. It'll help with the cash flow. We should get some sleep."

"So if I turn up tomorrow after work with my stuff, that'd be okay then?"

"Yes. Above the electrical shop."

He yawns.

"Oh er Jules? Is it okay if I stay the night here?"

"Fine. Anywhere. Listen, we better get some sleep. Walt? Kit?"

"I've got to finish this tonight," Kit insists.

Jules wearily resumes his portrait position. I can't quite believe what's just happened. I've got a place to live. Want to ask where 'Goodge Street, west one' is. Want to ask what it's like there.

Better not start asking questions though. Jules might get cross and change his mind. Anyhow, I'm leaving home. Wow!

"It's momentous!" I blurt.

Jules smiles at me.

"What is, Andy?"

"Well, I didn't even know you were still living here and now, suddenly, I'm leaving home and, I don't know, it's just momentous."

Kit tuts but Jules agrees.

"It's momentous for all of us. And not simply for us. I believe we live in momentous times. The gap between the old and the new has never been so great. And the polarisation. Anti-Viet Nam demonstrations all over Europe, riots in Paris, tanks in Prague, Bobby Kennedy assassinated and, before that, King..."

It's all gobbledegook to me. Making me drowsy. I didn't even know we had a King.

"The establishment thinks they can turn the clock back, but we won't let them..."

As Jules rattles on about ideals of human endeavour, I find myself staring at Kit's portraits of Beatrice. You can tell how much he loved her. Wonder how he feels about her now, and where she is.

There's the group portrait of Kit, Beatrice, Jules, Roy, Lorraine, Amanda & me, that I saw in the art department. All these pictures of people I know, people I love. My school friends. I've missed them. This is the most wonderful night of my life...

"What's happening?"

"You fell asleep Andy. It's alright. We're just moving you."

"Thanks Jules."

"Here, he can wear this," says Walt.

I can feel them pulling off my shirt, trousers, I don't know what they're doing. They're giggling. I've got a funny body. I don't care. They're settling me down on some cushions. Thank goodness for friends.

"Don't move!"

Christ! Must be police. Open my eyes, expecting to find myself surrounded by police, and see Kit. He's got a pencil in his hand. He's sketching me. I'm honoured. I always thought he despised me. Mind you, he's made me look like some fat Roman in a toga. Shit!

"What's the time?"

Kit doesn't reply. He just giggles. Jules strides into the room.

"Nine o'clock!" he announces, briskly. "Time to load the van. Are you coming with us, Andy?"

"I'm late for work!" I shriek, running out of the room.

"Will we see you at Goodge Street later?"

Jules, Kit and Walt are standing in the doorway, grinning from ear to ear.

"Yes!" I call, nipping across a road, narrowly avoiding a cyclist.

"Above the lighting shop!" Jules reminds me.

Above the lighting shop. Above the lighting shop. What's the street? Good Street. Mustn't forget. Trouble is, I'm not awake. Mind you, if I was awake, I wouldn't be running like this. I'd be puffing and blowing.

What am I going to say to Mrs Pickles? What if I made something up about what happened last night? Say I was down at the police station all night because my relative was arrested. Then, if she asked, I could tell her about the lynch mob.

People are laughing at me as I chug past them. I am puffing and blowing now. Must be red in the face. Why am I running to get there? I don't even like being a counter clerk.

Still, there's the canal. Just got to cross it, turn right, run to the corner and I'm there. I'll get inside. It'll be hot and enclosed. My asthma will come on. At least it'll make Mrs Pickles more sympathetic. At least I tried.

Here we go. In through the double doors. Post office is full of customers. They're all laughing at me. What's happening? They've forgotten about queuing. They're staggering about, holding their sides. One old black lady keeps looking at me, then looking away, cackling helplessly, then looking back... I'm getting angry.

"Okay! So I'm out of breath! Ha ha!"

This sends them into hysterics.

"Parvin?"

Oo er, it's Mrs Pickles.

"Get inside Parvin!"

When I'm in, she slams the door.

"I'm sorry, Mrs Pickles. I've got a large Jewish relative and..."

I dribble into silence because she's going to kill me.

"What the hell do you mean by coming to work dressed like that?"

I look down. What? That's not my body. Oh, I'm wearing Walt's sorcerer's robes. I look up. She's going to send me home.

"Get to your counter, Parvin!"

"Aren't you going to send me home?"

"Oh, you'd like that, wouldn't you! Here, you can put this on."

She struggles out of her jersey and I've got to wear it. How's that going to help? Horrible orange and purple. I'm going to look ridiculous.

"I shall be making a report about you, Parvin," she threatens, pushing me onto my chair at the counter.

As I appear, a cheer goes up, coupled with general merriment and people making comments.

"Be quiet in my Post Office!" commands Mrs Pickles.

Deathly hush. Customers shuffle forward in silence. A savings book lands in front of me.

"Got a wand, have you?"

I look up at the customer. Some old codger. He laughs at me.

"Heh-heh-heh-heh-heh!"

I study his savings book. There's a twenty quid note stuffed in it. I'll deduct twenty quid. If he notices, I'll say it was a mistake. Hand it back. He doesn't notice. Puts it straight back in his pocket.

"Heh-heh-heh-heh-heh!" I go, as he leaves.

"Next!" I call.

Pretty girl with big tits, smirking at me. Bitch. What does she want? Road tax. Okay. Give her a dog licence. See if she notices.

"But isn't it supposed to be a little round disk?"

"New type. Keep it in the dashboard. If you get stopped, just hand it to the officer. Next!"

With a bit of luck she'll go to prison.

"What do you want?"

Great big bloke bulging out of a pinstripe suit.

"Premium bonds. I want you to turn me into a millionaire!" he announces, much to the amusement of his fellow citizens.

How could Jules do this to me? I mean, a joke's a joke. And Kit. They're not my friends. Or perhaps they are. They all wear strange colourful clothes. Perhaps this is just their way of saying I'm part of the gang.

Yes. All these customers are straights. Jules and Kit hate straights. Mrs Pickles, she's a straight. What makes them straight exactly? I give the bloke in the pinstripe suit a look of utter contempt. He shrugs.

"You must admit, you do look a bit of a charley!" he says, goodnaturedly.

"Yeah?" I snarl. "And you look like a big fat saveloy! Here's your fishing permit, I mean premium bonds."

Suddenly this fist grabs my jersey.

"What did you call me?" he roars, half-pulling me over the counter."

"Put my counter clerk down!" bellows Mrs Pickles.

He's strangling me. His hand is shaking. I whisper in his ear.

"You want to be arrested? Or is your brain as stupid as your face?"

His grip tightens.

"Put him down!"

Slowly he releases me. I smile gratefully at Mrs Pickles.

"I'll see you after," he growls.

I'm not scared of him. Fucking straights! I wonder if there's a back way out of here. Wonder, if I rang her, if Amanda could come and help me move?

"Mrs Pickles?"

"What is it now, Parvin?"

"Feel sick miss."

"Well, for goodness sake don't be sick at the counter, hurry!"

I scoot off and she takes my place. Her office is opposite the loo. the door's open. Ring Amanda.

"Hallo? Amanda. Listen, I'm at work. Can you come and get me? I've decided to leave home."

"I thought you said you were at work?"

"Yes but I'm moving out of my parents' house. I've got to get my things."

"You can move into my place if you want. Then we can rehearse..."

There's a hubbub going on outside.

"Listen Amanda, I'm scared someone's going to find me here. Will you come and get me?"

"Of course, Andy. I'll just..."

Slam down the receiver and skidaddle. Back at the counter, a load of customers are shouting at poor Mrs Pickles. She glares at me.

"These customers say you've given them all the wrong things!"

"I mean, why would I want a dog licence? It's ridiculous. I don't even like dogs!"

"He deducted twenty pounds from my account when I gave him a hundred!"

"I specifically asked for premium bonds. He did it on purpose!"

"He was downright rude."

"Well Parvin?"

There's nothing for it. I pass out.

Mrs Pickles slaps my face repeatedly in an attempt to wake me. Then the Indian guy who works next to me starts banging on my chest as if I wasn't breathing. When he declares that he'll have to give me the kiss of life, I have to invent a coughing fit. Then the ambulance men arrive and I have to get better quick.

"I'm alright. See?" I say, jumping up and doing a little dance to prove it.

Luckily Amanda turns up and assures them that I'll be alright with her.

"I just need one of my pills. That'll stop me dancing," I sing, as she leads me out.

Watching Amanda at the wheel, driving us through the traffic, avoiding thicko pedestrians, I'm full of admiration. She knows what she's doing.

Well, she probably didn't when she drank all the whiskey and got expelled, but she's different now. Her manner is so confident, so agreeable and her smiles, so reassuring. I could disappear under her wing and never come out.

I wish I was admirable. I wish I wasn't such a mess and didn't have to admire her. Next to Amanda, I feel like a bit of a fool. These clothes don't help.

Still, be home soon. Change into proper clothes. What am I going to pack? I'll leave my train set and the Meccano. That's kid's stuff.

Just as long as Clara's not there. That's what I hope the most. If she is, she'll say something about last night and Amanda will find out. Please God, if you make Clara not in, I'll believe in you forever, I promise.

She's not in. There's a note from her on the kitchen table.

"IRA - ANDY - ANYONE - I AM AT HAMMERSMITH POLICE STATION. BRING MONEY! THESE FUCKING BA"

I scrumple it up and go and get changed. Thank you God.

Amanda's watching me change. I'm embarrassed. I don't want her noticing my podgy bits.

"Where did you get this?" she asks, holding up the sorcerer's robe.

"It's Walt's. They must've dressed me in it while I was asleep."

"Who?"

"Jules and Kit. Oh yes, I've been meaning to tell you. I bumped into them last night. Actually I was coming to see you."

"Were you?"

She's pleased.

"Yes. Only, what with one thing and another. The thing is, Jules is starting a company to sell Kit's paintings."

Start flinging my things in a holdall. Don't want to hang about.

"That's wonderful."

"Is it?"

"I always wondered what Jules would become. Isn't his dad some kind of businessman?"

"Oh it's not like that," I reply, picking up some socks. "Amazing Arts is going to change everything. It's for everyone. I mean, there's been a revolution in art and what do we get?"

"What?"

"The fucking Haywain!"

"What's that?"

"I don't know but anyway, it's all changing. Did you know that the King was dead?"

"What king?"

"Oh..."

"Are you packed yet?"

I gaze about my bedroom.

"Think so."

I peer into the bag.

"Strange to think that everything I own is in this holdall. It really does 'hold all'."

She laughs. I laugh. It's very funny.

"Hold all!" I repeat.

Can't stop laughing. Amanda has.

"What about your documents?" she asks.

"I've heard of them. What are they?"

"Your passport, your birth certificate, your driving licence, bank statements, all the official stuff."

"Oh yes. It's a wooden box covered in white fablon with red stars."

"Where?"

I lead her to the box. Mum and Dad's room is a complete mess. Bedding all over the place. Don't even want to think about it.

"Here they are! Under 'Andrew'," says Amanda, pulling out a file.

"Oh good. Let's go."

"Why is your birth certificate stuck together with sellotape?"

"I tore it up in front of Mum and Dad when I was seven."

"Why?"

"I told them I wished I'd never been born."

"Oh, Andy..."

She's gone all gooey-eyed, nuzzling into me, making little sympathetic noises. I'm losing my balance, falling backwards onto the bed. She's laughing, falling on top of me.

"No!" I scream, scrambling up. "I really think we should go. Come on!"

Stuffing my documents into the bag, I stride off, down the stairs and out of the house. Where is she? I thought she was following on behind. Oh well, bung the bag in the back, get in the passenger side and wait.

Finally she appears.

"You forgot your violin!"

As she raises my fiddle case, sunshine lights up her red hair and freckles, my childhood home behind her. A vision. I look at the house. Strange to think that I'm leaving. Always lived here.

"How else are we going to make beautiful music?" she asks, provocatively, plonking the fiddle on the back seat, chucking a plastic bag at me and getting in.

"Search me."

"We're going to be together from now on. Isn't that wonderful?"

She's all gleeful and excited and I have to let her kiss me. If I'd've thought, when I was a kid, that I'd be sitting in a car, on the pavement outside my Mum and Dad's house, being kissed by this beautiful woman... Can't breathe. Have to pull away.

"Asthma," I explain.

She gives me an odd look, turns the ignition and we head off. Amanda's a good driver. She never smashes into anything. I think I'd be more like Clara. Jules told me

once that he wrote off his dad's new Mercedes. He took it down onto the beach and it sank.

I peer into the plastic bag, scrunched up on my lap. It's Mrs Pickles' jersey.

"Why have you bothered with that?"

"She'll want it back, won't she?"

"S'pose so."

"I'll wash it when we get back to my place and you can return it in the morning."

"Right. Why are we going to your place?"

"To unload. You're moving in, aren't you?"

"No. I mean, I'm moving into Amazing Arts."

"Oh, I thought..."

"That's why I was telling you. Jules has rented these ultra-modern offices and I can have a room."

Amanda pulls the car over to the curb and stops.

"What's the address?" she asks, tightly.

"It's called Good Street."

She fumbles through the A - Z, her eyes small, her movements jerky. She seems upset.

"There's a Goodall Road."

"No."

Didn't mean to upset her. Didn't realise.

"Goodenought Road?"

"Good Street."

Could change my plans. Live with her. No. Can't. Scares me.

"It doesn't exist, Andy."

"But it must do. It's in west one."

"There's Goodge Street."

"That's it. Funny name."

She tuts and is about to throw the car into gear when she has another thought.

"What's the number?"

"West one."

"The house number."

"I don't know. Jules didn't tell me."

She sits back in the seat and folds her arms, exasperated.

"It's above the lighting shop," I remember.

Slowly, she indicates, checks in the mirrors, and slides out into the traffic again. Phew!

Traffic lights are against us. Man in the car next to us leers at Amanda. He says something, but you can't hear it above the engines. Amanda ignores him.

"Do you know the route?" I ask her.

She ignores me. Still cross. Lights change. We turn right. Suddenly we're zooming up onto the Westway. The sky rushes towards us. We're flying over the city. London, spread out beneath us, from horizon to horizon. It's as if we're suspended in mid air.

I know this time of year. Bright sunlight, but it's cold. People wrap up warm and you can see the air when they breathe out. This is when I go back to school. The nights close in. There's a woody smell. You start to think about Christmas.

Except this year it's all different. No school. No future. No nothing. Hope my room isn't one of those modern offices with glass so people can look up at you with no clothes on.

I could never imagine what would happen when I left home. And here it is and I still don't know. Horrible hollow feeling in my chest. Glad we're off the flyover.

Amanda, has her eyes focussed on the road ahead, concentrating. It's alright for her. She knows what she wants, she's confident. Her parents have bought her a flat. Her sisters are in a successful folk group. She's sorted.

"Shit! It's one way!" she snaps, flinging us left.

We're burrowing through busy backstreets.

"Can I help?"

"Do you know where we are Andy?"

"London."

"Marvellous. Anything more detailed than that?"

She's being sarcastic.

We swerve to a halt.

"Look!" she points.

It's a shop. A lighting shop.

"Is this Goodge Street?" I ask

"Do you like me Andy?"

"Yes."

She looks at my face to see if I'm lying.

"I love you," I blurt, which I don't know whether it's true but she throws her arms around me and kisses me until I feel like my face is going to get sucked down her throat.

"Well that's alright then," she says, jumping out.

I grab my bag and join her. She hands me my fiddle.

"We don't have to do music together, if you don't want to."

"No, I want to."

"Really? You could come over to my place after work and we could rehearse. I could get us some gigs. Gracie knows all the venues and she's promised to introduce me to the people who run them. What shall we call ourselves? How about 'Parvin and Bell'?"

"Certainly has a ring to it. We could be Parvin and Bell, the singers from hell."

She laughs.

"Shall I take your fiddle back to my place? Then it'd be ready for us when we rehearse."

"Yeah, okay. You are coming in, aren't you?"

"I'll have to park."

"Right."

She takes my fiddle and gets back in the car. I look at the building above the lighting shop. No big office windows. Dirty, old, crumbling brickwork.

"See you in a moment."

"Yes."

She drives off.

Goodge Street is full of people, swarming through each other, even spreading into the road.

I keep ringing at the door but no one answers. Above the lighting shop, Jules said. Is there another lighting shop? I'll have to wait till Amanda's parked the car. Otherwise she won't know where I've gone.

A chap in white overalls taps me on the shoulder and points up. Someone's hanging out of the top floor. Can't see who it is, against the cold blue sky. Jules, is it? He's shouting. Can't hear above the noise.

A lady behind me squawks. People stop and stare. She picks a bunch of keys from the pavement and peers up at Jules.

"You bastard!" she shouts.

"That's dangerous," observes a bystander.

"You could've been killed," adds another.

Nervously I approach the lady.

"Sorry," I say, holding my hand out for the keys.

Seeing the pitiful weakness in my eyes, she gives me them. The crowd disapproves.

"Could've had someone's eye out!"

"You ought to press charges!"

The lock turns easily. I leap in and slam the door shut, glad to escape the angry townsfolk. I'm in a dark corridor. It smells awful. Dead animals. Creaky floorboards. Expecting water to drip and bats.

A door opens in the side of a wall. This little rat-like man in a white coat squints at me. I can see the counter of the lighting shop through the doorway behind him.

"And who might you be?" he asks.

"Andy Parvin, sir."

"Who gave you keys to my premises?"

"Er Jules er Julian er he's my friend er he said I could er..."

The rat frowns.

"Do you mean Mr Marsden-Hunt?"

"Yes sir."

"I see. I wouldn't have rented it to him if I'd known there'd be so many of you going up and down, making a noise on the stairs."

"Andy? Jules?"

It's Amanda. She's yelling through the letterbox.

"Another one?" asks the rat.

I open the door. Her lovely face beams at me. She steps inside and comes face to face with the rat.

"And who the hell are you?" he demands.

"Amanda Bell. Who the hell are you?"

"The name is Small, Mr Small. I own these premises!"

"If you own them, why do you let them smell of cats' piss?"

Mr Small is aghast.

"I have never heard such rudeness in my entire life!"

"Anytime," she replies, pushing past him.

He opens his mouth but no words come out. I take the opportunity to nip by and follow Amanda up the stairs. Catch up with her on the first landing just as Mr Small gets his voice back.

"I won't have you keep on going up and coming down and going up again. Do you understand?"

"There's a loo here," announces Amanda, entering. "Christ it stinks. I'll meet you up there Andy."

I suppose I'd better continue up on my own, even though it's dark. Don't want Mr Small to find me hanging about. I think Jules must be on the top floor.

"Are you the gas man?"

Hideous spectre in rollers and tattered dressing gown looms above me. I almost scream.

"...No."

"Only there's a terrible smell of gas in my flat. They keep promising to come round. I had a man here two weeks ago, said he couldn't do anything about it. Said he'd send someone else. I thought it might be you."

"No."

"I've been waiting out here on the landing. But they don't care do they? They're all bleeding communists. I mean, gas. It might be dangerous. I could light a match and the whole place could go up. You don't know anything about gas do you?"

"No."

"Only I was wondering if you'd just come in for a moment and have a look. It won't take long. Sorry about the mess only it's September. Would you like a boiled sweet?"

"No, I'm sorry, I can't..."

"Diabetic are you? My sister Flo was diabetic, God rest her soul. I told her to stop eating the sweets but did she listen? Went into a coma. They had her down the

Middlesex. I went to visit her but she wasn't herself. Long nose and a bushy beard. I said 'that's not Flo' but would they listen? Bleeding communists. Here's the gas thingy. Smell it?"

"Andy?"

Thank God for Amanda. I'm out of the fiend's flat in seconds.

"Got to go. Goodbye er..."

"Stella."

"Stella. Right. Nice to meet you."

"You aren't one of those moving in upstairs are you?"

"Yes. Here I am Amanda."

"Bleeding communists."

Up the last flight of stairs. Poke my head round a doorway. Jules on the floor with papers strewn about him. He is holding a meeting. I notice Kit and Walt but there are others, people I don't even know.

Jules waves at me but continues with his meeting. Don't think I should disturb them. Find Amanda in the next room.

"What a disgusting tip," she says.

Slimy old paper hanging off the walls revealing older, slimier paper.

"I thought you said they were ultra-modern offices."

"It is curious," I admit, trying to think of ways to explain it.

"Bombed in the second world war and no one's been back since."

"Do you think so?"

She giggles. We wander into a second room. There are rude words painted on the walls and graffiti of people doing it.

"Have you seen Bonnie and Clyde?" she asks.

"Are they the people next door with Jules?"

"It's a film Andy. It's on round the corner. Do you fancy seeing it?"

"I don't know. I'd like to but I don't have any money."

"You've got a job haven't you? They do pay you, don't they?"

"Yes but it's in my bank account and I can't get it out."

"Why Andy?"

"Don't know how to."

"But you've got a cheque book."

"Have I?"

"It's in your documents file. I've seen it. Westminster Bank. Might be one on this road."

She tries to pull up a sash window but it won't budge. Then she notices the sky. Purple and yellow streaks.

"Too late anyway. Banks'll be shut. I've got enough for both of us. Come on."

"But what about unpacking?"

"Might be better not to, just yet. What do you reckon?"

She's right. Contact with the air in this place might turn my stuff black. I'll come back and it'll all need darning. It might get stolen. Or lost. And it's all my stuff. Maybe I should stand guard. Why am I moving in here? Where else? Oh, I don't know. Feeling even more bewildered than usual.

Seeing I'm in a dither, Amanda forces my head upon her shoulder and holds me. Why would she do that? How can she love someone who's so confused? Don't want to ask, in case she stops.

"I'm calmer now."

"Shall we ask Jules what he thinks is best?"

"Yes. That's sensible. What a relief. Oh," I realise, running after her, "I don't think they want to be disturbed. They're having a meeting."

"Hi!" says Amanda. The meeting stops.

"Amanda!" gasps Jules, rising.

They embrace so tenderly. A bit too tenderly. Kit positively wraps himself around her. I stand about, grinning like a daft thing, trying not to feel self-conscious in front of the people I don't know. I'm with Amanda so I can't be totally unimportant.

"Amanda, this is Nobby Dobson, sound engineer to the stars!" announces Jules, flamboyantly.

"And dealer," adds a strange-looking chap with a plume of white hair shooting up from the crown of his otherwise bald head.

Everyone sniggers.

"Alphonse duFeu creates festivals and happenings."

Suddenly everyone's getting introduced to Amanda, embracing her, touching her.

"This is Walt. He's going to be working here at Amazing Arts."

I'm only being ignored because I'm a bloke and they're all blokes and she's a pretty girl, not because I'm intrinsically uninteresting. I must remember that, otherwise I'd be upset.

"Hi."

It's Alphonse. He means me.

"Hi," I reply, being cool like him.

"Alphonse."

"Andy."

“What do you do Andy?”

The room seems to go quiet. I’m not going to be ashamed.

“I work in a Post Office,” I say, a bit too proudly.

The room collapses into helpless mirth and no one looks at me. Amanda’s staring at Walt.

“Walt? Am I wrong, or is that Andy’s suit you’re wearing?”

“Yes.”

“Take it off.”

Walt blushes.

“What? Now?” he asks, looking for support, as if it can’t be real.

“Yes. He’ll need it for work in the morning. Go on.”

Walt has to clamber out of my trousers while everyone watches and giggles. I’m glad, because now the joke’s on him.

“It’s not fair,” he complains, down to his undies.

“Isn’t it? Did you, or did you not, dress Andy in a sorcerer’s outfit while he was asleep?”

Walt titters.

“I did.”

“We all did,” Jules admits, honourably.

“You should have seen him,” Kit remembers.

That’s why he was drawing me when I woke up. Sure enough he’s got, not one, but a whole series of sketches.

These get passed around, causing instant hilarity. There’s a kind of hysteria in the room. People keep giving me sidelong looks and buckling up. I grin back so they think I don’t mind.

Amanda’s folded up my suit and packed it in my bag. She gazes fiercely at the giggling hippies.

“You laugh, but Andy went into work this morning, not even realising he was wearing it!”

There’s a kind of silence. Then all hell breaks loose. Hundreds of strange cackles and cries fill the air. The dust in the room whirls about.

They’re banging their fists against floorboards and walls, clutching their ribs and rolling around, snorting, wheezing, whooping, guffawing. Like a cage of hyenas. Even Amanda. She can’t help herself.

Me turning up for my straight job in a sorcerers outfit and not knowing it! It’s the funniest thing in the universe ever. I’m laughing too. I’m laughing at me. I wish I wasn’t here.

Amanda catches my eye, still helpless but trying to make out it's not against me. It's dark outside now. She flicks on a light. The room loses its sense of humour.

"Andy and I are off to the cinema," she announces.

They're surprised, a bit dazed from all the merriment. They don't want her to go but she insists.

"Which room is Andy's?"

"We'll all have to sleep in the loft until the flat is decorated, I'm afraid," Jules replies. "Shouldn't take long. Couple of weeks maybe."

Amanda goes round saying her goodbyes, kissing everyone. I wave from the door as she leads me out.

We tiptoe downstairs and out into the evening. Amanda thinks we might be late. I've a job to keep up with her, what with all the people. Have to squeeze between them. Keep losing sight of her.

"Wait here."

Where's she gone?

Hippies despise straights, the way kids despise teachers. Despise them because everything they say, wear, do, every choice they make is boring. It's a cop-out.

I'm a straight. I work at the post office. My hair is short and mousy. I don't like drugs. I find freedom frightening. I deserve to be laughed at.

"Andy?"

I'm to follow her. She's got the tickets. I feel like a corpse, stumbling down the steps in the darkness. A lady with a torch shows us where to sit. The man in front of me is a fat giant. I have to lean over towards Amanda. She puts her arm around me and the film begins.

Bonnie and Clyde are outlaws in the Wild West. They rob banks and trains. They're heroes and they are in love. They better watch out.

A hail of bullets, splinters of glass, flesh and blood. Their death is unbearable. It goes on and on. I can't stop crying. Wave upon wave of pain rolls up and gushes out through my face.

I know it's about what happened with Clara, my parents away, feeling lost, frightened, not having the faintest clue what's going on all the time.

"Do shut up!" hisses a woman behind us.

I manage to control my outburst to loud hiccupping sobs as Amanda guides me out.

"What's wrong?"

I can't tell her.

"Shall we walk?"

"I don't know."

I lumber along beside her. We walk down Oxford Street and across Hyde Park. Starts to rain. Light rain, not cold. Remember Jules and me climbing over the gates, the night we sprung Kit. Tell Amanda.

From Roy and Beatrice nominating me, of all people, to waylay Kit. To Kit in the cafe, telling me he was leaving home. The dreadful surprise party. Kit storming off to his room. His loud, overbearing stepmother, his silent, stooping dad. Pink sponge cakes. Magician collapsing. Oh God.

Jules saying we should help Kit escape. Breaking the chess pieces. Getting kicked out. Seeing Jules' flat. The fantastic mess. Waiting there. Discussing our future lives. Tearing my blazer on the park railings. These ones, I think...

Raining then as it's raining now. Six months ago. Kit's luggage coming down on a rope. Hailing a taxi. The three of us inside the cab, Kit, Jules and me. Something about that night. A torch lit, or a fuse. A clue, if I knew where to look.

"I've never heard the whole story before," says Amanda. "Do you think it was the right thing to do?"

"To help Kit? Oh yes. He draws and paints all the time. He's free. He's happy now."

Wind's got up, gusting through trees, spraying dead leaves and raindrops. Amanda's face dripping. We shouldn't stop here.

"Are you happy Andy?"

I shrug. We clamber around the Albert Memorial, across the road and take shelter under the entrance of the Albert Hall.

Press against each other for warmth. Around us the rain forms a single sheet. From his throne, Prince Albert hovers like God on high. Our sodden clothes.

"I love you Andy."

"Why?"

I'm in the loft at Goodge Street. I can hear the wind gusting. Must be nearly morning. Chinks of light between the slates. That's Kit snoring. He'll be on the mattress at the far end, beyond the hole. Freezing. Must remember, when the alarm clock goes, not to sit up and bang my head on the joist again.

I dread the start of another day. I'll have to crawl over whoever's asleep between me and the hole. Make sure not to go either side of the mattress where there's broken glass and dirt. Climb down the ladder, if it's there. Wander around in the freezing cold trying to find my suit.

It's never where I put it. Find it stuffed in some corner, rumpled or chewed, smelling of white spirit or worse. I think the hippies play with it at night, performing strange alternative rituals, venting their spleen against businessmen, politicians, warmongers and everyone else who wears a suit, the most boring uniform ever invented. Or perhaps they can't be bothered to go two flights down to the loo.

Suits are boring. Make you feel like just another ghost passing through. At least a bright red military uniform says be bold, be fearless and kill the ones in blue. A suit says be weak, be fearful, fill in those forms and do it until you die, slowly, of a kind of vacant sorrow.

Downstairs is always a minefield in the morning. Yesterday I stepped in something I thought was paint, but at lunchtime I found it was very smelly.

I'll have to struggle over rolls of paper, mounds of mess, sleeping hippies, ladders, furniture, bits of wood and general slime, just to get into the tiny kitchen which has no light and is invariably stacked, floor to ceiling, with filthy cutlery and crockery - paint in the cups, turps in the milk and a garden of rotting mould on everything else.

Try to clear up enough to get a cup of tea. Unable to find teabags, unable to get the gas stove on to boil water. Taking me the best part of thirty minutes to get out into the drizzle and then what?

Pushing and shoving my way with everybody else through the crowds going to work. Arriving at Maida Vale half asleep, dirty, in a state of suppressed rage. Working all day at the counter with a lunch break to make even more painful my imprisonment.

Then back to Amanda, who always wants to rehearse, when all I want to do is lie down and stop. Finally escaping, only to arrive back here and this freezing dump. I haven't paid any rent and I don't intend to.

Freezing up here. Kit's stopped snoring but it's raining. Wind's making the slates rattle and there are drips of water coming in. What is there to look forward to?

Is this what being an adult is like? I remember old people telling me when I was a kid, that I was lucky because they are the most wonderful years of your life and youth is wasted on the young. I hated being a kid.

Perhaps childhood would've been wonderful, if the adults didn't keep interfering, making you do things. Time to get up. Time to do your violin practice. Time to go to school.

Time for maths, English, geography, French, science, history, religion. Religion? I could hardly believe the world I was living in, let alone that there was a god who made it all up.

Time to sit in some classroom, scratching fuck off into the desk or staring morbidly out the window, wishing I was allowed to live in the real world, out on the plains shooting bison.

Instead of time to mill about in the playground. Time to go home. Time for tea. Time for homework. Time for bed.

And if I did find a friend in all this regimented madness, he was the wrong type, a bad influence. Like me and Reggie Balchin going to that cafe when we should been at school dinners. He had two luncheon vouchers and gave me one. That was kind.

We were never allowed to see each other again. And why? Because we were doing things we wanted to, instead of what we were told. What is the point of life, if it's all decided for you and you just have to put...

Crazy jangling ringing. Sit up. Bang my head. Whip my hand out to turn off the alarm clock. Misjudge it and slam my hand into the brick wall. Fumble around, can't find it. Roll over onto my hands and knees and scrabble around at the edge of the mattress amongst all the shit and rubbish. Find the clock, press the button.

Silence. Shuddering with the cold. Waste no time. Crawl the length of my bed, over the next mattress, trying to avoid Walt's body. Just past his head, there's only six inches to turn so I can get down the ladder. Knees on the edge and swivel. Tentatively dangle one leg down, find a rung and climb down, arse first, naked and shivering.

Arriving on the landing I turn and, through the doorway to the living room, see Jules, scraper in hand, looking at me. I'm painfully embarrassed at my nakedness. Why's he still up? He grins at me and goes on scraping wallpaper off.

I scamper over to the little cupboard where I hid my suit last night. Specially folded it up, cleaned out the bottom of the cupboard, and put it there so it would be safe.

Someone's scraped all the wallpaper off the inside of the cupboard and left it in a soggy heap on the bottom. I scrabble about trying to find my clothes but they aren't there. Someone's moved them.

"Jules, did you move my clothes out of the cupboard?"

He doesn't reply. I bound about the place looking for my stuff - under the table, behind the cooker, in the rubbish bin, among furniture stacked in the back room, in the paint store. It's nowhere.

"Where's my suit?" I shriek. "I specifically put it in this cupboard, which I'd cleared out, folded it up so it would be safe and it's gone!"

Jules strides over, starts scooping out all the slimy wet wallpaper. In one bunch my trousers flop out, in the next, my jacket. Everything's sopping with grey liquid.

"I'm late for work!" I scream, pushing a leg into the trousers and falling over.

"You can't wear that Andy. Hang on. We've got an iron somewhere. I'll help you."

He strides out of the room and returns with his great coat.

"Put this on."

"Thanks."

He stomps into the kitchen and flicks on a light. I blink in amazement.

"I didn't know there was a light in here."

He drags an iron out, plugs it in and starts ironing my suit on the little table. I watch him.

Put the kettle on," he suggests.

I stare at the huge mounds of mess. Oh well. Where's the kettle? Boil some water. Washing up liquid, steam and lather, dirt in one end, clean out the other...

"Do you only have the one suit, Andy?"

"Yes. Ought to get another I suppose. Where do you get them?"

"Oh, clothes shops. hundreds of them. Dunns will probably have a cheap pinstripe or something."

Dunns. Got to remember Dunns.

"It must be hard, you living here and having to work all day and come back to this mess."

I don't know how to reply. I want to please him, but it's true.

"I was hoping that this redecorating malarkey would only take a few weeks. Way things are going, it's going to take months."

I'm flabbergasted. It's going to be like this for months? I stop washing up and stare at Jules.

"Well no one's helping me. I'm working nights as it is. We've opportunities to place Kit's work in mags. I have meetings set up with galleries and publishers. I

should go down to Apple with Walt. I mean, one commission would change everything. But we've got to finish redecorating!"

I turn, nod in agreement, bung a load more plates in and carry on scrubbing.

"We can't function without offices. Not just so that we can sort out admin. I mean it's got to be glamorous. We have to attract people. And I'm getting no help. No help at all. I'm getting no sleep. Working office hours and the rest of the time trying to scrape thirty-three layers of wallpaper off the fucking walls!"

"What about Kit and Walt?"

"They're no fucking good. No point asking really. Kids. You can show them. You can stand over them for hours, encouraging them, telling them how important it is. You turn round, seconds later, and Walt's balancing a pot of paint on his head and Kit's sketching him. Either that or they've put a hole in the wall."

"Really?"

"I just popped out for some cigs. When I got back, they'd removed the wallpaper from about nine square inches of wall, chipped away the plaster and dislodged a brick."

"But why?"

"Who knows? Barking."

Jules has a fag hanging out of his mouth. He hands me my trousers and I struggle into them. Damp and warm.

"I mean, if I only had some help, we could get through it in a couple of weeks. We'd be set up. We'd have work coming in. The place would function. You'd be able to function, get to work and back. If I only had some help."

I want to offer my help but I'm already working all the hours god sends.

"There's always loads of people hanging around here. What about one of them?"

"Walt's friends? You're joking. All they do is sit about, listening to sounds and watching their toenails growing. I mean, it's one thing to decide to be free and live on your wits. Quite another having the vision and self determination to actually do something! Like you!"

"Me?"

"Look at the way you've cleaned up the kitchen!"

I glance at the gleaming dishes, two mugs ready with teabags, kettle boiling on the stove.

"But that's not difficult. Doing things isn't difficult."

"Well, I know. You're right. If you and I were working together, there'd be no problem. Unfortunately, Amazing Arts doesn't as yet have the capital to employ you. Hang on."

He nips out of the room. He's ironed my jacket but my once-white shirt is still wringing wet. Should I start ironing it? Does he really think I'm good at doing things? Does he really mean it, that he'd like to work with me? As a team? Pour the tea. Where's the sugar? Jules bounds back in.

"Here."

He hands me clean shirt and socks.

"Thanks."

A warm feeling of happiness gushes through me. Clean socks, clean shirt, pressed suit, a little mottled maybe, but all the same.

With new confidence, I sit down and sip tea.

"So do you reckon this place could be done in a couple of weeks, if you had some help?"

We both light cigs.

"What I was wondering," says Jules, "cos I know you work hard but, what I was wondering was, if you see working at the Post Office as kind of a career?"

"No. Of course not."

"Well that's what I thought. In which case, what are you doing there?"

I shrug.

"Finding my feet, I suppose."

Jules nods.

"I was wondering whether you might like to come in with us at Amazing Arts. You know, to be part of it. I know you've got your job at the moment. But, later, soon as the cash is flowing, we'd be able to pay you."

My heart is racing. I can't believe it. He wants me to be part of Amazing Arts. Me! He does think I'm good at doing things. Wow!

"...It's just that I think you and I working together could really make a difference. I mean, a business is a machine for achieving something. And Kit, he's a wonderful artist you know. There are loads of wonderful artists around. I mean I bump into them all the time."

"Careless."

"Oh, yes."

He laughs politely.

"Anyway, they have so much talent and it's such a crime that nobody is helping, encouraging and nurturing this talent. It's as if we should all go and die in Viet Nam or something. You leave home. No guidance, nothing. And unless you've got endless vats of self-belief, there's no way on earth you're going to nurture any talent you have."

"That's how I feel," I say.

"Absolutely. It's how we all feel."

I look at Jules.

"So, how does Amazing Arts work?"

"Well, we nurture the talent, sell their paintings, invest the profits in expanding the business and so on. You commission the work, you sell the work, you make a profit."

"My parents don't know anything about business, but it's obvious when you think about it."

Through the haze of our cigarette smoke, I notice the kitchen clock.

"Is that clock right?"

Jules nods.

"Christ!"

I head for the door.

"You better take a coat. It's raining."

"I haven't got a coat."

"Take this one."

He hands me his great coat.

"Listen Jules, I usually go over to rehearse at Amanda's after work. I could cut that short, get back here for say at least eight so I could help you evenings and some nights."

"Could you?"

"Got to go."

Scoop up my money and things.

"What are you doing Saturday, Andy?"

Look at Jules. Can't think.

"Dunno."

"Keep it free."

I'm down the stairs, out into the drizzle, pushing my way through the crowds converging upon Goodge Street tube, the image of Jules and me as partners bursting in my brain.

Suddenly I have a purpose. I'll be part of Amazing Arts. I'm not just a lodger. I'm Jules' partner. I can work. I can achieve things. I can motivate myself.

I leap onto the tube. Look at all these people on their way to their boring jobs. Poor witless fools. They live grey, meaningless lives. But I, Andy Parvin, have prospects. I am linked to something special. I am meant for better things.

Out the front window, there's just snow. We could be anywhere. We could've left the road miles back. I wouldn't be surprised to see a polar bear.

Walt doesn't care. Bouncing up and down in his armchair, making Kit laugh. Wrenching the steering wheel this way and that, sending the rusty old ambulance skidding and swerving all over the shop.

It's all I can do to cling to the spare tyre I'm sitting on. Hope it doesn't dirty my new suit. I look quite smart.

"Ring the bell!" cries Walt.

Kit rings the ambulance bell and they both roar with laughter. Why? Why is it fun?

Jules, oblivious, stretches out on the floor in the back next to me, engrossed in a book. It's called How To Form A Limited Company and I can't get a peep out of him. Wish I'd brought something to read.

I don't know what's going to happen today. I know we're going to visit Mr Grebe. He's the executor of Walt's trust and is setting up the legal side of Amazing Arts. But I don't know what to expect.

Walt says his father may be there. There might be a scene, because his father hates him. Last night, I heard Jules telling Walt that it didn't matter, that his dad couldn't do anything about it. But Walt said Mr Grebe is old and his dad is very forceful.

Still, it's exciting. Started snowing when we left London. Then we came to a place where it had already settled. Snow falling. Snow everywhere. That's when Walt gave a whoop and started driving like a lunatic.

"Look! Up ahead!" yells Walt.

I rise. Nothing but dazzling snow.

"What?" asks Kit.

"Ice! Are you ready?"

Suddenly we are floating. The whole ambulance is twirling and floating. Dff! We stop. I'm falling backwards. My bottom's stuck inside the tyre. Silence.

"Are we there?" asks Jules.

I shake my head, struggling to extricate myself from the tyre, as Walt restarts the motor and we skate off once more.

When Walt gets happy, he does crazy, uninhibited things and Kit, who's usually so intense, feeds off it. Neither of them can stand to do what they're supposed to for long. The pressure is too great and their natures rebel.

Makes me pensive. You don't know what's going to happen next. And yet, doing what you're supposed to do is so boring. What's the point of being alive if you're just a social robot?

If I were to let go, I'd have to unlearn everything. My parents are teachers. They have to set a good example all the time and bicker constantly as a result. If only there was some halfway house, a balance between duty and beauty, where you could be sane in the middle of it.

Jules exercises free will, but with discipline, hard work and in a way which benefits others. Totally magnanimous - forming a company to promote Kit's work. And, alright, so Walt Weirdness is putting up the money, but Jules is helping him too.

All his life, Walt's been told that, as long as he's good, he'll be a very rich man when he's twenty-one. As long as he's good. That's how they've controlled him. And behind that, lies the fact that Weirdness Senior would love to get his hands on the Trust, which would have been his, had he not fallen out with his own father.

That's why Walt races round the country, collecting traffic offences. Because his father shows him no affection, treats him like the enemy. It's upsetting. That's what happens when money becomes more important than people. That's why capitalism is wrong. It's the rule of money. Unloved, Walt has become self-destructive. That's why Jules is saving him, taking him under his wing, channelling his energies into something worthwhile.

Jules is saving me too. He's letting me come along and be part of it. What would I do without him? Sit and worry about what's to become of me. Instead I'm about to witness the creation of Amazing Arts!

Oh my god! We've crashed. Engine screaming. Wheels spinning. Are we alive? Engine's dead. We're at a funny angle. I'm on top of Jules.

"Sorry!"

"You bastard!" he shouts.

I scramble off. But he doesn't mean me.

"You could've had us all killed!" he barks, looming up like a demon and lurching towards Walt.

"Here we are!" sings Walt, leaping out, sending his armchair back into Jules' midriff.

Walt flings open the back doors. I clamber down, gaze around. Countryside, washing powder white. Wheel tracks where we've come off the road. Walt has driven the ambulance up a bank, into a hedgerow. What does he mean 'we're here'? We're nowhere.

Jules gives Walt a look as he steps down, but doesn't continue his rant, returning, instead to his book. Can Jules change his mood just like that? What quiet counsel guides him? On what basis does he choose? How to choose? That's what I need to learn.

Where are Walt and Kit trudging off to? Should I follow them? Do they know where they're going? Glance back at the ambulance. 'Walt Weirdness Total Weirdness 5 Flavours Strawberry Vanilla and Shit'. Won't Walt get in trouble, leaving it here like this? Without looking up, Jules lopes after them. I follow him.

Snow in October. Trees still have leaves. Every now and then the snow gets too heavy. Shlump. My toes are wet. I'm wearing the wrong shoes. The others have coats on. Long hair and dark coats trudging down a lane. Romantic poets, Keats, Byron, Wordsworth. Is that how the future will see them?

Or they could be the Marx Brothers, crazy outrageous guys who create chaos and mayhem wherever they go. Enough to make your heart burst with the sheer joy of their freedom.

Kit, short, wiry, his hands plunged deep in his pockets, would be Harpo. Walt, curly-headed, with the jerky movements of a clown, would be Chico and Jules, face bleak as the landscape, striding along with his book out in front, would be Groucho.

I'd be Zeppo, the boring one. That's what's wrong with me. I don't have a character. If I can't be like them, let me melt with the snow.

We turn a corner and suddenly loads of little Christmassy cottages pop up. Lights on in some of them. Pretty as a picture. I can just imagine Kit sitting down to paint it.

"I bet you'd like to paint this," I venture.

Kit scowls at me.

"Huh! It's a bloody chocolate box, Parvin, you blob!"

"I'm in a chocolate box!" screams Walt, dancing out in front of us.

Even Jules looks up from his book and smiles.

Walt leads us up the garden path of the first house on the left and bangs the knocker. Nothing happens.

"Is this it?" I ask.

But no one replies. I'd imagined commercial offices. We shuffle about in the cold. He bangs again. Some snow falls off the roof of the porch and lands on me.

The door opens. It's an old lady. She's wearing a shawl and a bonnet. Have we gone into fairytale land? She sees Walt and her eyes light up.

"Walter!"

They hug.

"Come inside," she tinkles. "You must be frozen."

We traipse along a little lopsided corridor to a room lined with legal books, with an ancient walnut desk and plush chairs.

She and Walt are hugging again. I wish I was Walt to receive such a loving welcome. Kit, Jules and I hang around like prunes.

"Jerome will be along in a minute. He's in the garden trying to save the plants. Would you gentlemen like a drink?"

"Have you any of that sherry?" asks Walt.

She nods, indulgently. Kit also wants sherry. I've never had sherry.

"Scotch, please," says Jules, his head still in the book.

What do I want?

"Have you got a chocolate milkshake?" I ask.

Kit snorts, Walt giggles, Jules tuts. But the old lady smiles, her eyes reassuring me that it's alright to want a milkshake. She's nice. I want her to love me.

"Are you Mrs Weirdness?" I ask.

She gives an odd, frightened look. Am I mad?

"This is Mary Grebe," Walt informs me. "Mary, this is Andy."

We shake hands. I'm embarrassed. Jerome must be Mr Grebe then, I suppose. I want to apologise but she's left the room.

"Weirdness isn't really my surname, Andy."

I stare at Walt. Not Weirdness?

"Isn't it? What is?"

"Wallace, of course," hisses Kit.

"Ssh!" insists Jules, reading.

I'm upset now. Everyone knows everything except me. Also, the snow from the porch has melted and I'm all soggy.

French windows at the far end fly open and there stands Albert Einstein. Mr Grebe presumably, in tweed trousers tucked into green wellies, face full of lines like a map and a huge bogey hanging from his nose hairs. Seeing Walt, he embraces him. I hope he doesn't embrace me.

"How are you doing, my boy?"

Here, under the gaze of Mr Grebe's admiring eyes, a wonderful transformation seems to take place in Walt. His back straightens, face opens and he exudes a kind of aristocratic confidence.

"Fine. I was half expecting Dad to be here."

"He was keen."

"To veto the entire project, I imagine."

"I reassured him."

I'm obsessed by Mr Grebe's bogey. It swings about with every movement of his head. It's bound to drop, surely... Mary Grebe enters with a tray of drinks. My milkshake is huge.

"I hate the way Dad tries to control everything I do," complains Walt, sipping his sherry.

Jerome and Mary Grebe share a look of concern.

"It does seem pointless to rebel against someone who only has your best interests at heart," Mary suggests, sweetly.

"My best interests?"

Mr Grebe puts his arm about Walt and guides him over to the desk. Mary is leaving.

"Thank you for my milkshake," I say, hoping to make up for calling her Mrs Weirdness.

Everybody roars. Apparently I have milkshake all over my face.

"By way of reassuring your father, I've included a clause in er..."

Mr Grebe peers at a document.

"...in 'Amazing Arts'. Nothing that interferes with the spirit of the venture."

He smiles round at us.

"I was going to ask about the clause concerning Walt," says Jules, rising.

Mr Grebe fixes him with a stare, as if sizing him up. Abruptly, he turns and stares out of the french windows.

"I didn't manage to get the larger pots into the conservatory. I don't want Mary lifting them. I wonder if you wouldn't mind doing it, Walter? Before the frost gets them."

"Now?"

"If you wouldn't mind."

As Walt leaves, Mr Grebe's attention returns to Jules.

"The clause simply limits Walter's, and therefore the Wallace Trust's investment and involvement should, say, the company accrue debts. Since you do not intend to accrue debts, the clause will surely not apply."

"If it will not apply, why include it?" asks Jules, tartly.

Mr Grebe peers at the documents on his desk.

"There are three equal shareholders, I seem to remember," he says finally.

"Yes," Jules confirms. "I am Julian Marsden-Hunt and this is Christopher Hogarth."

Mr Grebe looks up to identify Kit. Kit doesn't look up. He's sketching furiously. So Jules, Kit and Walt are the shareholders. I knew I wouldn't be one. I'm not hurt.

“Whilst equality might seem just, Mr Marsden-Hunt, I have Walter’s interests to consider. He is the only one of you making a substantial investment, yet he has no control, since he can, at any time, be outvoted.”

Jules is angry.

“You say that Walt’s the only one making an investment. What about Kit’s work? What if one shareholder had all the power? He - or those controlling him - could suddenly decide to take ninety-nine percent of the profits from Kit’s work!”

“I agree,” replies Mr Grebe and turns to Kit. “Are you aware, Mr Hogarth, that you are, in effect, handing this company, your entire artistic output in perpetuity?”

“Even this?” asks Kit, presenting Mr Grebe with his sketch.

“Oh my word. It’s rather good actually. Do I really look that ancient?”

Kit has drawn Mr Grebe. Wow! Has he drawn the bogey? Yes. Has Mr Grebe noticed? No.

“It seems to me,” says Jules, still agitated, “that the operative word here is ‘trust’. On the one hand, we have Amazing Arts, which aims to promote the work of young artists, without ripping them off - an artists’ collective, based on trust. On the other hand, we have the Wallace Trust which seems to be all about mistrust.”

Mr Grebe opens his mouth to reply, but Kit pipes up.

“Is it true that Walt’s father is trying to get his hands on the Trust by having Walt certified?”

Mr Grebe’s face goes a dark red. The bogey twists about like a tree in a gale. When he finally speaks, it’s hardly above a whisper.

“I have structured your company exactly as you requested, with the addition of one clause expressly designed for Walter’s protection. I repeat - for Walter’s protection - a function I fulfil in all, even family matters.

“So you protect Walter, do you?” asks Kit.

Mr Grebe stares at Kit. His eyes are fierce. He wants Kit to know that he protects Walt, even from people like Kit. I look between the old lawyer and the young artist.

“Okay,” says Kit, half-believing. “Even from his family?”

Slowly, Mr grebe nods.

“Good on you,” says Kit.

“Now, if you have no other queries, I suggest we get on and sign the company documents.”

Without waiting for a response, Mr Grebe opens the french windows and calls Walt in.

Everyone gathers at the desk to sign. I might as well stay sitting here, finish my milk shake.

“Where is the Company Secretary?” asks Mr Grebe.

“Andy, we need you,” says Jules.

I make my way up to the desk. Mr Grebe peers at me.

“Are you Andrew Parvin?”

I’m about to say yes, when I realise the bogey’s gone. Instead, his nosehairs are dripping wet. The bogey must be in his drink. Jules thrusts a pen at me and I’ve to sign where its says ‘Company Secretary’. I’m the Company Secretary. Wow! I’m overcome.

“Thanks Jules.”

I don’t know if he’s heard me. Everyone seems to be leaving the room. On the edge of the desk, I notice Mr Grebe’s drink. There’s no bogey in it. He must have drunk it. Eugh! It’ll make him ill. I should warn him.

Where’ve they all gone?

Why on earth am I dragging myself back here, to spent the evening decorating? Depressing. Especially the smell of rotting corpses in the hall.

I dream of Amanda all day at the post office. Can't wait to see her after work.

Yet when I'm with her, learning another song for our 'act', all I can think about is Amazing Arts. I'm Company Secretary, for goodness sake.

Should be at Goodge Street helping Jules. So, with umpteen violin parts fizzing about, getting mixed up in my head, I kiss Amanda, make my excuses and leave.

She says she admires me, calls me 'dynamic'. And Mrs Pickles said yesterday how pleased she is with my work on the counter and how well I've settled in. And Jules told me that the way I've prepared the walls for painting is 'tremendous'.

On the way back, I hear these voices praising me, saying all sorts of wonderful things, most of which they've never said, but might.

I look round at other tired faces on the train and wonder if they can tell how praised I am. A king, a saviour! A god. My wonderfulness spirals up and up, until it explodes like a firework in the night sky.

More like vomit. Sick with self-disgust as I turn into Goodge Street, past street lamps, shop signs and loud, happy people out to eat in Charlotte Street.

No more vanity. Whatever you put into fantasy, is lost to your life. Don't look for glory or virtue. Accept your loneliness. Accept it all, as a rodent accepts running round in its little wheel. Why did I want to grow up and leave home?

Can hardly climb the stairs. Wish Mr Small would leap out and order me off his premises. Maybe Stella will waylay me on the landing with endless insane chatter about gas leaks, bleedin' communists and her friend Betty, who got her head stuck down the lavatory basin last week and hasn't been the same since.

Anything but the filth and chaos of what Jules so confidently calls decorating. The more we do, the worse it looks. Last night we plastered and papered till four in the morning and I had to be up by eight.

Voices coming from the living room. Who is it? Better to know before you enter.

"What about this chap Wallace?"

"What about him?"

That's Jules, but the first voice, older, booming...

"I thought you said this chap Wallace was coughing up."

I know that voice. Who is it?

"Look. You've missed a bit. Up. Down. Left. There. Can't you see it?"

Who would dare boss Jules around?

"Lay off, Dad!"

Dad. It's his Dad. Of course, King of the Krazy paving. What's his name? Ralph.

"We've got a printing press to buy, Dad, a printshop to find, brochures for galleries, publishers, magazines, the list is endless."

Yes, Ralph, but I should call him Mr Marsden-Hunt.

"Are you telling me you're under-funded? You want to watch out. Lack of initial investment's a major cause of..."

"Did Mum tell you, we've already had Kit's work accepted for publication in Oz and I.T.?"

"Oh. Really? Very good. Well done. What are they?"

"Magazines. The point is, there are a zillion things to pay for, without wasting money on interior decorators."

"At least professionals would have done the job properly. Have you thought about carpets and furnishings?"

"If you want to help, Dad, grab a brush."

Should I make a noise before I enter? I'll have to go in soon. Just say 'Good evening Mr Marsden-Hunt' and smile.

"I'm hardly dressed for painting, Julian."

"Overalls in the cupboard."

"Are there? Actually, I've arranged to visit an old friend. Lives just around the corner, as a matter of fact. She's been poorly."

"In need of a quick poke from you, is she Dad?"

Sounds of things being moved. They've stopped talking. Now's my chance.

"Good evening Mr Marsden-Hunt," I say, entering with a smile.

Father and son leap apart and glare at me. They were fighting! Oo-er, bad timing. Pretend I haven't noticed. Puff as if I'm out of breath.

"...Came upstairs so fast, I didn't hear anything you said."

They hate me. Try again.

"I'm Andy, sir. We've met. Remember?"

Mr Marsden-Hunt shakes his head.

"You know Andy, Dad. Andy came down to Hayling. He was the one who threw up at the dinner table."

I give a little smile. Maybe he can see the funny side. He can't.

"Nonsense!" he fumes, turning his rage on his son. "That was another lad. I distinctly remember."

He storms over to the window, raps his fingers on the pane and peers out.

"His name was Kit!"

Jules tuts.

"So, what should I do?" I ask, bright and breezy, like a breath of fresh air.

Jules points.

"Brush. Wall. Paint."

Jules himself starts painting furiously. Should change out of my new suit first, but I don't want to appear lazy. There's a bad atmosphere in this room. Mr Marsden-Hunt hovers at the window, watching us work. Makes me nervous.

When you paint, you've got to be sure to brush out all the paint evenly, really work it into the wall. I'm doing it properly. Mr Marsden-Hunt can see that I'm doing it properly.

I should visit my Mum and Dad soon. Hardly seen them since they got back. That was the summer. Christ! I feel bad about it. Trouble is, I want them to see me when I'm proud of myself, when things are great and I'm confident.

But that's not fair. They'd just like to see me. They're probably upset. And not just about me. All that stuff about Clara. Is she still with them? All those court proceedings about the cars she smashed.

And Colin, my brother. I love him. Is he still in South America? Do we know where he is? Oh my god, they must be out of their minds. I'm such a bastard.

Both their sons gone, lost to them. Their lives empty, bitter, grief-stricken... At each others' throats more like. I'd better phone them.

"So you reckon you'll have this finished pretty soon then, do you?" asks Mr Marsden-Hunt.

I'd forgotten he was here. Jules ignores him.

"Julian?"

Reluctantly, Jules turns to face his father.

"Pretty soon, I should think, Dad."

Mr Marsden-Hunt holds out his hand. Jules shrugs. Nonetheless, he puts down his brush and walks over to his Father.

They're making up. It's sweet. I feel quite emotional. They're shaking hands. Don't look.

"You know what, Andy?"

"What Jules?"

They're both beaming at me.

"I think that, if you and I were to work all night, we could get everything finished by the morning. What do you reckon?"

"Could we?" I ask, feeling faint.

Mr Marsden-Hunt nods approvingly.

"I'll leave you two young lads to get on with it then. Nice to meet you, Andy."

As soon as his Dad's footsteps have stopped echoing up the stairwell, Jules gives a whoop.

"Brilliant!" he exclaims. "Can't fail! Well done, Andy!"

I'm pleased, glowing.

"Thank you. What do you mean, exactly?"

"Furnishings, carpets, the lot. It'll be tasteless crap, but it'll do to start us off."

"Will it?" I ask. "What are you talking about?"

"My Dad. He feels guilty. If I know him, the carpet fitters will be here first thing in the morning. Better get painting."

Jules starts sloshing paint on the walls and I start on another one. It's quite exciting really.

"Has Kit's work really been accepted for publication?" I ask.

"Yes. Christmas issues. A pic in each."

"Wow! Do they pay well?"

"Twenty quid."

That doesn't seem much.

"Oh. Is that each?"

"I.T. doesn't pay."

"Oh. Great. Shouldn't we try to get some other artists? If we got famous artists, we could sell their work for a fortune, because they're already famous."

"I have been thinking about getting other artists on our books, as a matter of fact," says Jules, standing back from his work.

He's done three walls and I've only done one. That's because I'm being careful. If there's a little dent in the wall, my brush goes right in. If the paper's not stuck properly, or it's a bit torn, I disguise it with extra paint. All my brushstrokes go the same way. Jules just slaps it on.

Perhaps it doesn't matter. Have a look. Whole room's just white really. Feel a bit dizzy. What next? There's a bit behind the pipes where Jules hasn't bothered. I'm so tired. Working like clockwork. Slow clockwork. Like a slow dream. Why am I bothering with these fucking pipes? Jules hasn't bothered. Snap out of it. This room's done. Where's Jules?

Whistling coming from the far room. Jules has a plank between two ladders. He's running along it, rolling the ceiling at a million miles an hour.

"This should be the art room," he informs me, jumping down and starting on the walls. "Trestle tables, paper, paints, inks, easel, finished work, work in progress, an inadvertent gallery."

Each time I start on a wall, Jules catches up, passes me and I have to start on another one. I'll stand on a ladder and paint above the door. That'll be useful.

"The office should be the small room because you see it immediately you come up the stairs. Pretty girl behind a desk. Amanda would do. Why don't you ask her, Andy?"

"I'm not sure she'd want to."

"Really?"

It's amazing how he assumes everyone will be falling over themselves to help. I'm not sure I want Amanda working here. Jules ducks under my step ladder.

"The living room should be where we entertain. Sofas, low tables, soft music, elegant..."

I climb down. He's finished in here. Just this bit beside the door. Is it because he's so fast or I'm so slow? I'm slow, in a daze. I'm trying to slosh it on like Jules, it's just...

Oh no. I've got paint on my suit. Perhaps it'll brush off. It's just smearing. Eugh - I've got it on my bottom. And on the flap of my jacket. Dribbles down my leg. Want to cry. Jules will think I'm a baby. It's ruined. No point changing now.

Join him in what's to be the office.

"There's a new Paul Raymond mag coming out. 'Club International'. British version of playboy. They've commissioned Kit to do a double-page spread for their opening issue. Have you seen it?"

"I don't read those sorts of things."

"No, I mean Kit's pic. They wanted him to paint a hippy paradise. Load of young men and women lounging around the countryside, children playing. Only everyone's naked. Naked but tasteful, they said. Well, Kit's got this woman sitting on a bench and her fanny's hanging through the slats and there's this dog underneath, licking it."

Jules staggers about, laughing.

"There's this toddler pulling himself up on his dad's willy!"

I laugh too, though it seems a bit rude to me.

"But, get this - they said it was pornographic! Them! Can you believe it?"

How we laugh. I think I'm going to pass out.

"Kit's had to repaint the kid's arm and remove the dog's tongue."

"Has that spoilt it?" I ask, but Jules has gone.

I'm never going to get my own room here. I thought I was only in the loft until the decorating was done. But if this is going to be the office and that's the art room and

the living room's where we entertain... Perhaps we're going to decorate the loft. I keep cutting myself on bits of glass up there.

Never mind, the company will be successful. We'll all have penthouses by the river and invite Ringo Starr and Harold Wilson over to tea.

"Jules?"

Where is he?

"I'm down here."

"I didn't know we were doing the stairs."

"Might as well. Look, if we just rip the stair carpet up, give the steps a sweep, we can paint everything - walls, floor, ceiling, the lot. No point having ritzy offices if you have to swim up a sewer to get to them."

"Won't Mr Small mind?"

Jules doesn't even answer me. He doesn't care what Mr Small thinks. And why should he? He despises Mr Small. So do I. He's frightening.

"You know we're planning to print posters."

"Are we?"

"Yes. It's a revolution in art. Everyone can have great paintings on their walls. Athena charge a quid. Well they don't cost half that to print. We can undercut them."

My head is reeling. I can't paint any longer. Need to sleep. Now.

"No!" yells Jules. "You can't go up, Andy."

"Why?"

"You'll tread in where we've just painted."

"Oh. Oh yes."

He's right. I'm stranded.

"Come on, we've nearly finished. Where was I? Oh yes, so Walt reckons he's found an automatic silk-screen press in Suffolk that's up for sale. He and Kit are looking at it tonight."

Every second seems like an hour. I keep going over the same bit again and Jules keeps on talking.

"Company notepaper will have to be picked up sometime tomorrow."

"Oh. That's nice."

There's a window above the front door. It's light already. Oh Christ.

"That's it!" shrieks Jules.

Nearly jump out of my skin.

"What?"

"How to get more artists on our books."

"Oh. How?"

"Simple. Get an article in Oz or Time Out, all about Amazing Arts - who we are, what we're doing, our plans. Say we're looking for young artists. Actually name a day when they can turn up with their work."

Hardly know where I am or what I'm painting. Just the drone of traffic outside and Jules wittering on. Doesn't he ever stop having ideas?

Got to climb up, using the pipes, like Jules, to do the bit around the window. Just know I'm going to fall. There are people outside on the street. It's crowded. What's the time? Christ!

"What's the time, Jules?"

He hasn't got a watch. Open the front door. Ask someone.

"What's the time?"

A few people stare at me suspiciously as they pass, but no-one answers.

"What's the time?" I yell. "Does anyone know what the time is?"

"Eight twenty-seven."

Bloody hell!

"Jules! It's half past eight. I'm going to have to leave for work immediately!"

"You can't."

"Why?"

"Your suit."

I look down at my suit.

"Yes. I know. What am I going to do?"

What am I going to do? I'm in a panic. I can't think. I can't even get upstairs to change. Not that there is anything. What am I going to do? I can't go in like this. What would Mrs Pickles say? Oh God! What?

"Jules! What are you doing?"

"Hold your arms up."

He's painting my jacket. I'm going to cry. It's a nightmare.

"Bend over."

He's painting my trousers.

"What's happening to me?"

"You're going to have a clean white suit!"

A clean white suit. Oh, I get it. Will it work? I'm dubious.

"Will it work?"

"You'll have to make sure not to touch anything till you're dry. You'd better walk. Turn around. There. You're done. Give me your brush."

I give him my brush.

“Off you go,” he says cheerily.

Off I go. Will it be okay? I look back. Jules smiles and waves. He’s a good friend.

Such a weird state. Cold. Wet cos of the paint and cos it's drizzling. Haven't slept. How long haven't I slept? Night before last I had four hours sleep. Up at eight yesterday morning. Over twenty-four hours without sleep. Feel upside down and inside out. I'm a zombie.

If I'm going to walk to work, I've got to remember two things. What are they? Two things. I know there are two things. Yes. Firstly: Mustn't lose my way. Walk straight till I come to the Edgware Road. Then right, up Edgware, till I see the post office on the left at Maida Vale.

What's the second thing? Ow!

"Mind where you're going!"

"Sorry."

Oh shit. The bloke's coat has white paint down it. Don't think he's noticed. Move away fast and don't bump into anyone else. Keep walking and, with a bit of luck, I'll be dry by the time I get to work. And walk fast. I'm going to be late anyway.

So that's it. Walk fast, don't get lost and don't bump into people. That's three things. What's the time? Can't see my watch. It's splattered with paint. Wipe it off.

Still can't see. I think there's paint in my eyes. Christ! Is there paint on my face? Look in a shop window. Can't tell. Can't see my reflection. Lights inside are too bright. It's a cafe. I'd love a cheese roll. They've noticed me. They're laughing.

Doesn't matter. Just walk. Once I'm dry, I can try and get the stuff off my face. How am I going to get dry, when it's raining? That's a fault in the plan, surely. Maybe it'll stop.

Where am I? Mortimer Street. Just keep straight ahead. I think the rain's getting worse. It's dribbling down my face. Bet my hair's full of paint. Ugh! It is.

This is ridiculous. Fucking waste of time. I should go back. But Jules won't let me upstairs. Anyway, there's nothing there for me. Have I got my wallet? Yes. Find a men's outfitters. Bound to be one on the Edgware Road.

No. Look. That's a clothes shop. Brilliant. Is it open? Yes. Bell dingalings.

"Hallo?"

Too dark. Can't see anyone. Somebody screams.

"Get out!"

"What?"

"Get out!"

Old man rushing up to me. I move back and bump into his door. Open it. White paint on the glass. And on his linoleum.

“Sorry!”

Raining harder. No one’s going to let me into their shop. What am I going to do? I can’t stand it! I can’t stand it! I’m going mad!

Don’t panic. Look on the bright side. Maybe the rain will wash all the paint away and the sun will come out and dry my clothes and - oh -

“Sorry sorry. Sorry. I’m sorry.”

Big lady, paint all down her front, screaming at me.

“What is it? It’s paint isn’t it? You’ve got paint all down my new coat! What are you? A fucking madman? Police! Police...!”

“No! Don’t call the police. Please! I’ll pay. I’ll pay anything. I’ve got money. Look. Please!”

“Andy?”

Lady’s staring at me. Can’t make her out. Try to wipe the paint off my eyes. Who is it?

“It’s you, isn’t it? Andy?”

“Yes, but...”

“Lorraine. From school.”

It’s Lorraine Phelps. The one who fancied Roy. I’d never have recognised her. She’s gone all trendy. At least she had until I...

“Why are you covered in paint, Andy?”

Can’t answer. All the strength’s gone out of my legs. I’m a heap on the pavement. At school, Lorraine was the lowest of the girls. Now we’ve left school, she’s an adult and I’m nothing. A heap of white paint on the street. A public fool. Lower than the lowest. Can’t stop blubbing.

“Who did this to you, Andy?” Lorraine asks, kneeling beside me.

People pass, avoiding us. Thousands of little raindrops bounce off the paving stones.

“Been up decorating all night,” I whimper. “Now I’m late for work.”

“Why didn’t you change, Andy?”

“Nothing to change into. Jules painted me white. He said it’d be alright. I’d dry off. Only it started raining...”

“Can’t catch my breath.

“Jules painted you white?”

“Yes.”

“Is that the Jules I know? The one that got expelled?”

“Yes.”

“You don’t half choose your friends, Andy Parvin. Come on.”

"Where?"

"Home. You'll need a bath. I'll find you something to wear. Is it emulsion paint?"

"Don't know."

Don't want to go to her place. I'll have to change in front of her. She's so mumsy. She won't think anything of it. I don't want her to see me without my clothes on. She'll have me in the bath and be washing me down...

"I think the rain's stopping. I think I'll be dry by the time I get to work."

"Don't be daft, Andy. Anyway, it's not far. See those flats?"

The rain really is stopping. Maybe I could just use her phone to call Mrs Pickles.

"Wait here."

Lorraine disappears up a flight of stairs. Sun comes out. She's ever so kind, is Lorraine. Never seemed to care that no one ever noticed her. Always friendly. Is that weak or strong?

Is that her bum? Pink and orange mini-skirt, big hips like mine. She's laying newspaper on every step. Makes me climb, two at a time, only on the newspaper.

There's newspaper all along the passageway. Stops at number thirty-four. Door's open. Newspaper continues inside. Carefully I enter. Peels of laughter.

Two women at a table, scoffing cream buns, wobbling about in helpless mirth.

"Looks like he's seen a ghost," says one.

"Praps he is a ghost," quips the other and they both wobble some more.

They look like the cakes they're eating.

"Mum, this is Andy," announces Lorraine.

"How do you do, Mrs Phelps," I say, politely.

"Mind you don't step off that paper," she warns me.

Mrs Phelps has a big jolly face. Lorraine will look like her. Will everyone look like their parents? Will it just go on and on?

"Andy is a friend of Roy's," she tells them.

I've never been a friend of Roy. He used to make fun of me when he became Head Boy. And he was mean to Lorraine, even though she loved him.

"This is Mrs Carmichael, Andy. She's Roy's Mum."

She's Roy's Mum? I always imagined her as a frail, sad thing who had to get up at five in the morning to clean offices because her husband was a drunk. She's strong, fierce. Her eyes ask questions. I step forward to shake her hand. This is a mistake. I'm off the newspaper. Paint on the carpet. I'm abject. The two large women scurry about, getting scrubbing brushes, mops and water.

Lorraine grins. She leads me along the newspaper.

"Do you still see Roy?" I ask.

"Oh yes," she beams. "Only sometimes. But he writes."

"Where is he?"

"Didn't you know? He got into Oxford!"

"Did he?"

She's running a bath. There's no way I'm taking my clothes off.

"Sometimes I wish he hadn't. I think he might get so clever that he won't want to know me anymore."

Lorraine brushes some hair off her warm, pudgy face. I don't fancy Lorraine but she's wonderful in her way. She still loves Roy. Unbelievable. He spent the whole of school avoiding her. Only went out with pretty girls from posh families. Like Beatrice.

"So do you think Roy will...?"

"What's the phone number for...?"

Both speaking at once. Lorraine has a pen and paper in her hand.

"Sorry?"

"No. What were you going to say?" she insists.

"Well, er - do you think Roy will get a top job and marry you then?"

She squints at me. Can I be trusted?

"We're engaged."

I'm shocked.

"To be married?"

"Ever since we were six," she confides.

Is she serious? She smiles, like some religious nutcase.

"What's your work number and who's your boss?" she asks.

"Maida Vale Post Office. Mrs Pickles," I reply, automatically.

"I'll leave it to you then," she says, closing the door behind her.

Tiny bathroom, full of steam. Is there a lock? No. No one'll come in though. Better get my clothes off then.

Water's red hot. Inch my way in. Heat overwhelms me. Hear Lorraine on the phone.

"Hallo? Yes, I need to speak to Mrs Pickles. Are you? Oh good, well anyway, I'm phoning up about Andy. Only he's not coming into work today. No. He's caught a nasty chill. Yes. What? Oh, I'm his mother. Yes. Thank you. Who's Mrs Parvin? Oh, that's me, isn't it. Yes. Tattybye."

Mrs Pickles won't fall for that. I'll be in trouble. I hate trouble. Just want to lie here, enveloped in this steaming heat forever. Lorraine's voice again.

"Victor? ...Yes I know. Sorry. - Wet paint. Well give us a chance and I'll tell you. I was on my way in, when this bloke bumped into me. Covered in white paint he was. Yes, so I've had to come back and change. Hang on. The point is, the bloke turns out to be an old school friend and he's got nothing to wear so I thought I'd bring him in, kit him out in some of our gear. Yeah, he's got money. What? I don't want to do the late shift, Victor. Why? But I'm supposed to be going out. I'll only be an hour. Why can't Lucy do it? ...Alright, alright, don't get your knickers in a twist, I'll do it. ...Yes. ...Yes. ...Yes I'll be in. Tattybye. ...Mum? Have we got anything Andy could wear? ...He's in the bath...."

Her voice fades into another room. I feel stupid, sitting scrunched up in this little bath. Rolls of pink flab. That's what I am. Nothing more. No centre. I follow people around. Anyone who will tell me what to do. Can't just invent a purpose though. Can't pretend. If I could put my head under the water, hold my breath and, when I rose up again, I'd be someone. Sure of myself, instead of worrying all the time.

I've always liked being underwater. Bath's too small. have to flip my legs over the end to get my head in. See if I can leave just my nose out, so I can breathe.

Fantastic. Pipes gurgling. Like whales calling to each other across the seas. Eyes closed. Red blobs. Water warm, equatorial. tropical island. Palm trees. Women with jars on their heads, snake down to the beach. Find me washed up on their shores.

The natives are innocent, loving. They anoint me with balms. I am strangely unashamed. My asthma has gone. I am whole. And slimmer, more muscly. Someone calls my name.

"Andy! Andy? Mum! Come quick! He's gone and drowned himself! Andy! Speak to me!"

Open my eyes. Three women staring at me. Don't know what to say.

"Hallo," I say.

The two Mums think it's hilarious.

"Look. He's even got paint on his little knob," cackles Mrs Carmichael.

Lorraine is cross.

"You won't budge all that paint just lying there. You'll have to scrub. There's clothes for you in my room."

She herds the Mums out and I'm alone again. Only I'm shaking. Scrub, she said. I hate doing what I'm told. But I need telling, that's the trouble.

Scrub. Scrub till I'm raw. Scrub till the skin's come off and I've learned my lesson. What is my lesson?

Corridor's cold. Feel like a big red balloon but there's no one about. Door open with pants, vest, boiler-suit neatly arranged on a bed. Shut the door quick and get them on.

Boiler-suit's much too long. Roll up the legs. I can't wear these boots. They're huge. Lie on the bed to get them on.

Mattress does something wonderful to all the muscles in my body. Sod the boots. Let go. I can let go and still be awake.

If other people couldn't hurt my feelings, I'd be alright. If I was immune, like when you brush your teeth with Colgate and get the Colgate Ring Of Confidence...

...Room's changed light. Getting dark out. Must've been asleep. Voices shouting next door.

"What do you mean, there's a bloke in your room?"

"Keep your voice down. He's asleep."

Lorraine. I'm at Lorraine's. The door's flung open.

"She bloody has! Who the bleedin' hell are you?"

I jump off the bed. Grin.

"Here Lee, have a look at this!"

Two huge hairy blokes glaring at me.

"Gladys?" comes a cry from the other room.

A sullen look passes between the two hairy men.

"Gladys? Have Jim and Lee got back yet? Oh, there you are."

"You should see what Lorraine's got in her room, Dad," says one of the hairy men.

"I'm not flippin' interested in flippin' Lorraine!"

"Well you should be, Dad. She's turning this place into a brothel!"

"Belt up about bloomin' Lorraine! Have you told your Mum what you done? Jim?"

"No," mumbles Jim.

Lee shuffles guiltily.

"I put my job on the line for these two, Gladys, and they've made a laughing stock of me. Whole building site knows!"

Lorraine has slipped between her brothers and is putting the boots on me.

"But what have they done, Joe?" asks Mrs Phelps.

"They can bloody-well tell you themselves, pardon my French. Have we got any Aspro?"

"Up there, Joe. Well? Lee? Jim? What is it this time?"

"Oh, it's just some cement, Mum. It got dark and..."

"It didn't friggin'-well get dark!" interjects Mr Phelps. "It was the football. They went off to watch QPR, leaving half a ton of cement uncovered. Didn't tell no one or nothing. Well it rained, didn't it! Didn't it Jim!"

"Yes Dad."

"Cement set solid, didn't it Lee!"

"Yes Dad."

"Crashed through two floors, didn't it! - Who the flippin' heck are you?"

"He's Andy," says Lorraine, leading me through the room. "Tell you about it later only I'm late for work."

"Hey! That's my boiler-suit, isn't it?" shouts Jim, pointing at me.

"Are those my boots?" demands Lee.

Lorraine more-or-less drags me out of the flat, down the stairs and along the street.

Twilight. Must've slept all day. Feel completely different. Awake, optimistic.

"Where are we going?"

"Victor's."

"Oh."

"I work there. It's a boutique."

"Is that a beauty parlour or something?"

"No. Clothes. Honestly Andy."

"Like a men's outfitters?" I ask, nervous.

"No. Fashionable clothes. You'll like them."

I won't. They'll be garish and they won't fit. When Mum took me to Hammersmith to buy my first pair of long trousers and I looked like a sack of potatoes, I knew there was no hope.

We cross Oxford Street. Lorraine's late, almost pulling me. We come to a road that's all lit up and crowded. Clothes on display outside, like a bazaar. As if we turned a corner into a foreign land. It is hippieland.

'VICTORY VIC' is painted in swirly purple over the boutique. I'm a bit scared of the strange people. The unnerving thing is, they all dress different. Like people from all over the world and from every century. I like it though.

My parents, their friends and all the older people that you see, dress like dead people, people who died in a war. They are angry underneath and upset. When the young people started dressing weird, it must have seemed like rubbing their parents' noses in it.

My parents really believe that they fought for democracy. Democracy is supposed to be freedom. Actually, it's just a little piece of power that even poor people have. But it is the hope that, eventually, everybody can have good lives.

However, when the war ended, we were poor, nothing worked. So everybody had to muscle in, work like slaves and do what they were told. They became slaves - the opposite of what they believe in and hoped for. Slaves, like their parents, and all their parents before them.

But they did a wonderful thing. They made their children safe. Free health, money when you're out of work. If I'd been born a few years earlier I would have had to go into the army. I don't know at what age or for how long. But everybody had to do that.

They gave us a world where we could be free. And now we're free and they can't stand it.

I don't know how I know this. My father is a history teacher. He was born in Vienna of poor Jewish parents.

My grandfather is still alive. My grandmother is dead and I miss her. She believed in the future. She had to. Her son died during the war. My father's brother. Once, when it was dark in her bedroom, she was looking out of the window. I stood beside her. I saw that she was crying. Then she said "Freddy". That was his name.

It brought the suffering home to me. It is what makes me slightly different from the other people in my generation. They celebrate their freedom without a thought for anyone else.

The clothes in 'Victory Vic' are garish. There are racks and stacks of ridiculous, poncy outfits. None of them work on me. It's not that I'm particularly fat. I'm just peasant-shaped and these clothes are for young aristocrats who fancy dressing up.

Lorraine has me in a Sergeant Pepper uniform and I look like King Pig. I was right. Nothing fits. Nothing except a pair of grey pyjama bottoms and a shapeless grey

tunic which she assures me are Chairman Mao clothes and haven't I read his Little Red Book "which preaches continuous revolution"?

I don't know about revolution but when I look in the mirror, I know about revulsion.

"They're all the rage!" Lorraine assures me. "Look at Victor!"

I look at Victor. He is serving another customer. A Viking man with shocks of blond hair. A young lion. Victor keeps touching him. I think Victor's a homosexual. Like Ira. They fancy other men. Is it wrong? I don't know anything. I don't see how anyone else can know anything either. Why would God say it was wrong?

Supposing people in the past hated something, for whatever reason. Supposing they put it about that God had said it was wrong. Could people be so devious? Or might they smugly convince themselves that it was true?

I just don't know. But it is scary. I don't know how homosexuals make love. Do they make love?

Victor is indeed wearing the Chairman Mao thingies. But he's small. When we came in, he pointed to a leather bracelet on his wrist. He meant the time. Lorraine was late. When he saw me, he shot his eyes up to the heavens and left Lorraine to kit me out.

I don't like him. Even if I am hopeless, it's rude to say so. He talks like a wise man from the East, except that wise men probably don't put the word "man" at the end of every sentence. What's more, he's got a really posh English accent.

He's looking at me. Now at Lorraine. Now at me. It's hopeless. I'm a sack of potatoes. I look at Lorraine. She knows it's hopeless.

Oh my God. It really is hopeless. We're in the middle of her shop and there is nothing I can wear. Everyone knows it and no-one can admit it.

My eyes latch onto sparkly material. Delicate prints of creepers and trees. Silver brocades of blossoms and birds. Gold-leaf designs of demons and snakes.

"This," I say.

A worried look passes across Lorraine's face, but I ignore it. These particular materials are truly beautiful. They are heavy and the colours are deep. Lorraine swathes me in a selection and points me in the mirror.

"Well?" she asks.

"I look like Julius Caesar on acid."

She giggles.

"Not all of them Andy. Which one?"

I know which one. The most exquisite material ever. Deep blue and blood red, spun with gold, depicting stars, scorpions, mythical creatures and men...

It is almost full length and hangs like a robe. This is a point of departure. I know it the moment it's on. My face seems to have changed, it's not round, it's long. Piggy nose but big serious eyes. Hair's still flecked with white paint. Masses of it at the roots make my long hair stick out like a brush. I look more ridiculous than anyone I've ever seen, and yet...

The thing is, it's beautiful. Walt's wizard outfit was crude, ugly. Surely nobody could deny that this fabric is beautiful. I can wear it. Not to make me look good. But because it has its own beauty.

Victor takes an interest.

"It's Balinese batik, man," he informs me. "Geringsing Wayang, man."

"Geringsing Wayang, man," I repeat like a fool.

Who cares if I'm a fool?

"It has magical properties, man. Wards off evil spirits."

"Doesn't seem to be working," I say, looking down at his fingers, which are 'feeling the quality'.

He shoots me a look of pure venom.

"It's expensive," he informs me.

"I don't care."

I write him a cheque. Lorraine fusses, nervously.

"Is this what you're going to wear then, Andy?"

"Yes."

"Out on the street?"

I nod.

"I've got to stay here and work."

"I know. I'm sorry."

"It's alright."

I'm on my way when she calls me back.

"Stay in the streets that are brightly lit, will you?"

She is genuinely concerned. She loves Roy and I don't fancy her, so there's nothing much more to say, except, I give her a little kiss on each cheek, the way French people do.

There is no way to keep to the brightly lit streets. Lorraine thinks I could be attacked. Two people are walking towards me. A man with white hair and a dark overcoat fixes me with his eyes.

"You disgusting poof!" he says.

"Disgusting," repeats the posh old bag next to him.

"Oh yeah?" I say. "And you look like two old sheep."

The man stops in front of me. He is shaking with anger. I'm not scared.

"Baaah!" I say.

Will he hit me? The lady is tugging him away. He tuts and is gone.

Did my Geringsing Wayang clothes protect me? Or was it just that he was smaller than me and older and I could have just pushed him over? I've never known how to fight but I'm strong. I can always push people over. That's what I'll do then. If anyone gets on my wick, I'll push them over.

Charlotte Street is full of conventional folk, out to eat because they've nothing better to do...They glance at me, furtively, as I stride past.

It's as if they think I'm pretending to be something special. Or perhaps they think that I really do know something that they don't.

I will never be anything that I'm not. I will never fake. Never pretend I know, when I don't. These clothes are not to protect me, but to give me courage. I have to come into my own. What is "my own"? Find out! The thing is - Stop Being Frightened!

Turning into Goodge Street, there's a crowd around the Smalls' lighting shop. Has there been an accident? I push my way through.

A red carpet leads from the pavement into our place. A red carpet? A Rolls Royce draws up. Is it the Queen? The driver jumps out and opens the back door. A floaty, hippy chick gets out. Actually, she almost falls out. The bystanders gasp.

"Ooh."

Sounds like cows mooing. The chick, all beads and bangles, gives the crowd a big, sexy smile and disappears inside. As the Rolls moves off, two blokes with long, straggly hair, bandanas, moccasins and floral shirts wander across the road and enter. A taxi delivers a posh couple who are middle-aged but who still manage to look with-it. A murmur goes around.

"Who are they?" asks a girl beside me.

"It's Jules' mum and dad!" I gasp.

"Wow!" says the girl.

As more and more trendy folk turn up and go in, a thought comes into my head. Has Jules invited all the hippy people to our place? Or is it just happening spontaneously? It is our place, isn't it? Next to the lighting shop. Yes and Mr and Mrs Marsden-Hunt are here. And they're all toggled up.

How am I going to get in? Along the red carpet? There's no other way. What was I on about before? Stop Being Frightened! Okay. Here goes.

Lurching out onto the carpet I collide with a tiny little hippie in a white suit. Not white from decorating, though. It's so posh, it shines.

"Sorry," I blurt.

The little feller gives me a dopey smile. Good. If he'd got on my wick, I'd have pushed him over. This is my house and I'm going in!

I'm aware that everybody's looking at me in amazement. No. In wonder. No. In admiration.

Inside is lit by candles. Since this morning, the white walls have been fitted with candle holders. The red carpet continues up the stairs. Above and around me, strange young adults hang about sipping drinks, smoking joints. And whenever someone sees me rising towards them, they get a panicky look in their eyes and their mouths drop open. As if they've seen God.

When Mr and Mrs Sheep saw me, they were intimidated. I thought it was because they knew I could push them over. But what if it really is the clothes? The Geringsing Wayang has probably been warding off evil spirits for thousands of years. And it is beautiful. I smile at the faces that gawp at me. They smile back. They positively beam, as if I have relieved them of all their anxieties.

"It's alright," I say to a girl with a feather in her head like a Red Indian squaw and her mouth wide open. "Be brave," I tell her.

The looks of adoration almost make me want to cry. To be accepted by them, by their loving eyes, I can't believe it's finally happening.

But I do understand it. I'm saying "This is me!" and that's great because everyone feels like I did till today. They're worrying "Is this me?"

There are two homosexual men kissing each other on the second landing. I seem to rise before them.

"It's okay to be yourself," I tell them.

"Do your own thing, right?" replies one of them.

"You are what you eat," adds the other.

Are what you eat? Well I suppose you are. I'd have a hard job getting up these stairs though, with the chicken legs I ate last night.

Stella, the old lady who lives on the floor below us, is all trussed up in some ancient fairy costume, trying to bribe some strapping Australian freak to fix her gas.

"Truth is, Stella, the only thing I know about gas is that it's better out than in!"

"But that's just my problem...Have a boiled sweet..."

The Red Indian squaw brushes up beside me and takes my hand in hers.

There's a banner across the top of the stairs. Kit has drawn it. It says "Amazing Arts". There's a heck of a party going on up there. I can hear the loud, throbbing jungle music. Hundreds of eyes peer down in amazement as my squaw and I ascend and join the merry throng.

"Have you known Brian long?" asks my Squaw.

"Who's Brian?" I reply.

Everybody roars with embarrassed laughter.

"I am, mate," says the tiny hippie in the white suit.

"Oh. Have we met?" I ask, flustered.

He looks me up and down.

"Shouldn't think so. Unless it was in another life. Was it?"

"Can't be," I reply. "I haven't had another life."

"Are you sure?"

"No."

"Well then," he says. "If you don't know about your other lives, how do you know you're having this one?"

I'm bewildered. Everyone's laughing and he's winking at them.

"This what?" I ask.

"This life," he says.

I've had enough. I'm going to push him over.

"Brian!" roars a deep, womanly voice from just beside my lughole.

It's Jules' mum. She knows this Brian geek. Jules has popped up beside me.

"Who is he?" I hiss.

Jules looks at me. Then he looks again.

"Andy?"

"Yes?"

"Christ Almighty, Andy, what are you wearing?"

"Geringsing Wayang," I reply, proudly.

"Well change into something decent for Christ's sake! This is our opening party..."

"What?"

"We're supposed to be making an impression, not pissing about like some Oriental nutcase!"

"What?" I exclaim.

"Ssh!" he replies.

I'll push him over. I don't care if he's my friend, I'll push him over! But Mrs Marsden-Hunt puts her arm around her son, drawing him into her conversation.

"Jules, you know Brian don't you? Brian Jones of the Rolling Stones?"

"I'm a great fan of yours," Jules purrs.

I've heard of the Rolling Stones. They're a rock group. Jules is telling him all about Amazing Arts. Brian listens and everyone looks at him, even though he's not the one talking.

I've got a funny feeling that, when I came up the stairs, Brian was just behind me. They were looking at him, admiring him, adoring him. No-one was looking at me. And there I was, nodding left and right like some king acknowledging his people, placing my hand on people's heads to heal them. Jules is right, I'm a laughing stock.

I can't move. I'm so embarrassed. I thought everyone was admiring me when it was a famous pop star behind me. I feel as if everyone is laughing at me.

"Hi!" says a friendly voice.

It's the Australian geezer who was being browbeaten by Stella about her gas.

"What do you want?" I ask grumpily.

He sees that I'm unhappy. It's a scorching look he gives me. But then he ignores it.

"I couldn't help noticing your gear," he says. "Is it a Geringsing?"

How does he know?

"Yes," I say, pleased. "How do you know?"

"I travel through Bali all the time on my way to and from Oz."

"Oz?"

"Yeah."

I'm incredulous.

"But isn't that a magical land somewhere over the rainbow?"

He laughs. It's infectious. I don't know if I'm joking or not.

"Sure is," he says.

What does he mean?

"And that's where you come from?"

He sees that I am confused.

"Oz - Australia."

"Oh. Australia..."

What must it be like?

"What do people do there? Is it civilised?"

He laughs, but it's kindly.

"Same as here, pretty much. I was a lawyer."

"A lawyer? Wow!"

He's older than me. He knows about the world. But he is kind and patient.

"I'm sorry I was a bit grumpy when you said hi," I admit.

"Why were you grumpy, er..."

He doesn't know my name.

"Andy."

"Jim."

Should we shake hands? We just smile at each other.

"So how come you were grumpy, Andy?"

"Oh. Nothing. Jules, who's our leader, said we have to make a good impression and I shouldn't be pissing around like some Oriental nutcase. He's right of course. When I was coming up the stairs I thought everyone was admiring me. But they were admiring Brian Jones and I was acting like I was someone special."

"You are someone special."

"No I'm not. I'm fat for one thing and when you're fat, you are already admitting defeat."

Jim's eyes open. His mouth opens. His whole face opens.

"No!"

He almost screams it. I look around to see if anyone's looking at us. They aren't.

"Andy," he says.

He puts his hand on my shoulder. He caresses my cheek. He is homosexual but I don't mind.

"Listen to me," he says. "This fame thing is crap, isn't it?"

He's really asking me.

"Yes. But maybe I'm just envious"

"No need," he says. "We all have different qualities, don't we?"

"I suppose so."

"You have qualities, Andy. Just because you are not famous, or born with a silver spoon in your mouth, it doesn't mean that the world doesn't need you. He leans into me. Will he kiss me? No. It's just kindness.

"As for being fat, even if you were, it's just how you are. Yeah? It's okay."

"But other people think..."

He shakes his head.

"What other people think isn't worth thinking about. Do you think there should be atom bombs pointed at millions of ordinary, innocent people?"

"No."

"Do you think that half the world should be rich while the other half are starving to death?"

"No."

"Do you think that being white is better than being black? Or that men are better than women? Thin better than fat, tall better than short? I mean, who decides these things?"

"I don't know...tall, thin, white men?"

Jim's a tall, thin, white man. He giggles. I giggle.

"Bullshit, isn't it?" he confides. "Thing is - be who you want, do what you want. Take drugs! Stay up all night! Break down the barriers between sexes and races! Bugger the fascists and - above all - have fun!"

"Wow! - Really?"

"Really."

His lips are so close, I could kiss him.

"So what are you doing in England, then?" I ask.

"I'm involved with Oz Magazine."

"Oh.. Is it about Australia?"

"That's where Richard and I come from, but really it's about changing things."

"Oh that's good. I think we've got a picture coming out in your magazine."

"Are you a photographer?"

"No," I say quickly. "Amazing Arts."

I point to the banner above us.

"Right! I'm with you. The Kit Hogarth painting. So you represent him, do you?"

"Well not me personally."

"Sure. But how does it work? Does Amazing Arts take a percentage?"

"I don't know. Of the money you mean?"

Jim nods.

"I don't think so," I say. "I think that the point is that there are all these wonderful young artists about and Jules wants to help them."

Jim is nodding in agreement. I knew he'd approve.

"Good on you," he says. "I only ask because there are all these greedy agents about, ripping off the artists."

"Oh, we wouldn't do that. Would we Jules?"

Jules is still chatting up Brian, and seems irritated by my interruption until he sees Jim.

"What is it, Andy?"

"We don't rip artists off, do we?"

Jules shares a look with Brian and Jim.

"Course we don't rip them off. We're not breadheads!"

"So is Kit Hogarth here tonight?" asks Jim.

Jules scans the faces.

"He's somewhere about..."

Jules has taken over. He leads them off to find Kit. Jim grins at me.

"You coming?"

I follow on. The living room is so crowded, the music so loud. Trying to get between people, I trip over the side of something hard. A platform, all down one side of the room. It's lit by a huge stage light. Kit's paintings line the walls behind it.

Jules is talking with everyone at once. Is that what I'm supposed to do? There are a group of intense intellectual types next to me.

"Hallo," I say, warmly. "Welcome to Amazing Arts. I'm Andy."

The group, three blokes and a fierce girl with no make-up and short, cropped hair, mumble their names. I don't catch them. I don't know what to say next.

"Thing is," I say. "Do what you want. Stay up all night! Smoke drugs and - above all - have fun!"

I am confident of this, because Jim said it to me. But it makes them very angry.

"Fun?" asks one of the blokes, derisively.

"Typical decadent imperialist," spits the girl.

"Do you think you're going to change anything by sitting around stoned?" asks the bloke.

The other two nod in furious agreement.

"No," I admit.

I'm going to have to change my tune.

"So what is fun?" demands the girl.

"You're right!" I say. "Fun's a waste of time! What we need is hard work!"

"Not hard work," the bloke corrects me. "What we need is revolution."

The others murmur at the awe-inspiring truth.

"Revolution," I say.

They nod, sagely.

"Moloch! Whose mind is pure machinery!" says the girl. "Moloch, whose blood is running money! Moloch, whose fingers are ten armies! Moloch, whose breast is a cannibal dynamo! Moloch whose ear is a smoking bomb!!"

"Moloch," I say.

"Ginsberg," says the girl.

"Moloch Ginsberg," I say, smiling and waving goodbye.

Phew!

"Hallo. I couldn't help overhearing, when you were talking to Brian. What was he saying?"

It's the Red Indian squaw girl. What's she on about?

"These are my friends, Zecky and Moodri."

"Oh, hallo Zecky...Moodri."

Zecky is sitting against the wall, strumming his guitar. Moodri, a girl with a sweet, faraway smile, is accompanying him on bongos.

"Nice music," I say.

Zecky smiles in appreciation and carries on strumming.

I'm kneeling down beside them.

"Your gear's beautiful, man," he says.

"It's Geringsing Wayang," I admit.

"Too much."

"It's supposed to have magical properties."

"Far out."

"Wards off evil spirits, actually."

"Do you know Brian Jones then?" asks Moodri, tapping away at her bongos.

"No."

"Pippin said you came with him."

"He did," says the squaw who must be Pippin.

"Well I don't know him but it's not the point. The truth is the fame thing is crap. We've all got our own qualities. We've got to stay up all night and have fun. No. I mean - revolution!"

"No man. It won't work man," says Zecky. "Revolution's for the birds."

"Is it?" I ask.

"What you do, you become. Don't try and fight it, man. Get away!"

"We're getting away," Moodri informs me. "Jason and Ross are buying an island."

"Are they?" I ask. "Where?"

It sounds wonderful. I've always liked islands, ever since 'The Island of Adventure' by Enid Blyton.

"It's in the Outer Hebrides. Far away from the atom bombs," Zecky explains.

"Good idea," I say, encouragingly.

"Yeah man. Like, we might be the last people on the planet."

"What's the island like? Does it have electricity?"

"No man. We don't need that kind of shit."

"But how will you survive?"

"Self sufficiency."

"Self sufficiency," I repeat, taking it in.

"We'll farm the pure earth with our bare hands," says Moodri.

As Zecky, Moodri and Pippin witter on about natural foods and basket weaving, my eyes wander around the smoky, crowded room. It is all good and wonderful? Or is it pretentious shit?

Kit is looking down at me.

"Andy," he says.

"Hallo Kit."

"Your clothes..."

He crouches down where I am.

"...What made you choose them?" he asks.

"Everything else in the boutique was ugly. And then I saw them, Kit."

He looks right at me.

"Who are you?" he asks.

"I don't know."

"I've got an acid tab. Do you want to share it?"

He gets out a tiny pill and breaks it in half. It's bitter, but I eventually swallow it. Kit crouches beside me. I feel good that he's beside me. Maybe I'm homosexual. I certainly have great love for some of my male friends. And of them all, even Jules, Kit is the one I worship. Everyone has a powerful response to him. Nobody knows who he is and yet, when he speaks, it opens your eyes and when you see his pictures, you get drawn into other people's thoughts, and hopes and pains and pettiness and...

"Well I think it's cruel to eat animals," says a girl standing above me.

I can see up her skirt. She's wearing pink knickers. So what?

"Animals have feelings just like us," continues the girl.

"My brother's a pig," says an American guy dressed in bangles and beads.

"Yeah," the girl agrees. "Cos animals are our brothers."

"No," says the Yank. "My brother. He's a fucking pig! A cop! - He fucking reported me for dodging the draft - He gave them my fucking address in London!"

"I hate the pigs," says the girl with pink knickers.

Zecky, Moodri, Pippin and some other dopey, peaceful people are playing and singing songs, which clash with the loud rock music on the hi-fi.

Kit grins at me. There's a burning feeling in the pit of my chest. It isn't unpleasant, but it makes me need to breathe.

My eyes and ears float about the room.

"There were ten of us."

"Wow."

"We were all doing it to each other, you know?"

"Beautiful. Have you ever done it in the park?"

"Which park?"

The room whirls.

"Are you coming on the demo?"

"When is it?"

"Saturday."

"Where?"

"Hyde Park to Downing Street."

"What's it against?"

"Dunno."

"Okay. I'll come. Will you come Nicola?"

This strange burning in my chest. It's energy. Everything around me is like music.

"What's your sign, Pierre?"

Pierre does a V-sign and thinks it's funny.

"It's her third abortion."

"I think the pill is making me fat."

"Only it turned out to be our planet. And we were the murderers!"

"Did you hear? We're going to the moon. It's official."

"Whatever we imagine, comes true."

"Da Vinci drew a helicopter."

"Nostradamus said the world will end with two great powers blowing each other up."

"1984."

"It's frightening."

"Don't cry Debby. We'll change it. We'll make the world beautiful."

The thought explodes in my mind. 'We'll make the world beautiful.' I see. They fear, after two world wars and two atom bombs, that the people in charge will blow the world up. And it's our job - all the young people - to change it. We've got to make the world beautiful.

I listen in on conversations. Theatre, happenings, multimedia. There's a place in Covent Garden called the Arts Lab where famous people mix with all the rest of us and everyone is on a huge mattress and some make love and bands play. There are theatre shows, movies and strange things happen...

"We're choking our planet to death..."

"I've got chakras there, there, there and there!"

She's pointing at her crutch.

"That's a chakra?" asks a little froggish man in a velvet suit, excited.

"Yes," she says. "Hang on. I think I've missed one."

The velvet frog grins.

“Let me help you find it.”

I look at all the girls in the room. I look at their chakras. It’s a wonderful feeling. If I was confident, I could make love with all these beautiful ladies. Without it being wrong. Without it being for life. Without their minding. That’s right. Because they would enjoy it too.

They take the pill every morning. Got to remind Amanda. Where is Amanda? I’ve missed some rehearsals because of the decorating.

The room whirls again. The acid tab is working inside me. Everything is significant, my one chance to glimpse the truth, before I return to earth and resume my mortal life of fear and insignificance.

“The straights don’t know what’s hit them. They’re really scared now.”

Listen to the voices. They don’t just have opinions. They are actually trying to change the world. And they believe that they are succeeding.

“The straights are morally bankrupt. And they know it. Revolution’s just around the corner. I mean, look what’s happening! – Even in the States!”

Apparently there are riots all over America and Europe. In France, it’s near to revolution. All the workers - millions of them - and all the students, set up barricades. The riot police had to withdraw and all the people in France are against the government and its army. Amazing.

Just think. For the first time in history, we have a bomb that can blow up the whole world and destroy everything that lives. The Americans and Russians keep threatening.

What if their leaders are mad? My Dad says that power corrupts. What if they are mad, like Hitler? What if they care more about their personal power than they do about us?

My mind whirls - What if it was a con? What if the leaders all met together and said -

“The best way to control our people is to keep them scared.”

But another leader says -

“But they will hate us.”

And another leader says -

“What if my bombs point at your people, and your bombs point at my people?”

And all the leaders laugh because they’ve realised that all they have to do is make enemies.

That's why it's so serious. That's why the hippies hate violence. As for me, it's no good me saying that 'If anyone gets on my wick, I'll push them over.' I've got to find another way to feel strong.

Kit takes my hand. He leads me up onto the platform. Jules is handing out pieces of paper. He gives me one.

I'm on the platform looking down. I'm so high and I can see into everyone's hearts. Their bodies and faces twist into animal shapes. Their voices are the squawking, chattering jungles.

"I travel so fast I'm flying."

"Who said that?"

"Fuck off Manfred."

"Far out."

"Stop tinkling those bells, man, it's giving me a headache."

"I think you ought to make a speech, Jules," says his mother.

Sonia Marsden-Hunt has a face like a large plum. Jules' face is the skull of a goat. He gave me a piece of paper. It's in my hand.

'Amazing Arts.'

It's our headed notepaper. A wonderful drawing by Kit forms a margin all the way round. The piece of paper itself is art. Even our address and our names...

'Company Secretary Andy Parvin.'

I can't believe what I'm reading. My name is on the notepaper. I look up. The light dazzles me. The beautiful people gather around as Jules begins to speak. He is telling them about all the amazing things Amazing Arts is going to do. I can't believe I'm part of this. And it's just beginning.

I should be listening to Jules.

"The quality of creative work is an end in itself. Not for money, or fame, or power..." he says, in his quiet, cultivated voice. "Enlightenment is not the domain of the Establishment. On the contrary, the Establishment discourages all forms of originality..."

"You can say that again!" echoes his mum, watching proudly from the side.

The trouble is that Jules is being very intellectual and people are starting to chat again. We've got to help. Kit won't do it, he looks awkward and embarrassed just standing on the platform. He hates being looked at.

Walt can't help. He's slowly flapping his arms as if he's about to rise up like an angel. Walt is what my granddad would call 'two springs short of a cuckoo clock'.

"On December the thirteenth, we want all the young artists to gather here and..."

"Thirteenth? That's unlucky, man," says a goofy bloke.

People giggle. Are they laughing at Jules? Zecky and Moodri have started playing guitar and bongos again. Jules is finding it hard to go on.

"The thirteenth of December," repeats Jules.

They've stopped listening. He's too soft.

"Artists' Day..." he mumbles.

"Yes!" I bellow, jumping up beside him. "National Artists' Day!"

Silence. Now what?

"December the thirteenth. That's when everyone will become an artist! That's because on December the thirteenth everyone will wake up and be different. Remember the date. Put it in your magazines and tell all your chums because, on that day, Amazing Arts will be surrounded by thousands of artists. And we will make them famous. And do you know why? Because otherwise the world will explode and there will be revolution. And what's the good of revolution, if the world isn't beautiful? - Cos it IS beautiful!"

"Yeah!" someone cries, encouraging me.

"Yeah, and every day will be fun!"

"Yeah!" cry a few more.

"Yeah, and there'll be free drugs on the National Health!"

"Yeah!" cries most of the room.

"And no more bombs and wars. And no more horrible jobs. And no more diseases. We will be free! And it's all going to happen on the thirteenth of December. And all because of Amazing Arts! So let's give three cheers for my friend Jules!"

I turn, proudly, to Jules. What's wrong? He's furious. He's pushing me out of the way and taking over, mumbling again. Why? I was only trying to help.

Everything's going funny. My hands reach up slowly and push forward. My hands are pushing forward. Jules, tall and slim, goes over like a tree. People scream and scatter. Is someone hurt?

Oh shit. I've pushed Jules over. In front of everyone. He'll kill me when he gets up. I'd better make myself scarce. Oh.

The room whirls. Rushing air, freezing cold. I'm falling and falling forever and ever. Got to open my eyes! Stars whirling round and pedestrians like tiny insects below. I'm on a rooftop. Christ! Shut my eyes again quick. Now. Breathe. That's it. Even breathing. Now, slowly - open my eyes.

I'm still on a rooftop.

"Help! Help!"

"It's alright Andy."

"Where are you?"

"Here beside you."

"I can't see you Kit."

"That's because you've got your eyes shut."

"Oh yes. Oh God! Are we on a roof?"

"Yes."

"Why? For fuck's sake, why?"

"You passed out. You needed some air. Do you want some water?"

We're in a gully, between two pointy slate roofs. If it wasn't for a low brick wall at each end, you could just walk off to your death. I don't feel safe up here.

Kit encourages me to drink. It tastes wonderful. I can feel the sap flowing through me again, like a shaft of energy between the centre of my chest and the starry sky.

"It's just the acid, Andy. You're tripping."

"Oh yes. I remember. When will it stop?"

"It'll be fine."

It'll be fine, he says. Just go to hang on to the thought. What was it? Yes, just got to remember not to think that I can fly.

"I can't fly."

"Yes you can, Andy. You can fly as high as you want."

"Don't say that."

"That speech you gave. It was fucking hilarious. Do you remember doing it? Andy?"

"Was that real then?"

"You said that the whole world was going to change and peace would reign."

"Did I?"

"Yes. You said it was going to happen on the thirteenth of December."

Kit, usually so serious, holds his sides and rocks with mirth. In between, he tries to continue.

"You said...you said Jules....You said Jules was going to make it happen!"

"Did Jules hit me?"

"No, you hit him Andy."

I hit Jules.

"Will he chuck me out?"

"No. You fainted. Everyone laughed. It was great. They thought the whole thing was an act."

"Did Jules think that?"

"Who cares what Jules thinks? Who cares what anyone thinks? It's all bullshit. Everyone spouts opinions. They're like costumes at a ball."

"But that's just your opinion, Kit."

"It's what I observe."

"Don't you believe in anything, then?"

He shrugs but, as if to answer, steps up onto the little wall. I'm a bit alarmed.

"You do believe in things Kit. I remember at school. You were in love with Beatrice!"

Kit stares at me, as if I've wounded him terribly. No, it's not that. It's that - he still loves her now. Blimey.

"Still?"

"And why not? Love isn't a tap you can just turn off. You don't love someone because they love you, do you?"

My head thinks about Amanda. I don't know the answer.

"Surely, Andy, you love someone because you recognise something in them, you connect..."

"So you believe in love, Kit."

He struts up and down the wall.

"A belief will always come to grief - An insight will, however, shed light."

"Who said that?"

"Me."

"When?"

"Just now."

I'm stunned. It was brilliant. It rhymed. What was it? Forgotten.

"Anyway. You still love her then."

"Shall I tell you why I love Beatrice?"

"Yes. Please. And please get off the wall, Kit."

He jumps down but then he sits on it. I have to sit beside him to show I'm not scared.

"I have awful parents as you know, Andy. But mine are just a mess. Beatrice's parents are nasty. They're nasty, cold people. It's like the Snow Queen story. You know."

"I can't remember."

"In the story, it's a little boy who gets a sliver of ice in his heart and the Snow Queen whisks him off to be a slave in her palace. But his little sister saves him and melts the ice in his heart. Well, anyway, I think, if Beatrice could see me, then she would break free of her parents' spell."

“But Kit. If she doesn’t love you back...Won’t it hurt?”

There’s a clattering. Someone is scrambling out onto the roof. I can only see a silhouette.

“There you are. I thought you must have gone.”

It’s Amanda.

“Don’t come any further,” I warn her. “You could push us off!”

“I won’t push you off, honestly Andy. Hi Kit.”

“Hi.”

Kit and Amanda kiss.

“I better be getting in,” he says and leaves.

Was he just staying here to look after me?

“I’ve got wonderful news, darling,” says Amanda. “Oh, you’re freezing cold. Come inside.”

We have to crawl through a window to get back into the loft. She wraps us in blankets and cuddles me close.

“What’s the news then?” I ask.

“Oh - I’ve got us a gig.”

We have got a McCormick Automatic Silkscreen Machine! I don't know what it means. Jules says it means we can print our own posters. It also has one other fabulous advantage. We can undertake commercial printing to fund all our other good deeds.

I am in a whirlwind of excitement. When I come in from work, the Amazing Arts offices are full of interesting people.

"This is Jerry. He runs the Arts Lab. We're working on an exhibition of Kit's line drawings."

"This is Spig from the Craft Experience."

"...from Video Circus..."

"...from Bink the Barking Bonk Save the Wigwam..."

I'm a bit bewildered. Tired from working as a counter clerk all day. And yet I'm beginning to feel part of it. Because we're all part of it.

Even Beatrice, the most beautiful girl from school and the object of Kit's undying passion, is part of it. Her dad is a journalist, so Beatrice has got a column in a Sunday paper. Jules shows me. There's a picture of her and, beside it, it says:

BEATRICE MOORE

Voice Of The Young

The big heading is:

FREAKS ON THE MOVE

Jules is grinning like a mad thing. He's incredibly impressed. So am I. He's breathing down my neck. I suppose I'd better read the little writing.

Cosmic? Psychedelic? Geodesic? Macrobiotic? Meditation? Fusion? Riots? Revolution?

You don't get it?

Well, here is some straight talking for all you straights out there!

This is good.

You are out of control. You don't know what is happening.

Let me take you on a trip.

We are at the Arts Lab, deep in London's swinging Covent Garden. ...Mama Cass is in tonight and the joint is buzzing.

There's a new film by Andy Warhol. - "Vagina Rex and the Gas Oven", a new musical. - A sculpture exhibition by John Lennon and Yoko Ono. - Instead of cinema seats, hundreds of hippies, freaks and beautiful people are sprawled upon a huge mattress.

What's happening? you ask.

I smile. My smile says:

Listen to the people!

You look at the hundreds of peaceful eyes reflecting the silver screen.

But they aren't saying anything! you cry.

You're getting uptight. - The more we smile at you, the more uptight you get!

A beautiful chick, from Haight Asbury in San Francisco, offers you a reefer.

You are out of control. - You don't know what's happening. - Your fear overpowers you. - Before you know it, you have injected the drug. - You are hooked and your soul connects with all the other souls in the universe of beautiful people!

Listen to the people! - They are talking about art. - It is a psychedelic, multi-media, five-dimensional, whatever-you-think-it-is pop explosion!

Pow! You understand everything completely. - You're so high, you're flying. - You are on an ashram in Israel, chanting mantras, meditating, washing your hands in the Ganges and making the desert bloom.

Because, you know, we aren't racials, like the straights. We dig the spades. They are the real people!

Listen to the people! - We are talking about the assassination of Martin Luther King and Bobby Kennedy. - We are talking about Russian tanks in Prague and American bombs in Vietnam. - We are talking about revolution. - We are talking about riots in Chicago, in Berkeley. - All the workers and students of France on the streets of Paris. - The siege of Grosvenor Square.

So don't ask "What's happening?"

It's happening everywhere!

And don't ask "When is the revolution coming?"

It's here! It's now!

You dig? - Your world is as dead as the dodo! - Your children are not your children!

Because you straights are on the run and us freaks are on the move!

So watch out!

I'm so impressed. It seems as if we are everywhere. Our generation is taking over the world. Anything can happen. It's just going to get better and better!

I decide I must ring Mum and put her mind at rest.

"I realise you must have been worried sick," I say, "but I'm making a good career for myself. Kit's work is going to be in all the papers and on cards and in books. And, did you know? - We've got a McCormick Automatic Silkscreen Machine!"

"A what?"

"It means we can print Kit's posters."

"That's all very well for Kit. The question is, are you making any money?"

"We don't care about money, Mum. We're doing it for art. To save the world."

"You haven't left the post office, have you Andrew?"

"No."

"Good. I'm glad to hear it."

"I thought you didn't like me working at the post office, Mum."

"Yes. Well it's a job. At least you're safe. I'm afraid there comes a time when us parents just have to wash our hands and draw a line under it."

"But that's what I'm saying. All my friends from school are doing wonderful new things, to change the face of the globe. And I've got very good prospects so there's no need for you two to be worried sick."

"We're not worried sick."

"Aren't you?"

"We're having a lovely time. We're off to Majorca on Monday."

"Are you? What about Colin?"

"Colin's managing a farm in the hills of Colombia. He sent us pictures. They regard him very highly over there."

"Oh. So you're not worried about him."

"No."

"Or about me."

"No. As you say, you're making your way in the world. In fact, both our sons are doing rather well. Mr Bailey, next door, was very impressed. His eldest has just dropped out of Reading University without so much as a by-your-leave."

"Oh. So, you're alright then."

"Yes. I've told you, Andrew. We're off to Majorca."

"Great."

Sinking feeling when I put the phone down. How come Colin can run a farm in South America? Everyone else is doing so well. I don't know what I'm doing.

Jules realises that I'm confused. He gives me a special task. I've to get the printing under way. It's important because it will give us an income.

"First of all," he says, "we've got to find a place to put the McCormick."

"I've got an idea. We could put it in the art room."

"It's huge, Andy."

"How huge?"

"It weights two and a half tons."

"Oh. We'll have to build a shack."

"Where, Andy?"

"In the garden?"

He looks at me, curiously.

"What garden?"

I shrug. I've run out of ideas.

"Never mind," says Jules. "Walt knows this guy called Michel, who runs the Dairy. We may be able to put it there."

It turns out, we can put the McCormick in the Dairy. It's in Chalk Farm. I have to meet the others there after work.

It's different from what I imagined. For a start, there are no cows. Just artists, each with their own section.

The McCormick is indeed huge. It takes up a third of the space in the draughty old barn we've rented.

Each night we visit a local building site to nick timber and other things we need. It's dangerous and exciting work. We find a hole in the wire fencing and climb through. There are lights, so we have to try to keep in the shadows. It's like a mission in the war and we mustn't get caught.

We split up to find the things we need. Joists, floor boards, panelling, window frames to use as drying racks. I've got a huge bag of cement on my back. It isn't just climbing out that's scary. We've to make our way back through the dark streets. If anyone should see us, they'd know. The cement feels like it's crushing the bones in my shoulders. I'm pouring with sweat. But thrilled.

Third night. Our final mission, only the builders have got wise to us. They've fixed the hole in the fence. Kit knows where there are some wire clippers. He nips back to get them. We hover in the shadows, smoking cigarettes, sizing up the mission, finalising the plan.

It's a military operation. We sense each other's every move, we don't waste time.

Dogs are howling. They've got dogs on the building site! They've beaten us now. We circle the wire fence.

"There!" hisses Jules.

We see the dogs, sitting, panting. Alsations. Five of them. Oh well, we've already got most of the stuff we need. Perhaps we can do without.

"They're on chains," Kit observes.

Walt giggles. In a trice, we're round the other wide of the site, breaking in. Dogs howl. Let them howl. We fan out, grab the booty and scarper.

We pass people on the way back. But we are fierce. They don't dare to stop us, even though they know we're up to no good.

But what we're doing is very good. We're not doing it for evil gain. We're not trying to make money. We're doing it to help Kit and other young artists and because, as Jules tells me, the world needs them. The world could do with a breath of fresh air to blow away all the selfishness...

We've built a second floor in the rafters to store paper, inks and all the other gubbins. We've built drying racks and had three-phase electricity installed. Walt, Kit and Jules are a wonderful team and I join them evenings and weekends.

All of us have to learn about silkscreen printing. I sit in Maida Vale Library every lunch hour, poring over books, until I understand.

It's simple: Imagine a window-frame, hinged to a table-top. You stretch synthetic silk across the frame, to form a screen. Then you stick a stencil to it which is the negative version of your final image. You place your paper on the table-top, under the screen. Pour ink into the frame. Spread the ink with something called a squeegee. Lift the frame, remove the paper and there you have it - a beautiful silkscreen print!

Jules has put ads in papers announcing "Amazing Arts Printworks". I have to take some afternoons off work - stage a coughing fit or something. Jules hands me a list of phone numbers of people who've rung, asking for printing quotes.

Working out quotes is a skill in itself. Have to ring each of the potential clients twenty times.

"Amazing Arts here. Sorry to ring again, only I forgot to ask how many posters you want."

"Amazing Arts here. I forgot to ask how many colours."

"Amazing Arts. Yes it is me again. What size do you want them?"

"Amazing Arts. Yes, I've nearly got your quotation. But are they going to be line or half-tone? Will you be providing the artwork? What sort of paper do you want? When will you want them done by?"

I don't understand it, even when they tell me. I'm on the phone to Sericol every other minute, for the price of inks, screens, photographic stencils and advice. There are endless alternatives and combinations.

You could have gloss finish, matt finish, slow drying, quick drying inks. You could have a million grades of silk, from coarse to very fine. Negatives, positives,

enlargements, reductions. Was that with a border, or to bleed to the edges? To bleed or not to bleed...

In a frenzy, verging on hysteria, I tot up all the costs, estimating labour and profit. I'm exultant at having achieved it and all the money flowing through Amazing Arts' veins, bringing it to life.

When I ring, with their quotes, the clients are universally shocked.

"Five hundred and twenty-three pounds, four shillings and ninepence? Listen mate, I've been quoted thirty quid by someone else. If you think I'm going to pay five hundred quid for a bunch of black-and-white fliers, you want your fucking head examined."

Another said "Two thousand pounds? Amazing Arts certainly are Amazing!" And the line went dead.

I don't know why it makes me giggle. I start making up slogans.

"Amazing Arts - Amazing Prices!"

Jules is very cross.

Kit has got us a job. Our first real printing job. There's a shop opening over the road. "Lovely Rita's Magic Beanbag." Lovely Rita has been overland to India and discovered that you can buy a ton of Indian carpets for a quid and sell them over here for a hundred quid each.

We hate her. She's that wickedest of all creatures - a breadhead posing as a hippie. Kit likes the carpets though and Lovely Rita likes his drawings.

She's driven a hard bargain. A thousand posters for fifty quid. We're not exactly going to make a profit but everyone is jubilant at the order. Our first job. We are professionals.

We've hit a problem. Having installed the special high-powered electricity supply and switched on the McCormick Automatic Silkscreen Machine, nothing happens. The bloody machine doesn't work.

After hours of consultation with McCormick's in Scotland, it turns out we've got bits missing. Though no-one seems to be sure what bits. We can't even work out which model it is.

Anyway, Lovely Rita's posters have to be done by Monday and there is no chance of new parts arriving in time. We'll have to print the posters by hand.

I'm late. Mrs Pickles kept me behind because my counter was a shambles. Jules, Kit and Walt have rigged up a hand press but they haven't started. Waiting for me. We are a team.

We pour ink onto the screen, spread it by pushing the squeegee across, remove the paper and there is it - a beautiful silkscreen print. We admire it.

The second one, however, doesn't come out at all. Just a few black blotches. Kit works out that the screen is blocked. No problem. Clean the screen with 'thinner', wipe it dry and start again.

The third print is bleary from washing the screen but the fourth is almost as good as the first. Only a bit missing in the top corner.

The fifth print is blank. Screen blocked again. We clean it and proceed.

Jules realises what the underlying problem is. We have bought quick-drying ink for an automatic machine. There are two alternatives: Either clean the screen after each print or, like the McCormick, average thirty prints a minute. Okay? Ready? Jules feeds paper. Kit pulls the squeegee. A guy called Terry, who's wandered in, pours ink. Walt and I remove the wet prints and stack them on the drying racks.

We work like maniacs. When the racks are full, we spread them all over the floor. Then, as they dry, a second layer, a third and so on. Every time the screen clogs, we try to work faster. Paper goes in skew-whiff, ink gets spilled, bits of the stencil come adrift.

I skid into one of the drying racks and send hundreds of posters flying. Kit squeegees so hard, the screen develops a small tear. Heroically, we keep going. We know we have to print at least double, to have enough good ones.

In point of fact, there are no good ones. We've been printing all night and there isn't a print that doesn't have a huge blob on it, or a rip, or a footprint, or it's rumpled, or clumps of them all stuck together.

Lovely Rita freaks out. She says she will tell everyone that we are completely useless and we'll never work again. She even refuses to pay us.

We have to go back to the Dairy. It's the afternoon before we've got the new stencil and the right inks and thinners. We start, just as it's getting dark again. We have to concentrate. All the prints have to be perfect.

Terry, who's got his studio next door, brings in his record player. He has wonderful taste in music. Every time a record ends, he puts another one on. We listen to the Brahms Violin Concerto. I love it. The others haven't heard it before. They love it too. It's the most complex tangle of emotions. There's a Beatles song about loneliness called Eleanor Rigby, which is accompanied by a string quartet. Terry has an old LP called Dance Nights in Nigeria, full of wild drumming and beautiful singing.

Some people say they like jazz. Others like pop or folk or skiffle or rhythm and blues. I love all kinds of music. It takes me into other worlds and makes me feel alive.

It is light again by the time we get out. We're exhausted and it's too early for buses. With our precious prints, which are heavy, we struggle along Chalk Farm Road, through Camden, to Tottenham Court Road and right, into Goodge Street.

We can't believe our eyes! There are young people crowding around our offices, spilling into the streets. Hundreds. They have art folders, sculptures, and all sorts of strange, weird things that you don't know what they are.

"Christ!" gasps Jules.

His face has gone white. What's happening?

"It's Artists Day..." he says. "It must be the thirteenth..."

It is the thirteenth. I'd forgotten about Artists Day. The magazines must have published what we said at the party. Jules must have arranged it. And now all these artists have come and we've got to make them famous.

Jules sits us at different desks, so that we can see four artists at a time. We have paper and pen to write down details. There's a queue in front of me, like in the post office. Only at the post office you have to know which form and what the procedure is. Here, it's all up to me. I can decide.

It's hard to say no to artists, but when you see a few jagged lines and it's supposed to be "Eclipse of the Mind", I can't help shaking my head.

"I'm sorry," I say. "But this just will not do."

"Who are you to decide, man?"

"Sorry," I say. "Next!"

Some ugly chick with green lips starts giving me a load of pretentious shit about art and creativity and how women see things differently. She won't take no for an answer. Have to put my hands over my ears and go "La-la-la-la-la" till she goes away.

One guy is truly miserable that I have rejected his work. It's as if I have broken his will to live.

On the other hand, there are beautiful things too. A sculpture of a little boy, holding out a money box. An exquisite chart of the zodiac, yellow like a sun shining.

We work all day and into the evening. Still they keep coming. Finally it's dark and Jules goes to tell the remaining artists to piss off.

I've been working in the little room and it's stacked high with the paintings and stuff I've collected. Walt wonders in and starts nosing through it. Kit, in the doorway, gives a look of surprise and disappears. He comes back with Jules. They stand in the doorway.

"What the fuck have you done, Andy? What's all this?" Jules asks.

"It's the booty!" I proclaim, humorously.

"But you've taken all the artists' work away from them."

"Only the good stuff!"

"But how are we going to get it back to them? You have taken their addresses haven't you?"

"Nope."

"Phone numbers?"

"...It would've taken too long."

"Christ, Andy!"

"Look at this!" says Kit.

Jules and Kit study the works of art.

"What is this, Andy?"

I come over to check.

"It's a girl rubbing her tits," I explain.

"Why did you choose it Andy?"

"Well ...Nice tits."

"And what about this Andy?"

"It's the zodiac of all the astrological signs with pictures so you know what they all mean. For instance, this is Taurus. He's the ram."

"Shut up Andy."

Walt shows something to Kit. They're giggling.

"What's wrong?" I ask. "It's beautiful. All those wavy fields and that wild sky and the crows flying."

"It's a Van Gogh," says Kit. "Ever heard of Van Gogh?"

"Yes. He's a painter. So, are you telling me this is a Van Gogh?"

"Yes, Andy. Definitely. It's very famous."

I gasp. It's very famous. And we've got it. Then a sudden thought hits me.

"I must have met Van Gogh," I say, "only I never knew who he was."

No-one says a word. Jules points to the corner of the picture. I read it. It says "Athena Reproductions". Oh. It's a print. I've been tricked.

"Well some of them are good. That statue for example."

"Which statue, Andy?"

"The little boy, holding out his money box."

"That belongs to some charity. Look - the boy has callipers on his legs. It's to give money to the handicapped. Someone's nicked it from outside a shop."

Jules prowls about the room. He's thinking. I'm a bit demoralised.

"Well it's all shit!" he says, picking up a sweet picture of a girl with a tear in her eye, and flinging it down again. "And we haven't got their names and addresses anyway and it's not staying here. Get your ambulance round, Walt. We'll chuck the lot of it in the river."

"What if someone comes round wanting their work back?" I ask, as we're loading up.

"Tell them there's been an explosion," says Jules, grimly.

We drive in silence.

Everybody's knackered. We dump the art between some garages under the arches.

"Can I keep the girl rubbing her tits?" I ask.

"No!"

Amanda is waiting for us at Goodge Street. She's on the pavement as we draw up. I don't want to tell her about my mistake with the art.

"We've got the printing done!" I say, in a chirpy voice.

She nods. Doesn't even greet me. No-one greets anyone. We stomp upstairs without a word. The others go straight to bed.

"Fancy a coffee, Amanda?" I ask. "I'm having one."

Either she doesn't reply or I didn't hear her. Make her one anyway.

"Here you are."

She's sitting on the packages of posters. I proffer the drink. She looks up.

"Where were you Andy?"

"In the kitchen."

"Where were you tonight?"

"We had to do the Lovely Rita posters. I told you."

"You missed our gig, Andy."

"What?"

"The one we've been working for since the summer. Our first gig."

Shit. I knew there was something.

"I'm sorry."

She doesn't respond.

"What happened?"

"I waited for almost an hour. Then I went on and performed solo."

"Well done."

"Well done?"

"I'll make it up to you, Amanda."

"Don't bother."

"Please!" I say, coming over to kneel beside her.

She stands up.

"I don't know what the hell you're playing at, Andy," she says. "You're not a printer. You're not a businessman. You're paying rent for a room you don't have. You're working at a nine to five job you hate and devoting all the rest of your time to an enterprise you have no interest in and no talent for. You take no time to rehearse. I spend all my time getting us gigs and you don't even show up!"

Amanda strides out of the room, down the stairs and I can't stop her.

"How was your Christmas, Andy?" asks Jules, flinging his holdall down.

"Fine."

"Did you go over to your parents?"

"No. Anyway, they probably went to Barbados, or somewhere."

Jules tosses his overcoat on top of the holdall and strides into the kitchen.

"And you weren't with Amanda?" he calls.

"No."

I haven't seen anyone for a week and a half. Just been here on my own. Merry Christmas. Not even a telly. Been sleeping mainly. When Jules rang to say he was coming over, I told myself to clear up and make myself active and cheerful. But then I just sat here.

"The others will be arriving soon," he says.

"Oh."

The doorbell goes.

"Would you get it, Andy?"

I walk down the stairs. Round and round. Down and down. Open the door. A blast of cold, January air rushes in. It's a woman. She's dressed like Anna Karenina in a long, black, fur-trimmed, fitted coat. Her face is dazzling. Masses of dark, lustrous hair. Lustrous lips. Everything about her is lustrous. I gasp.

"Hallo Andy," she says.

It's Beatrice. The most beautiful girl in the school has become the most beautiful woman in the universe.

"...Schlmmblgerblgh..." I say.

She passes me. I shut the door and follow her upstairs. The way her body moves makes my mouth dribble. She catches me looking but my eyes won't budge.

At the top, Jules and Beatrice embrace. The kettle is boiling. I make cups of coffee and tea for people as they arrive.

Amanda arrives. What's she wearing? She looks like she's stepped out of a nursery rhyme, bonnet and all. What's she doing here? My heart goes thump thump thump. I've a job not to spill the drinks.

"What would you like to drink?"

She answers but I don't hear what she says.

Kit is chattering at Beatrice, eighteen to the dozen and grinning like a Cheshire cat. I've never seen him so happy. Is she joining Amazing Arts?

"Okay!" says Jules, bringing us to order. "A new year and new directions!"

"Nude erections?" I query.

I am ignored. Looking at the faces, I remember school and the whiskey affair. They could chuck Jules out. They could make Amanda leave. But they couldn't destroy our friendships.

Here we are, all together again and about to do great things. Jules is congratulating us on what we have achieved so far. Kit's pictures in Oz and IT are passed around. Examples of our printing work...

"Now it's time to move on," he tells us. "Beatrice here has been working as a journalist. That means she has experience with all facets of publishing - news agencies, deadlines, layouts, typesetters, national distribution, etcetera. Anyway, Beatrice and I have been talking it through and come to a decision: Amazing Arts will publish its own national weekly magazine."

Jules pauses for effect. I am dazzled and surprised that the others don't break into spontaneous applause. Walt is playing with something in his hands. It's a spider.

"What's it going to cost?" he asks. "Only I don't think my trust'll go for it."

"It won't cost a penny, Walt. Beatrice, perhaps you'd explain."

Beatrice looks at each of us in turn and begins to explain in her wonderful, husky voice.

"Typesetters and printers will give us up to ninety days credit, by which time we'll have returns on nine issues. Distributors will take us on for commission on a sale-or-return basis. That's about it. We don't fork out a penny."

"Why don't we do a circus?" asks Walt.

The spider is dangling by a thread from the tip of his finger.

"Well, we can do a circus, Walt," Jules assures him. "But now we're doing a magazine. It will be designed to appeal to a young, alternative readership and will feature a mix of news items and cartoons."

"I don't want to draw cartoons!" blurts Kit.

"Yes Kit, I'm aware of that. Listen, this magazine may not be your cup of tea. We've set up the silkscreen printing and the art agency to create outlets for your work. The magazine will be a totally separate thing, run by Beatrice and myself."

Kit's mouth is open. He's gobsmacked. Beatrice smiles at him, beneficently.

"You can still contribute," she purrs in her loveliest, creamiest voice. "Page layout and, perhaps, the occasional illustration."

"What you mean is, that you two will be off, starting your magazine and I'll be left running everything else!"

"No Kit, I don't mean that," Jules replies, firmly. "You'll have Walt here, working with you."

Kit splutters and I can understand why. Walt is a very kind person, but you can never rely on him to do anything. He is too bonkers. Kit can't say that, of course.

"I'm aware that it's going to need a bit of a cabinet reshuffle," quips Jules. "That's why I invited Amanda along."

We all look at Amanda.

"Jules just phoned me up," she explains.

"I know you have your music, Amanda, and of course you will have to weigh things up."

Jules is speaking softly to Amanda, in his kindest voice. I like it when my friends like each other.

"While you are setting up your music, we could really do with your help at Amazing Arts. What do you reckon?"

Amanda looks around, to see what we think. She looks at me. I hope she says yes.

"Is that it then?" spits Kit.

Don't spoil it Kit, I beg you.

"No," Jules replies. "Andy, here, has been working at the post office ever since we started. Every second he's had off, he's helped us set things up, as well as donating his wages. It's my suggestion that Andy should be brought in, to help Kit and Walt, on a full-time basis. That is, if Andy can bear to leave his job."

My face is burning with pleasure. It's as if I've won the pools. I am being accepted. I glance at Amanda, to see if everything can be alright between us now. But she is concerned about Kit. His eyes are fixed helplessly upon Beatrice. Beatrice is looking anxiously at Jules and Jules is looking at me. He wants an answer.

"Yes!" I say, nodding furiously.

Kit leaps from his chair. He punches Jules in the face and storms out of the room. Amanda rushes out after him.

Beatrice cradles Jules' head. His nose is bleeding. I rush into the kitchen, grab a wet sponge and push it onto Jules' face.

The sponge is full of dirty water. It merges with the blood and goes trickling down his clothes. Oh dear. No time to think. Got to squeeze out the sponge.

Beatrice gives a shriek. I've squeezed it out all over her.

"You absolute moron!" she hisses, wrenching the sponge from my grasp, before I can do any more damage.

I'm embarrassed. I look at Walt to see if he's noticed my humiliation. But Walt is concentrating on his spider.

"I don't think a magazine is such a good idea," he says, not looking up.

I never know what to think when everyone disagrees. I like it when everyone is united. Then I know what to do.

"Would anyone like a drink?" I ask, nonchalantly.

No-one replies. Perhaps I'll put the kettle on anyway. Gather the cups. Keep myself busy. That's what I'll do. Whatever needs doing. If I'm to work full-time for Amazing Arts, I'll be full of energy. I'll have this place spotless. I'll make breakfasts so that everyone else is full of energy and ready for work. I'll answer the phone calls and work on the printing. I'll get the estimates right. I'll make sure nothing goes wrong and soon we will be making lots of money. I'll keep a happy smile on my face and soon everyone will be happy again.

A door slams. Kit? No, Amanda. I hover in the kitchen doorway, trying to give her a cheerful smile but she stamps straight up to the couch, where Beatrice is attending to Jules' nose.

"You bastards!" she yells, looming over them. "You're so fucking wrapped up in your own dreams and schemes. You don't fucking care how you treat other people. What's the fucking point, Jules, eh? Are you going to gain the whole world and lose your soul? Is that it?"

Jules laughs bitterly, as if what Amanda says is too ridiculous for words. Why is she attacking him anyway? Jules is the one who got hit. Surely she knows that he's just doing what's best for all of us.

"Don't I even warrant a reply?" she asks. "I mean, he's your best friend. Everything you do is organised around Kit. It is the quality of his work that gives you credibility. Isn't it?"

Jules won't say a word. Amanda is very agitated.

"Don't you care? You don't, do you!"

She's trying to goad him.

"That's the truth, isn't it. The moment you got your hands on the exclusive rights to his work, that was it. Right? Onward and upward?"

Jules flinches.

"Got you where it hurts, have I? Well go on then, do your worst. His work is greater than all your petty manoeuvres. You won't destroy him!"

"Destroy him?"

Jules jumps up from the sofa.

"Destroy him?" he repeats, incredulously.

He stuffs a wodge of toilet paper up his nose to stop the dribbling. It looks funny, but Jules is not concerned with the shallow appearances of things. She's got him riled.

"You think that setting up a printing press to print his work is an act of destruction?" he storms. "You think that setting up an art agency and getting his work in magazines is a betrayal? Do you?"

"No, not that," she admits.

"No!" he agrees. "And ask yourself this: What has anyone else ever done for Kit? His parents? His teachers? His so-called friends? And apart from poncing about like little Bo-Peep, what have you ever done to help?"

"Nothing," she confesses.

I think she's going to lose this argument.

"Nothing!" he confirms, prowling about the room, like a leopard. "The fact is, Kit's work is unknown and it will remain unknown unless someone does something about it. Do you agree?"

"Yes," she says. "But that doesn't give you the right to walk all over him."

"Walk all over him? What are you talking about?"

Jules stops pacing. He seems to hang in mid-air. He's having an idea. Wow.

"It's business isn't it! You hate anything to do with business. As soon as money or contracts or - dare I say it - profit comes into the picture, all you little hippies freak out! Anything to do with business and it's got to be corrupt. Well, open your fucking eyes!"

"You open your fucking eyes!" she roars back at him.

It's a stand-off. Jules looks genuinely bewildered. Amanda turns to face Beatrice.

"Well Beatrice knows. You know he loves you. Don't you!"

Beatrice has rearranged herself on the sofa. She would look wonderfully glamorous if it wasn't for all the dirty water and blood stains down her blouse. She returns Amanda's stare.

"Well?" asks Amanda.

Beatrice shrugs. Amanda asks Jules.

"You know, don't you Jules?"

I know. But Jules shakes his head. He knows nothing about that sort of thing. It puzzles him.

"So, do you mean that Kit's feelings come before everything else?" he asks. "Because he's an artist, we've got to treat him like some child-emperor in our midst? Whatever he wants? Beatrice and I can't start a magazine - a magazine that will reach thousands of readers, with the work of hundreds of gifted young writers, with insights that will alter people's perceptions forever - and we can't do that because Kit has feelings for Beatrice?"

"Jules!" says Amanda, in a deep, passionate voice. "Listen to yourself! Can you hear the scorn with which you say the word 'feelings'? As if they are some small inconvenience, a price to pay for progress. Perhaps you don't know what love is?"

She peers at Jules. With a sad smile, he shakes his head.

"No," he admits.

"Perhaps you don't mean any harm," she suggests.

"I don't."

"Then let me tell you."

As Amanda starts speaking, Kit appears, silently, in the doorway. She doesn't notice him.

"Kit has loved Beatrice since school. Remember, Beatrice, when you and I were friends and we used to sit together in geography and Kit would draw all those amazing rain forests and savannahs and pass them secretly to you? Remember that dazzling sketch of a couple in a boat, sailing down the Amazon? It was obviously Kit and you. You couldn't possibly fail to be aware of how he felt about you. How he feels. You were flattered. You encouraged him. I don't know what he sees in you, but it doesn't matter. He paints for love. And he loves you."

"I don't," says Kit.

Amanda is shocked. She sinks back, horrified, as if she has betrayed him. But Kit just fixes his eyes on Beatrice.

"I don't love you," he says.

He pulls an easel from behind the sofa Beatrice is sitting on.

"When I used to play over at your house, when we were little, I noticed that your parents criticised everything, all the time."

Kit is struggling with the easel. Walt helps him.

"They put each other down and they put you down. Nothing was good enough for them. They were greedy and self-obsessed. And I liked you, because you weren't like that. You had a generous spirit..."

Kit has got his stuff set up. He's sketching with a pencil on the canvas. He has zoned in on his work, and his words come out sideways.

"Then I noticed that your parents' behaviour was having an effect upon you. When I saw you being mean, making fun of someone or something, I'd draw you a picture, to show you a happy and benign world. I thought, if I was good enough, the pictures might inspire you, and keep your heart warm. I didn't do it to possess you but to save you."

"I don't need saving," says Beatrice.

“And I didn’t agree to start Amazing Arts to promote my own work, to sit in the centre like some half-wit child-emperor!”

Kit must have been listening all the time.

“I did it to create a movement, to force a change. I mean, what’s the point of painting, of anything, if it doesn’t do anyone any good?”

“Absolutely,” says Jules.

Kit is painting Amanda in her Bo-Peep outfit. Why? She looks ridiculous.

There’s a terrible atmosphere in the room. How can I help?

“Would anyone like some sausages?” I ask.

I duck into the kitchen. Where are those sausages? Bit bluish. Never mind. We’ll have sausages and we’ll all be happy.

"You can't leave, just like that," says Mrs Pickles.

"Why?" I ask.

Her office is cramped and smells like old gravy. I want to get out of here.

"You have to give a month's notice," she insists.

"Why?"

"Because it is the rules!"

"Why is it the rules?"

"Because if everyone left just like that, there'd be chaos. Nothing would work. It's irresponsible. It's downright selfish."

"What happens if I break the rules?"

"It'll go on your record."

"I haven't made a record."

"Oh yes you have. Every potential employer from now on will know. It will be a red mark. A stain on your character. They may not wish to employ you. It will hinder your possibilities."

"What are my possibilities?"

"A job at the post office is a job for life!"

"Is it a job for your life?" I ask.

"Yes."

"Isn't that frightening?"

She's furious. I don't know why.

"One day you'll regret it!" she snarls. "One day, when you have children to support and you can't get a job, then you'll understand. That's why you should follow the rules!"

"But I have to leave."

"Why? I've always played fair with you, Andy. You haven't once balanced your books and I've helped you every time. What is so important that you can't, at least, give a month's notice?"

What can I say? She wouldn't understand. I don't want to hurt her feelings, but...

"They've asked me to conduct an orchestra."

I hear myself say it. It's a lie. I am committed. Mrs Pickles is amazed.

"An orchestra?"

"Yes. They want me, specifically."

"Which orchestra is it, Andrew?"

Oh shit.

"It's the London Philharmonic Orchestra."

"The London Philharmonic orchestra?" she gasps.

She is incredulous.

"Yes. It's the Turangalila Symphony by Olivier Messiaen. I saw him conduct its British premiere. I was with Ira Goldberg, who conducts in New York. We stayed behind and that's when they decided that I should conduct it. And now it's happening."

"Where? Where are you performing?"

"All over."

"All over where?"

"All over the world. And that's why I've got to go now. I've got to buy a baton!"

I'm out of the door before she can say another word. It's biting cold on the streets, but bright. This is January but soon it will be spring. The printing press will be churning out Kit's posters. Galleries will exhibit his work. The world will blossom.

Most of the faces I pass are etched with painful experience. The war or something personal.

Every now and then you see a hippie bouncing along. Or groups of them in record shops or couples arm in arm. Always colourful. There's a hippie woman on the train with a baby. She takes her breast out to feed it. I've never seen that before. It's a beautiful breast. Everyone pretends not to look. Except a middle-aged lady with frozen hair and a clown's makeup.

"Put it away!" she mutters.

The hippie woman is wrapped up with her baby and doesn't respond. The doors slide open. It's my stop. The hippie woman gets out too. We're walking along the platform, side by side. It's a nice feeling. I smile.

"I've just left the post office," I say. "I'm doing Amazing Arts from now on. I've got a Geringsing Wayang indoors. It's colourful. What I mean is, I'm going to be a hippie too."

"Fuck off!" she says.

I'm humiliated. I hope no-one has heard her. Out in the open air, my blood boils. She's not a hippie, to say those words. And in front of her baby child! Got to put it behind me. She's a stupid chick.

Clambering up the stairs. Can't wait to tell the others I've left my job. The phone is ringing. No-one is answering. Can I get to it in time?

"Amazing Arts," I wheeze. "How may I help you?"

"You can tell me when the Pegasus artwork will be ready, so we can get on with it!" replies an angry voice. "You were supposed to get back to me two days ago."

I'm fumbling around the desk, hoping to find something that will explain what the caller is on about.

"I'm sorry," I say. "The person who is dealing with this is not yet in the office."

"What do you mean? It's half past three! When's he coming in? Midnight?"

"Ah yes. Ha ha ha. I'll just go and check. I don't be a tick.

Barge into the living room. Kit is painting a picture.

"Oh, you're here. There's some geezer on the phone. He wants to know when the Pegasus artwork will be done."

Kit doesn't even look up.

"Don't you know anything about it?"

He goes on painting.

"Do you know anything about it, Walt?"

Walt is surrounded by half a ton of wicker.

"Anyone know how to make a basket?" he asks.

"Listen Walt. Pegasus artwork. Chap's on the phone. You know anything?"

"Who knows - speaks. Who doesn't - freaks!"

"Look - one of you must know something!"

"I know something," says Walt.

"What?"

"We've got to start a centre for arts and crafts. It's in Dumfriesshire. A small holding on the side of a hill, with woodlands and trout streams flowing through. I know where it is. I dreamed it."

What's he on about? I want to scream at them to help me. But I mustn't. The bloke's still on the phone.

"Listen, I'll have to get someone to phone you back. What's your number? Hallo."

The line is dead. Shit. Anyway, get out of these clothes and into my Geringsing Wayang. Where is it? In the loft. Climb up the ladder. Phone's ringing. Shit.

"Hallo. Sorry we got cut off. I'll have to get someone to ring you back. What's your name again?"

"My name is Leonard Jarvis."

He's got a completely different voice.

"Who are you?"

"I left my painting with you on your Artists' Day. I was wondering what was happening about it."

"What was it?"

"Boy with Tear in Eye."

I remember that one. I can see it, poking out between the garages where we dumped all that stuff. What am I going to say? What would I say if I was at the post office?

"I am afraid it's had to be sent away for inspection."

"Inspection?"

"Yes. And fumigation."

"Why would you need to fumigate my painting?"

"Germs."

"I don't understand. Where has it gone?"

"I'm not at liberty to say."

"I want my painting back!"

"Well you can't always have what you want! It's selfish! And those are the rules! And you're going to regret it! So goodbye!"

Slam the phone down. That's done with that!

Where's my Geringsing Wayang? Turn on the bulb in the loft. Christ! What's it doing crumpled in the corner? Never mind. Get it on. Get some coffee. Have a cig. Get to work!

"Anyone want a coffee?"

"Teas please," says Walt.

Oh yes. They want things. But when it comes to lifting a finger themselves... Never mind. Work hard. Be positive.

"Here are your drinks," I say, cheerfully.

The bell's ringing in the office again.

"Amazing Arts. How may I help you?"

"The fliers. Where are they?"

"In the sky."

"No. The fliers for Alternative Army."

"An army doesn't need fliers. You need the air force. Goodbye!"

Whew! Sip some coffee. Tastes good. Phone rings. Pick it up and put it straight down again. Now, what's all this? Desk's splattered with letters and estimates and bills. How am I going to make sense of all this? Leave the phone off the hook. Right. Now concentrate. What the heck's going on next door?

I storm in. Walt is chucking bits of wicker all over the room.

"How dare you make such a racket while I am trying to actually get things done!" I rage. "You should be helping, not making it impossible. How am I to understand anything if you don't help? It's my first day, for Christ sakes. Is it always like this? Is this what I've been putting my money into? I mean, what the heck is going on?"

Walt stares at me. I've broken the unwritten law. I am completely uncool.

"As far as I am concerned," says Kit, waving his brush as if it's a wand, "this is Amazing Arts and that's what we're doing. If you prefer, Andy, you do amazing business."

"The vibes in London are getting really destructive," says Walt, staring at the bits of wicker strewn everywhere, as if it just happened by itself. "We should get out of here before the shit hits the fan!"

"It's finished!" says Kit, stepping back, dramatically.

"I agree," Walt replies. "We should run for the glens och aye the noo. Oh. The painting. Wow! What's it called?"

"Little Bo-Peep," replies Kit.

Walt giggles.

I look at the painting but I can't see it. I'm so angry. Why do they treat me as if I don't exist?

"Well if you've finished, we could leave for Scotland now. The ambulance is parked outside," says Walt.

Kit looks at him. They grin. Surely they aren't serious. Got to stop them.

"Great idea," I exclaim. "A commune. In Scotland. You dreamed it. Fantastic! We should definitely do it. But, at the moment, we've got a load of jobs pending. What I suggest, is a system. For example, let's make a list each evening of what needs doing and who's going to do it. Then, the moment things are running smoothly, we can discuss the commune and buy one. Okay?"

It's worked. I've persuaded them. Walt is gathering wicker. Kit's dismantling his easel. I'm putting plates in the sink. We're clearing up.

"Who wants coffee?" I call.

No reply. Total silence. Poke my head out of the kitchen. Where are they? Not in any of the rooms. Christ! Down the stairs two at a time.

"Walt! Kit!" I scream.

They're standing below me.

"Where are you off to?"

"Bonny Scotland," sings Walt.

I don't know what to say. They're leaving.

"Come back!" I cry. "You can't leave, just like that!"

They've gone. Better go back upstairs. It's where I live. On my own. Daren't put the phone on the hook, in case it rings.

Kit's left his painting. 'Little Bo-Peep'. Is it a joke? He's caught her likeness though. The ridiculous costume makes her look gawky, out of place. Her nose is big, like an alpine ridge. Her forehead is ridged. Her face is too challenging to be beautiful.

Too challenging. That's it. She's too challenging for me. Big, bony face, splattered with freckles. Mad red hair springing out from the ridiculous bonnet...

"You all on your own, up there, again, then?"

I quite like Stella. When I was on my own at Christmas, she was on her own in the flat below. She let me watch her telly a couple of times and made me tea that tasted like toilet water. Trouble is, she's always trying to get me to fix her gas. I've told her, I don't know anything about gas but she won't believe me.

"Yes. All on my own," I chirp, on my way up.

"Do you want to come in for a nice cup of tea?"

Have to stop. It would be rude not to.

"I'd like to, Stella, but Jules and Beatrice are off starting their magazine and Walt and Kit have been gone over a week. Who knows if they're ever coming back? Not that I'm worried. Only, I've discovered that Amazing Arts is in debt! And I can't print anything on my own. And I daren't try to get commissions for Kit because who knows if he's ever coming back? But it's okay because I've found a trick."

Should I confide in Stella? Yes, she won't shop me.

"When someone wants printing done, I just take the details and phone up another printing company. I get their quote and they do the printing!"

"So what do you do?" she asks.

"Nothing! That's the trick!"

Stella is as excited as I am.

"So how much do you make, doing nothing?" she asks.

I'm shocked.

"Oh I couldn't take a profit. That wouldn't be fair. But the printing's first rate, so we're building up goodwill.

"Very clever!" she says.

"Really? Anyway, Jules is coming round later. He'll know what to do."

"Clever man like you, ought to be able to fix this in a jiffy."

What? Gas meter. Pipes. How did I get inside her flat. I didn't notice my legs walking.

"I use this hammer," she says, handing me a hammer.

"Where do you bang it?"

"There."

There are great gouges in the wall opposite the pipes, where she's been banging. She's barking mad. At least I'm the one with the hammer.

"You're right!" I say. "It's this wall. We've got to bang the gas out of it. I don't think you were strong enough. Let me have a go."

I swing the hammer and smash it against the wall with all my might. The hammer goes straight through. A great section of plaster explodes and crashes to the floor. I can't see Stella for dust.

"That should do it. You'll have to do the clearing up, only I'm late."

Skidaddle, out of the door. Up the stairs. Phone's ringing.

"Amazing A-arts," I say in a sing-songy voice. "How may I help you?" Put my hand over the speaking bit while I get my breath back.

"Steve Anson, Travellers Trails."

"Steve, hi. I'm glad you've rung. Did you get the brochures?"

"Yes."

"Good. There are a few hundred extra. Maybe even six thousand in all."

"That's hardly the point, is it?"

"Well, a few extra. Anyway, as long as you're happy."

"I'm not happy."

"Oh. Why?"

"Who did the artwork?"

"We did, of course."

"Did Kit Hogarth do it?"

"No. Not exactly. But someone pretty-well just as good."

"Who?"

"Er. Me. Actually."

"Have you ever done artwork before?"

"Yes."

"You astonish me."

"...Thanks..."

"What's it supposed to be?"

"Er. Camels. Camels guiding the happy hippies across the deserts. And stars twinkling in the sky."

"Do you think a circle with four sticks coming out of it, constitutes a camel?"

"Nothing too fancy, you said."

"These brochures are entirely useless to us. You may collect them if you wish. Either way, we will not pay for them, nor will we be using Amazing Arts again."

Phone goes dead. Shit. I've already paid the real printers. Out debt is just getting worse and worse. I can't do anything about it. I don't know what I'm doing and I'm the only one doing anything! It's not fair! Oh...

Jules' face in the doorway. He's seen me banging my fists on the desk.

"Jules. Hi! ...Just letting off a bit of steam. You know how it is. Nothing really."

"Then why did you call me over?"

"Well, you know. Walt and Kit have gone to find a commune in Scotland."

"I know that, Andy."

"Did you know Amanda's gone with them too?"

"Oh."

"Well, anyway. I've tidied everything. I've got a system, look. I've got printing jobs and I know what's happening but..."

Suddenly, I'm on the verge of tears. Mustn't lose my pride in front of Jules. But it's already happened.

"Fancy a coffee?" he asks.

I follow him out of the office. On his way through the living room, he stops.

"What's this?" he asks.

"It's Kit's painting."

He nods. He takes it to the window. I peer at it, over his shoulder.

"It's of Amanda," I tell him.

"I can see that. Hang on a second. This is seriously good."

He studies it. The detail. The overall effect. I should study it too. Colours, shadows, dollops of oil paint. All I can see is Amanda.

"You know what I think..." he says, putting the painting on the sofa so we can keep seeing it. "I think it would make the most amazing poster. It's got everything. From the commercial point of view, she's a beautiful young woman. Bold and brave and free. But if you look more closely, you can see the confusion - the desire to serve, faced with a cynical world. ...I think it would make the most fantastic poster, Andy. Listen. That's it. There's a pop festival somewhere near Bedford. Winter solstice is it? Fuck knows. The point is. Print the posters. Full colour. Sell them at the festival. They'll go like hot-cakes. It's a three-day festival. We should be able to sell a thousand or more. Say a thousand at one pound each. Won't cost more than a couple of hundred to print. That's eight hundred quid profit."

Will it work? It would pay all our debts. We wouldn't even have to sell the whole thousand...Jules smiles at me.

"Coffee?"

"Yes?"

I follow him into the kitchen.

"But how am I going to print it? I can't do it on my own and who knows when Walt and Kit and Amanda will be back? They may never come back at all! And what happens, if..."

"Andy. You have to grow up. You have to take some responsibility. When there's a problem, you have to face it, instead of just getting in a mess inside yourself. You have to face it and find a solution. Either there's a logical path through, which you can work out when you know the facts. Or there is an imaginative solution. Do you take sugar?"

"Two."

There's a racket on the stairs. I want to investigate but Jules is stirring my coffee. He hands it to me.

"Do you understand Andy?"

"What?"

"About solving problems."

"Yes."

"Instead of feeling threatened, think of them as opportunities."

"Yes."

There's someone in the living room, panting like a dog. It is a dog. A big black dog. Kit is kneeling, caressing the dog, who rolls over.

Walt, Amanda and Kit are pink with the cold outside. I'm ever so glad they're back.

"We found it," says Walt. "Forty acres on a hillside, just north of Dumfries. Trout streams, everything, just as I dreamed it."

I can't believe it, but Amanda is nodding.

"He led us straight to it," she says.

She is delighted by the magic of it. But what will it mean for Amazing Arts? What will it mean for me?

"Any buildings?" asks Jules. "Or are you going to learn to build as well?"

"There's a farmhouse. They've plastered over everything in horrible plastic formica and shit, but we can soon rip all that out," says Kit.

I'm horrified. It's real. And Amanda is going with them. I'll have to harden my heart. Brazen it out. Problems are opportunities.

They're hungry. They want tea and coffee and bread and cheese. Normally I would serve them. As it is, I sink into the sofa, next to Kit's painting, and sip my coffee.

Walt is effusing about how Mr Grebe thinks the Trust might well agree to buying the land as an investment, as long as it's worth the money. Walt can be very coherent when he's happy. When he's unhappy, he's still kind. So I can't be angry with him. And I can't be angry with Kit. All Kit cares about is painting. If he wants to paint on a commune on a hillside in Scotland, then he should. But Amanda. I don't

understand Amanda. Okay, so I missed the gig. Okay, so even if I don't want to do a music group with her. - If she really loved me, that wouldn't matter. And if she wants to do music so much, why is she bugging off to the wilds of Scotland to do some dozy craft commune?

I have to stop being angry. It's putting me on the verge of tears. Concentrate on what's going on. Be part of it. I can't! - Well, try!

"This painting is just sensational, Kit," says Jules.

Kit is playing with the dog. He doesn't even look up. Walt is enthusiastic, though.

"I want to go to that festival anyway!" he announces. "Pentangle are playing."

"And the Bell Family," says Amanda, shyly, because it's her sisters.

Everyone wants to print the posters, sell them at the festival and make a profit. But I am speechless. We've got to get everything on an even footing. If they fuck off to some hippie commune. I mean, it's chaos!

"Have a look, Andy."

Walt hands me a crumpled piece of paper. It's a hippie advert. Cartoons of couples fucking and threesomes and more, all around the border.

"Let's Get Into Bedfordshire!" reads the caption.

That's corny.

"The Great Love-In-Out!"

I don't mind printing the posters as long as I don't have to go to the festival and watch lots of people making love. It would just make me feel worse. And I can't make love with just any old people. I'd be embarrassed. I couldn't get it up! I'm not going. No-one can make me.

"Andy. Can I borrow you for a moment?"

Borrow me? I follow Jules into the office.

"Shut the door."

I shut the door.

"Right. Now Beatrice and myself have got our hands full at the moment, trying to get this magazine launched. As you see, the others are keen to print the posters, but you'll have to organise things, Andy. You'll have to lead them. Make them want to do it."

"But...And anyway, if they're bugging off to Scotland..."

"Stop! Listen Andy. For a start, Walt gets a new idea every day. Transactions involving land take months. My dad's always buying and selling property. The least it ever takes is three months! Yeah?"

"Yeah."

"Can you honestly imagine Walt retaining the same idea for three months?"

"Yeah."

"No!"

"Yeah, I mean, no. You're right!"

"So all you have to do, Andy, is take the painting to Sericol. They'll do the colour separation and the screens. Get 3 reams of 20" by 30" from Capital. Then get the others to Chalk Farm and print it. That's all you have to do. Get it?"

"But what about selling them? I don't know how to and if they're all naked, where will they put their money? And if they don't have any money..."

"I'll do the festival."

"Will you?"

"You just get the posters printed, Andy. Then I'll take over. Okay?"

"Okay."

"Listen, Andy. I've got to go now. Say goodbye to the others for me."

"Oh."

A question pops into my head.

"What about Kit? Why doesn't he talk to you? He doesn't even look at you. How can we continue if..."

"It's okay. Our job is to promote his work. When Kit Hogarth is the name on everybody's lips, when his work is recognised, Kit will come round. He's not indifferent to success, you know. He wants it. He wants it so much that the prospect of trying and failing stresses him out. That's why it's our job. Anyhow, must dash. Get that poster printed!"

"Byee. And thanks Jules...!"

Someone is crying. Dark in the loft. Silence. Sheet all rumped round me. But where are the blankets? Again - a sob. Don't move. Listen.

Whispering.

"...don't worry..."

Whose voice is that?

"...I can't bear you to be unhappy, please..."

Freezing. Got to find the blankets and pull them over me. Pretend I'm doing it in my sleep. Sit up. Stare around. There they are. Grab them and swivel back round...

Amanda. Her head is no more than six inches away. But it's upside down. She's on the next mattress along. She doesn't see me. I bury myself in blankets and make snorey, snuffly sounds for a bit.

Again the soft sobbing. Is Amanda sobbing? Should I go to her? Does she need me?

"...Please Kit. Accept my love..."

Kit? Love? What's going on? It's Amanda. She's in bed with Kit. She said - accept my love. To Kit. I heard her. What can I do? Can I suddenly wake up noisily and say... What could I say? Nothing. It's none of my business.

It's all gone quiet. Maybe they realise they could wake me up. Or maybe it was something that happened to upset Kit just before they were going to bed. Something small. And now they're going to sleep. Like ordinary people. Only they just happen to be side by side.

I'm freezing and sweating at the same time. Ridiculous. Got to make myself sleep. Think of pictures in my mind. ...Dreamy pictures... Kit is grunting. Amanda is gasping in the same rhythm.

Poke my eyes out. They won't notice if they're making all this racket. He's on top of her. No. They're rolling over. And over. Knocking into things. Nothing interrupts their panting and groaning. Amanda's on top. I can see her tits bouncing up and down. But how can she? I thought she was in love with me.

I took her love for granted and now I've lost her. And now I have to lie here and listen to them making love. Don't move a muscle. And don't ever let anyone know.

Shut my eyes. Breathe as if I'm asleep. Imagine pictures - faraway islands in the sun - sunset over the Alps. ...No. Not pictures of Kit and Amanda fucking. Happy pictures. Sheep. People count sheep. Start counting. How can I count sheep, when I can't see any fucking sheep! Why can't they stop all that panting and groaning?

I have to get away. I can't help it. Sit bolt upright.

“Need a piss,” I announce.

At least they stop moving while I climb down the hole. I can see their bodies all twisted up around each other, shaking with the effort of remaining still. Or are they coming? No they’re off again. Thank goodness my clothes are neatly folded in the desk drawers. Can’t put on my Geringsing Wayang. Anyway, it’s night time, I might get mugged.

Endless banging and grunting above me. Tiptoe down the stairs and away along the street, anywhere.

It’s dark, misty and freezing cold. Even with my big pullover that Mum knitted and the great coat that Jules kindly gave me.

Can I go home to Mum and Dad? How can I tell them what I’ve just seen? How can I think about anything else?

At least there are lights in the West End. Don’t think about it. Don’t think about it. Just get some distance. Then, when the distance has been got, then. ...Shit, I’m thinking about it. Their bodies clinging to each other. Her freckles. Her armpits. Her tits. His...

I’ve seen Kit’s penis, in the changing rooms at school. He’s only short but it’s long and hairy. I’ve never seen it with a hard-on but...

Stop it. Where to now? The river. Throw myself into the river? - Don’t be so stupid. You’d die! But why do I care if I live?

Because there’s always tomorrow. That’s what Dad says. “Don’t you know that the sunshine always follows the rain? So pack your troubles in dreams, and dream your troubles away.” That’s a Bing Crosby song. But it comes from the 1930’s when everyone was depressed, and it’s very wise.

Benches on plinths along the Embankment so you can sit and look at the river. If I sit too long I’ll freeze. Maybe that’s what I should do. After a while I would stop feeling cold. Then I would feel numb. Then I would feel nice and warm and my life would slip away.

Yes. That sounds better. I want to be dead. If I could just jump into the river and I’d be dead, that would be fine. It’s all that drowning and the water being so chilly. That’s what puts me off.

I wonder how long it takes to freeze to death? If it takes hours, the sun could come out and I wouldn’t have died. But I’d have frostbite and even chilblains, whatever they are. People would notice me.

There are already a few people about. There’s a man walking towards me. I’d better pretend that all’s well, until he passes.

He nods, by way of greeting.

"All's well!" I say, cheerily.

"Pardon?" he asks, coming over.

"All's well!" I repeat, waving my arm about in a carefree manner.

He glances at the sky and the river.

"I suppose it is," he says.

"Just out for a stroll, were you?" I ask.

"Been visiting friends," he explains. "And you?"

"Just sitting here on my own, having a nice time."

"You're freezing."

Without asking, he touches my hand. Then my cheek.

"You're freezing cold. What's wrong with you? Are you on anything? Drugs is it?"

"No. Honestly. I don't take drugs," I lie.

"Haven't you anywhere to go?"

"Yes. Of course."

"Do you need money for a bus? Is there a bus?"

"No. It's alright. Honestly."

"I don't mind paying for a cab for you. Is it far?"

"No. Just Goodge Street. I just don't fancy going back there at the moment, that's all."

"Did something happen? Did your parents chuck you out?"

"No. No. It's nothing like that."

"Well I'm certainly not leaving you here to freeze. You can either take a cab home or come and have a cup of tea at my place."

"At your place?"

"Well, if you have a problem with going home, I don't mind you crashing out in my lounge for the night. You're not a murderer or a thief are you?"

"No."

"No. And nor am I. So what's it to be?"

"Could I...?"

"Of course."

We're walking along side by side.

"My name is Andy. What's yours?"

"Jeremy."

"How far is it?"

"Just over the bridge. Mist over the Thames. Isn't it dramatic?"

"Yes. Dramatic."

We don't feel the need to talk. We just watch the beautiful sights. I hope it's warm at Jeremy's. I hope I don't have chilblains.

"Hang on."

He fumbles for his keys. It's a big thick posh front door with a knocker.

"Come in. Follow me."

The lights are all double sidelights like wooden antlers with glass bowls on the ends in the shapes of flowers. The furniture is all rich dark wood. My parents say light wood is modern because otherwise the rooms are too dark. But this room is cosy.

"Sit there. I'll put the fire on."

It looks like a coal fire with lumps of coal in the hearth, but it's a gas fire. Clever.

"You warm yourself up. I'll put the kettle on."

The walls are covered with shelves of books. If you took all those shelves away, the room would be quite big. He must like reading.

The works of Dickens, Trollope... Who's Trollope and was he embarrassed about his name? The plays of Shaw, Brecht. I pick out 'Songs of Innocence' by William Blake. It's got pictures.

*"Little Lamb who made thee?
Dost thou know who made thee?
Gave thee life and bid thee feed
By the stream and o'er the mead;
Gave thee clothing of delight,
Softest clothing woolly bright;
Gave thee such a tender voice,
Making all the vales rejoice.
Little Lamb who made thee?
Dost thou know who made thee?"*

What's all that about, then? O little lamb? Baah! That's not a poem, it's a bloody nursery rhyme. Baaah!

"Pardon?"

"What?"

"You bleated like a sheep."

"Did I?"

I didn't know I'd said it out loud.

"It's this poem," I explain.

Jeremy takes the book.

"I made some soup and toast," he says.

I sit in a padded chair with lion's legs and sip my soup. Jeremy peers at the poems. He's got little half-glasses on a chain. He looks like a nineteenth century lady, all elegant and formal.

"This is one of Blake's Songs of Innocence," he says, smiling at me, over the tops of his glasses.

"Yes, I know. But it's rubbish, isn't it!"

He raises his eyebrows and holds me in a quizzical stare.

"Nice soup," I say.

"Nice soup," he repeats, watching me eat.

I don't mind. I'm hungry. I wish there was more. But he doesn't offer.

"So, Little Lamb," he says. "Who made thee?"

"Do you mean, where do I come from, my background?"

"Dost thou know who made thee?"

"Well, I don't believe in God, if that's what you mean."

"Oh?"

"No. As far as I'm concerned my parents made me and when you die, you're dead and that's that."

"Very pleasant. And how do you know this?"

"It's evolution. First there was rocks and stones..."

"Where do they come from, these rocks? Who made them?"

"They were already here, weren't they?"

"How did they get here?"

"Well I don't know, do I! Probably we're not supposed to know."

"Oh? And who's not supposed to tell us? I thought you didn't believe in God...?"

"You're just trying to trick me."

"No, Andy. Just to challenge you. You might as well take off your coat now. You must be warm enough. I'll hang it up in the hall..."

"Anyway," I say, as he returns. "You must like reading. Is it just for pleasure, or is it part of something to do with your work?"

"Well done. Yes it is something to do with my work."

"Do you teach, or do you study ancient texts? Do you criticise books in the papers?"

Jeremy laughs.

"This is getting to be like 'What's My Line'. I'll tell you. I'm a theatre director."

"Oh. That's interesting."

He's wearing floppy grey corduroy trousers and a turtle-neck sweater but the way he laughs, peering at me, is like a maiden aunt. Like my granddad's sister. She was a nun.

"Why is it interesting?"

"Well, you must get to meet lots of famous actors."

"Do you think that's why I do it?"

"Is it?" I ask.

"Oh, do not say 'what is it?' Let us go and make our visit - Elliot."

"It's Andy."

"Well, Andy, I expect you'll be wanting to get some sleep now. I know I do."

As he stretches, he crosses his arms in front of him and pulls off his turtle-neck sweater. He's got nothing underneath.

"Do you want to sleep alone on the couch, or would you prefer to share my bed?"

I can't believe it.

"...Couch..." I splutter.

"Very well. I'll get you a duvet..."

Is he going to lock all the doors and windows so I can't escape? If I try to phone to call for help will he cut the line and trap me here and force me...?

He throws me a duvet and a pillow.

"Are you sure you want to sleep alone?"

"Yes."

"Okay."

He smiles.

"If you want to join me at any time, I'm first on the left."

"Right."

"I have to be out early. I won't disturb you."

"Wont' you?"

"I promise. Goodnight Andy."

"Goodnight Jeremy."

Whew! Will he disturb me? Will he creep into my bed and touch my private parts for his own wicked pleasure? I could barricade the door. But it would be rude. He seems nice enough.

I'm not taking my clothes off though.

I am happy. We are printing 'Little Bo-Peep'. We're on the last colour run. Kit is pushing the squeegee, which squeezes the yellow ink through the silkscreen.

As Kit draws the squeegee, Walt gets the next print ready. They already have two colours, blue and red, printed on them. You can see Amanda's face, her frizzy red hair bursting out from the ridiculous 'Bo-Peep' bonnet. But until the yellow goes on, the posters seem almost abstract.

Kit hardly speaks at the moment. He seems very tight inside himself. Every ounce of his concentration is going into making the posters perfect. If Walt places the paper even fractionally wrong, Kit adjusts it. That's good. It means I don't have to worry about it myself.

I am happy. All week I have chivvied and encouraged Walt, Kit and Amanda. I have flattered them. I've coaxed and teased and allowed myself to be the foolish one, the uncool one. It hurts a bit. Perhaps it's true. I have manipulated them. Not cynically though. I do love them and I do give them all my love. And it's worked.

That's why I'm happy. Each time Kit raises the silkscreen to reveal another full-colour poster of the glorious and complex Amanda, a sort of silent gasp goes up.

No-one says they're beautiful. Kit is too tense. But they are beautiful. Amanda and I take turns racking the wet posters. She's dazzled by her own image. And troubled too, I think.

Kit is in love with the Beatles' White Album. It plays incessantly. I like some of the tracks. There's a song about a blackbird. It's very simple, just voice and guitar. Pretty, almost corny. But the blackbird has broken wings and sunken eyes. So there's something darker, as if the pretty tune is just the way things seem on the surface.

About an hour ago, I realised that the words go on to say that, despite sunken eyes, the blackbird has to learn to see. And, despite broken wings, it must learn to fly.

If I'm honest, that's like me. I feel stupid most of the time. Everyone else seems to be sorted. The executor of Walt's trust is Mr Grebe. Mr Grebe loves Walt like a father, or grandfather perhaps. Yes. Perhaps Walt's granddad left his wealth to Walt intentionally. Not just because he had a row with Walt's dad. Anyway Mr Grebe has bought the land in Scotland. It's called 'Woodfoot'. They're going to call it 'The Centre of Creation'.

Walt and Kit are going up there in a few weeks, to make a start. I suppose Amanda will be going with them.

Couldn't I stop her? Couldn't I say I'd do anything? I'd help her get gigs and I wouldn't miss them! The thing is, I don't want to play violin. It's not just that they made me practice all those years until I hated it. I just don't know what I want to do yet. If I just do what Amanda wants, I won't be free to find out. Anyway, she's with Kit now.

When Jules told me to take responsibility for printing those posters, I felt weak. I thought it was impossible. But when I got started, I had no time to feel bad and gradually I started to feel better.

And now I'm happy. But it's in a new way. It's easy to be happy when nothing's wrong. But I've lost Amanda, everyone's going away to start the Centre of Creation. And still I'm happy. How am I going to cope on my own? Who knows. I'm the blackbird.

"Andy?"

"Yes?"

"Are you coming?"

"Where?"

Amanda is pointing at the door. Kit and Walt are loading posters into the back of the ambulance. I look around. There are tins of ink and thinner open everywhere. No-one's cleaned the screen.

"We haven't cleared up," I say.

"We've got to get up to the festival," urges Walt.

"Is that where you're going now?" I ask.

"I thought you said we're picking up Jules at Goodge Street," says Amanda.

"Yes," I confirm.

"Hop in!" calls Walt, revving the engine.

I should stay and clear up. But I'm tired.

"You coming Andy?" asks Kit, tersely.

"The screen will block. It'll be ruined."

"Who cares? We've got the posters."

Too tired to argue. Lock up. Jump in. We hurtle through Camden. Whenever the traffic is held up or there's a red light, Walt sounds the ambulance alarm and plunges straight through. Cars screech to the kerb. Pedestrians run for cover.

I'm petrified. I can hardly bear to look. Where are the police when you need them?

"Jules better be there!" shouts Walt. "The Who are on at dawn!"

Jules is standing on the kerb as we roar the wrong way down Goodge Street and come to a sudden and dramatic halt with the aid of a lamp-post.

"Couldn't get in," explains Jules. "Forgot my key."

"How long have you been waiting?" I ask.

He's not interested. He wants to see the posters.

"Fantastic!"

He thinks they're fantastic. He's over the moon. I'm proud.

"Have we got time for a cup of tea?" he asks. "Only I'm frozen."

"There's no milk," says Walt.

Walt just wants to get a move on.

"I know where there's milk," I say. "If someone goes up and puts the kettle on, I'll be back with the milk in a tick.

The others, grudgingly, agree. They traipse upstairs.

"I'll come with you," says Jules.

I'm grateful. We stare at the front of the ambulance, still wrapped around the lamp-post.

"Will it be alright?" I ask.

He shrugs. It's not in our control. We walk.

"Well done for the posters," he says.

"Thanks. Yes, I feel different about it now I've achieved it. It's given me confidence that I can do things."

"Is there an all-night shop?" he asks.

"I don't think there is. What a great idea, Jules."

"No!" he hisses, irritably. "I mean, where's this milk coming from?"

"Oh. Just up the end here. On the corner. The milk gets delivered while the restaurant is closed. It's left outside in crates. Look."

I take a bottle. He takes a bottle.

"We'll need some for the trip," Jules says.

There's no-one about. We walk back.

"You know, you said that if I took responsibility for the printing, you'd take care of the selling. You remember?"

"So?"

"So, I don't want to come to this pop festival. I don't want all that loud music and sleeping in tents and having to take your clothes off."

A man steps out from the shadow of a shop across the road. We stop, uncertain.

"Remain where you are," says the man.

We remain. Another man comes into view beside the first.

"May I ask what you are holding in your hand?"

"A bottle of milk," I reply, timidly.

"And you sir?"

"Well it's obviously a bottle of milk!" barks Jules.

Something in Jules' eyes makes me look at the men. They're policemen. Of course. We've been caught.

"And where did you get these said bottles of milk?" asks the second policeman.

"You must know where we got them, or you wouldn't have stopped us," Jules reasons.

The first policeman looms over me. Actually he's a bit shorter than I am. But it's terrifying. He sort of looms under me.

"Where!" he demands.

"Outside the restaurant, I admit. We only took two. I was going to put them back in the morning only my chums have to get off to the music concert and Julian was cold and needed a cup of tea because..."

"Be quiet! My fellow officer and I have just observed you in the act of stealing two bottles of milk. You are under arrest. You are not obliged to say anything. Anything you do say, will be taken down and may be used in evidence against you. Have you anything to say?"

"For Christ's sake!" says Jules, irately. "There's an illegal ambulance that's smashed into a lamppost and been left halfway across the road just down there that could cause accidents which could cost people their lives and you are arresting us for nicking a couple of pints of milk?"

"Are you telling me that you have just smashed into an ambulance, sir?"

"No. Not me. It belongs to a friend of mine...But it's not the point!"

"This friend of yours, what's his name?"

"Nothing. I'm not saying another word!"

The two policemen confer.

"Better investigate."

"Get these two jokers down the nick first."

"Where are you taking us?" says Jules. "I demand to speak to my lawyer!"

"You'll get your phone call. Now, are you coming quietly or am I going to have to cuff you?"

I don't want to be cuffed. I'm against violence.

"...I'm coming quietly..." I witter.

I'm scared and cold. I know where the police station is. Just round the corner in Tottenham Court Road. No. We're going in the back way. I never knew it existed.

"Book'em, Sarge."

"What's the charge?"

"They're the ones been nicking Alfonso's milk."

Several policeman chuckle.

"Name!"

"Andy."

"Andrew is that?"

It's as if it's not happening to me. My name. My address. Will they inform mum and dad? I've got to rub each finger on an inkpad and press it onto paper. I've got to stand, facing the camera. Should I smile?

"Wait here!"

Jules is sitting beside me, thank goodness.

"When you phone your lawyer," I whisper, "will you ask him to help me too?"

"You've got to use your phone call to warn the others!" he whispers.

"What shall I say?"

"Tell them to leave immediately, before the little piggies start nosing around."

"Oh. Right."

I'm exhausted and hyper all at the same time. Keep falling into the sleepy world.

"Follow me."

Where's Jules gone?

"Where are you taking me?"

"Tell your lawyer, or whoever it is, that you'll be appearing at Marylebone Magistrates Court in the morning. Have you got your chequebook?"

"Me. No."

I'm dialling Goodge Street.

"Better get him to bring your chequebook then, in case you're lucky enough to just get fined."

"Thank you sir. Hallo?"

"Amazing Artsy-Fartsies. How can we rip you off?"

"Walt. Is that you? It's Andy here."

"Where are you Andy? Listen, your brother's here. He looks just like you. He's broken his legs. Both of them. Anyway, come back. Forget the milk. We've got to get going."

"We're at the police station. We've been arrested."

"What? What for?"

"We nicked some milk," I whisper.

I can hear Walt telling the others. I can hear them laughing.

"Walt!" I hiss.

"Do you want to speak to your brother?"

“Yes. No. Listen Walt. You’ve got to leave immediately. You are in danger. But listen - in the morning Jules and I will be at Marylebone Magistrates Court. Have you got that? Somebody will have to stay behind...Walt? ...Walt?”

The line’s gone dead.

“You finished your call then?” asks the policeman with an amused smile.

I could ask him if I could make a second call but he wouldn’t let me. Anyway, what good would it do? I’m not phoning my parents. I’ll have to tell Jules what happened.

“In.”

I’m supposed to walk into this cage. Where’s Jules?

“You better get some rest.”

He locks me in.

“And don’t make any noise, right?”

He goes away. There are cages everywhere. Some have people inside them. I daren’t look at them in case they’re dangerous and they take offence, and from now on they’ve got it in for me.

Someone I can’t see is wailing. Others snoring, snuffling, grunting. Animal sounds. An old man is jabbering quietly to himself.

My bed is tiny. It’s like trying to perch on a shelf. If I rolled over in my sleep, I’d fall off. ...One grey blanket. This isn’t going to keep me warm. Anyway, shut my eyes and pretend I’m not in prison.

If I’d slept with Jeremy, that night... If I’d become a homosexual and stayed with him, I wouldn’t be in prison now. He was kind. He took me in. He wanted to sleep with me. I was nervous all night. Could a homosexual find me attractive? Could I be attracted to a homosexual? He left me a note with his address, his phone number and if ever I fancy giving him a ring... I bet, if I’d phoned Jeremy, he’d be round here now, getting me out of prison, taking me home to safety.

Whole thing's a nightmare. Pushed, with all the other bad people, onto a bus that looks like a fortress. Drunks, drug addicts, thieves and angry violent types with coarse voices, swearing. One frightened black man tries to resist and gets kneed in the groin.

I'm shoved into a cubicle and handcuffed to a rail. Slits for windows. I can see people in cars but they can't see me. I'm a little middle-class boy. I don't belong here.

Herded off the bus. Chucked into a tiny, ancient cell, like a dungeon, with wet muck on the floor and a hole to piss and shit in. And this old geezer, with black spots and scales, telling me he's a master forger. More like escaped from the nut-house.

"...I can forge fivers so as you wouldn't know the difference," he confides, in a soft Irish voice.

"Wow," I say, admiringly. "So how come you er got er ...caught?"

"Ah!" he replies, sadly. "Now there hangs a tale..."

"Andrew Parvin!" barks a voice.

That's me! Jules is outside. He gives me a grim smile. It's our turn. We are led along a tunnel.

The courtroom is huge and dazzling. I feel as if we are stepping into the jaws of a lion who will swallow us up. It's full of people. Suddenly they roar with laughter.

"Was that one pint or two?" asks the Magistrate.

Another roar.

"Two, Your Honour," replies the little policeman from last night.

"Two pints of milk!" exclaims the Magistrate. "That's very serious!"

People fall about with mirth. The Magistrate confers with his magistrate friends. The three of them giggle together. Are we just here to be laughed at? Or will they laugh and send us to jail?

"My colleagues and I are, unfortunately ignorant upon a point of information."

"Yes, Your Honour?"

"What is the current value of a pint of milk?"

More ripples of merriment.

"About one shilling and sixpence, Your Honour."

"I see. Just one moment."

The Magistrates mumble.

"Andrew Parvin and Jules Marsden-Hunt. You must know that the Law takes a very dim view of theft, however small the amount. Your parents are professional

people, I believe. You should know better. Therefore, on the basis that this is, in both cases, a first offence and, in the sincere hope that it will not lead to a life of crime..."

The Magistrate pauses to accommodate the tittering.

"...we hereby fine you each the sum of one shilling and sixpence."

Absolute silence. A cheer goes up.

"Have either of you anything to say?"

"Yes!" says Jules. "A question - a point of information. Which is more expensive? A pint of milk? Or the cost, to the taxpayers, of you milking applause for yourself?"

The Magistrate's eyes twinkle with hatred.

"Very witty. And you?"

He's looking at me.

"...I...I"

"Out with it!"

"...I haven't got one and sixpence..."

"I'll pay!" a voice rings out.

It's a man with long hair, moustache and shaggy beard in the second row. Who is he?

Jules and I are hustled out, led to a high desk, where the bearded man is handing over the three shillings. He's balancing on crutches. Both his legs are in plaster. Can't see his face for hair. But the eyes... It's Colin! It's my brother Colin.

"Colin!" I cry.

"No!" he cries.

But it's too late. In my rush to embrace him, we've both fallen over. I jump to my feet.

"Jules, this is Colin, my brother. Colin, this is Jules. Are you alright Colin?"

"Of course I'm not bloody alright! Get me up!"

Jules and I help him up. We're free to go. I'm so grateful to my brother, I want to carry him but he fends me off. He wants to use his crutches. I've got so many questions to ask him.

"How come your legs are broken? How come you're back in England? Do Mum and Dad know you're back? They said you were running a farm in Colombia. Is it true?"

Colin is concentrating on getting through the doors with his crutches. He's not very good on them. It's raining. None of us has got any money. Colin has to rest. We sit on a step in the rain.

"So when did you get back, Colin?"

"Last night."

"So, a day or so ago, you were in South America?"

"Yes."

"On a farm?"

"Yes. Sort of."

"Sort of what?"

"Sort of a drugs farm."

"What?"

"Mountains of cannabis, valleys of poppies."

"Wow! Beyond your wildest dreams."

"You could say that."

"So were you the boss?"

"Huh! Listen, can I crash at Goodge Street for a while? I don't want to see Mum and Dad till my legs are sorted."

"Of course, Colin. Stay as long as you like."

"Shouldn't be long. I rang Sam and Becky. They've got their eye on a house in Covent Garden. Said I could move in with them."

"A whole house?"

"Downstairs is a shop. They want to start a café."

"Wow! But how can they afford it?"

"Squatters rights. Help me up."

Jules has hailed us a cab.

"But how can we afford it?" I ask Jules. "We haven't got any money."

"Shut up, Andy and get in," he says.

In my anxiety to obey orders, I tread on Colin. The cab is full of his legs and crutches. Jules has a word with the driver and we're off.

"Listen Andy," says Jules. "I need to trust you with a vital task and I know it's going to be tough. My folks have just bought a property in Kensington. I've got to convince Dad to let us have the basement for the magazine. He's leaving for Hayling this afternoon. I've to speak to him before he leaves. That means you have to go to the festival. You have to get there, find the others and organise selling posters. Otherwise they'll get into the spirit of things and start giving them all away. Do you understand, Andy? It's important. I'll see Colin back to Goodge Street. Okay? Ready?"

"What?"

Jules opens the door. I'm supposed to get out. I want to say no. I won't do it. But it's a vital task and what will Colin think? He's not a coward.

Colin and Jules are waving goodbye. I haven't got any money.

"I haven't got any money!!"

Jules shrugs as the cab pulls away. I'm alone. It's a station. What should I do? I better join a queue.

"Hallo."

"Yes?" asks the Booking Office man.

Got to gain his trust.

"Destination?"

"Well. It's called the 'Love-In Bedfordshire,'" I begin.

"What is?"

"It's a popular music festival. It's on now. But I don't know the destination. I was wondering..."

"I'm sorry. There are others waiting. Unless you can tell me the destination..."

"Bedford," says a woman behind me.

"You want to go to Bedford."

"Do I?"

"Yes - now tell the booking clerk and let's get on with it!"

"Oh. Bedford."

"Single or return?"

"I don't know."

"You must know! Look, are you coming back?"

"It doesn't make any difference."

"It makes exactly two pounds, seven shillings and sixpence difference. Now which is it?"

"The thing is, I haven't got any money."

"Then hop it!"

"I was wondering if you could lend me the fare and I'd pay you back, only it's an important mission. I could write you an IOU and sign it."

"Go! Away!"

The woman behind me pushes me aside and the rest of the queue view me with distain.

Well that's it, then. I tried. Don't want to go back to Goodge Street though. Don't want to go to Mum and Dad's in case I let slip about Colin and his legs and that would upset them. Why is my younger brother so tough and hairy? I'm the eldest. I should be tough and hairy.

It's still raining. There's a train stopping at Bedford. Leaves in nine minutes. Platform six. Maybe I could just sneak on. That's what Colin would do.

You have to show your tickets to get onto the platform. There's a man. But the entrance to the next platform is unattended. I can just nip round. Now.

Quickly. Good. Now join the other people as if I'm one of them. Merge, meld. Chat with them so anyone looking...

"Hallo. Fancy meeting you here. It's a nice-looking train, isn't it? Are you going to the Love-In Bedfordshire? I don't want to take my clothes off but I might have to!"

"How dare you speak to my wife like that! Do you know this man, Celia?"

"Never seen him before in my life!"

"Just being friendly. I think I saw my friends get in here ...Byeee!"

I'm on the train. It's very plush. Slip into an empty compartment for six and take the window seat. Luxury. I was in a prison cell this morning. It's like rags to riches. The train moves off.

"Good afternoon sir."

"Oh. What?"

A train official has slid open the door and is smiling at me.

"May I offer you a light refreshment, sir? We have a restaurant car towards the centre of the train. We will be serving a choice of lamb, chicken or beef main course from six pm."

"Oh. That's good. It's included, is it?"

"All part of the service, sir."

"Oh."

"Forgive me for checking, but you are a first class passenger, aren't you, sir?"

"Oh. Yes. First class. Absolutely first class. I'm on an important mission, you know. Yes. I'll have the beef. No, the chicken. Can you have both?"

Another official has joined the first. He's holding a metal nutcracker. No, it's one of those things that punches holes in tickets. He's a ticket inspector. Shit.

"Both sir?"

"No. Just the chicken. I had a big lunch. Actually, I think I'm going to be sick. Excuse me."

Run down the corridor. Hide in a loo. Engaged. Sit tight. Wait till he goes past. Horrible stink in here. Back in prison. Smaller than the one this morning. At least it's got a proper toilet.

Someone's outside.

"Ticket sir?"

"Certainly," says another voice. "Here you are."

Click of the ticket punch.

"Thank you sir."

Footsteps going off in both directions. Wait a bit. Now. Slowly. Open the door. The man about the dinners is staring straight at me.

"Excuse me sir. I forgot to ask which sitting you'd prefer."

"Sitting? Yes. I'd prefer to eat sitting."

"There are two sittings, at six pm and seven pm respectively. It depends upon your destination. Which station are you getting off at, sir?"

"Bedford."

"Bedford? But that's the first stop. You won't have time for a sandwich let alone a three-course supper. As a matter of fact, we're pulling into Bedford now."

"Could I see your ticket please."

It's the other one. Can't run to the loo. We're pulling into Bedford.

"My ticket. Yes. Where the dickens is that darned ticket? Not in here? No. Just old used tissue, look."

Train's slowing down.

"Nothing in this pocket either. And nothing up my sleeves, look! But look up there!"

They look at the ceiling. I push through the people getting off.

Dark on the platform. Hundreds of us shuffling along towards the exit. Another bloody ticket inspector. Shit! Is there another way out? No. Stick with the crowd. Maybe someone will give me the money. Choose someone.

Load of blokes in T-shirts and jeans. They look a bit rough. Two black dudes with dreadlocks. They look like mighty African warriors except they don't have bones through their noses. Don't ask them. I probably wouldn't understand their reply and that would be embarrassing.

There are five orange people behind me, chanting Hare Krishna and banging tambourines. We're almost at the ticket collector and I can't hear myself think!

What about girls? Not those. Too pretty. There's an older hippie couple. I always look up to older hippies. They're the elders of our movement. He's tall and looks like Buffalo Bill with beads. She's fat, with a huge flowery dress and twinkling eyes. Ask them.

"Excuse me, I haven't got a ticket. You couldn't lend me the money, could you, only I'm going to get caught?"

"Was Wollen sie, mein freund?"

"Oo, er...Never mind."

Shit. Germans. Didn't know you could get German hippies. Don't know how they've got the gall.

"Have your tickets ready please!"

What am I going to do? Don't panic! You're an experienced criminal. Think of something. Bloody chanting! - That's it! Join the orange people. The inspector won't dare ask a religious person. If he wants to know why I'm not dressed in orange, I'll say my uniform's at the cleaners.

"...Hare Krishna, Hare Krishna

"Krishna Krishna, Hare..."

One of the orange people smiles at me and passes me a brochure. It's got a picture of an Indian Temple. I smile back. He's happy that I'm changing. I'm happy.

"...Krishna, Krishna Krishna

"Hare Krishna, Krishna..."

"Your ticket sir!"

"Here!" I say, pushing the brochure into the inspector's hand. "This is better than a ticket. It's a ticket to heaven!

"...Hare Hare, Krishna Krishna..."

It's a wonder world. A hippie wonder world ...Stars twinkling in the heaven and, beneath us, a valley of hippies.

Stop. Catch my breath.

Thousands of shadows in the moonlight. Some have lit fires and are gathered around them. I love the hippies for promoting peacefulness. And also because their peacefulness is full of thoughts. Trying to see the world in a different way.

A girl beside me, hands me a joint.

"Oh. Thanks."

She smiles at me. She has the face of someone my age but with a few crinkly lines as she smiles. She must be in her thirties. She too is looking down into the valley of hippies.

People always look for reasons in the past. Like in psychology when you do this because your parents did that. Or in religion, where bad luck is a punishment for what your ancestors did or what you did in a past life.

There are the religious laws and the laws of the land, telling us what to do and how to be. And, apart from the nebulous 'Kingdom of Heaven', that's all there is.

But what if the reason for doing things is in the future? Something we don't know, which will come into existence because of what we do now? What if, god or no god, what we do matters? Perhaps we can affect creation by the quality of our creativity.

At the far end, there's a stage. Can't see anything on the stage. Too far away. I can hear the music though. Echoing drums, nasty clangy guitar and a bloke wailing away like a rat in a trap.

"Who's singing?" I ask.

"Joe Cocker."

The way she says it, she must be French.

"Ah yes, Joe Cockeur," I reply, smiling and nodding, so she won't think I'm critical of the horrible noise.

"Are you French?"

"I'm Nina. I have photographs."

"Photographs?"

She's showing me photographs. It's dark, for Christ's sake. I can't see a thing. Is she a lunatic?

"I can't see them, Nina."

"But you can imagine. This is Kecak dance in Bangli town. All the villagers are entranced. See their eyes. And this, I think this is the statues of... - No it is a procession in Jimbaran. You like this one?"

"Er."

"I don't like it. It is too commercial. Here is a cremation..."

On and on she goes.

"I will return to Bali, when I have enough money," she confides. "There is word that the Americans are taking over, killing anyone they like and saying they are communists."

"Why would Americans say they're Communists, and why would they kill people they like?"

She doesn't hear me, doesn't even take a breath.

"You should come with me to Bali, Andy. We must find out what's going on, and make a stand!"

"Come to Bali and get murdered?"

She hears me now.

"You are fearful," she says, fixing me with very penetrating eyes. "If you have fear, it is because you do not believe in anything, apart from yourself."

"I don't believe in myself," I admit.

"Exactly!" she cries, and, taking my arm, leads me on, down the hill, whilst breaking into some rant about the living skeletons on the wild rocks of Borneo, or something.

Maybe she's right, maybe I'd stop being frightened if I believed in something. Looking down over the valley of beautiful, possibly crazy people, under the endless sky, I can't help thinking that maybe it's all a joke. And that everything we believe, is based on that joke: Us humans are frightened, we'll believe anything.

Joe Cocker's vomiting on about "with a little help from my friends". More like with a little help from a throat specialist.

Never mind. The world beneath me is a sight to behold. I never wanted to come to this festival. But now I'm here... Also, I've got here by breaking laws. I am truly free. I bet a lot of these young office workers, pretending to be hippies, haven't broken laws. They're just pretending. Nina isn't pretending. She's genuinely bonkers. I wish she'd shut up with the bingly bangly photo crap.

"What's wrong with you?" I ask.

That shuts her up. She's wearing a little black cotton dress. Must be freezing. She has long dark hair, tied at the back. Her face is rather lovely. Full lips. There is something wrong with her, though. It's in the eyes.

“...What’s wrong...?” I repeat, trying to sound less nasty.

“I’ve got to get back to Bali. They chunked me out. They said it was because my visa had expired. But I was getting too close to their wicked plots. I have to get back. But I have no money and I can’t go back to France.”

“What about your parents, Nina?”

“My mother is dead and my father is a rapist. I must purify my soul. I must seek the truth. It is my art. I give my photographs to people, but they pay a little, so I can eat and. ...Do you like this photograph? It is Kula Beach at sunset. It is a cliché but people like it. Do you like it?”

“Well, maybe. If I could see it. But anyway Nina, I’m broke. No money.”

“Like me.”

“Yes.”

“What is your name?”

“Andy.”

“Are you alone, Andy?”

“I’ve got to find the others.”

“Which others?”

“Kit, Walt, Amanda... I’m never going to find them, and I... It’s going to take hours and they might have moved...”

“I know,” says Nina. “Follow me.”

We wander down the hill. She puts her arm in mine. My heart goes out to her. She looks at me with such need. Not victim-need, though. Fierce. Her eyes tell me that she isn’t mad. She has a peculiarly strong will.

“Hey! Watch out!”

We’ve walked into somebody’s fire.

We jump out and bang our feet on the ground. I can smell the burning rubber from my shoes.

“Where are you taking me?” I ask Nina. “And does it have to be through fires?”

“To the stage. They will make an announcement so your friends will find you.”

“Oh. That’s a good idea, Nina.”

There’s huge applause and cheering as we stumble through. Joe Cocker has finished. There’s a kerfuffle with the microphones. Then some music strikes up.

“O bla di, O bla da, life goes on bra!”

It’s the Beatles. Are they on? No. Just a record. My dad hates this song. He thinks it says “Oh bloody!” That’s why he hates the Beatles.

“All you funky freaks and groovy chicks, say “Hi!”

“Hi!” thunders the audience.

"Up here on stage getting ready, the fantabulous Bell Family!!"

The Bell Family. That's Amanda's sisters. They'll know where Amanda is. Just run up to the stage and ask them.

"Eloise? Gracie? Where is Amanda?"

They can't hear me. Too much noise. People chatting and laughing.

"Shut up!" I yell at some stoned imbecile, who's wailing in my lughole.

He looks at me as if I'm the most uncool person in Christendom, and goes on wailing.

"Eloise?! Gracie?!"

Eloise's bloke, Clive, peers over the edge of the stage.

"Where's Amanda?" I scream.

He shrugs and disappears. Maybe he's gone to ask someone else.

"Andy!"

I whirl round, almost banging my head into Nina, and see Amanda, pushing her way through towards me.

"Amanda."

"Andy. You made it."

I turn to Nina.

"Thanks,"

She gives me the peace sign, that Churchill invented.

"Come to Bali. It is beautiful. We must make a stand against American imperialism!"

Amanda hugs me. We hug as if we've never been apart. But we are apart. Amanda is with Kit now. I think she senses my feelings as we disengage.

Still, don't let the side down. Don't show weakness.

"So, how's it going?" I ask.

"They wouldn't let us bring the van in. Walt bought us a tent though. Over there somewhere. Do you want a vegiburger?"

"What's that?"

"It's a burger with vegetables."

"Food?"

"Yes, Andy. It's food. Are you hungry?"

"Yes. They didn't feed us in prison."

"How was it?"

"Alright."

"I still care about you, Andy."

"Do you?"

"Two vegiburgers and chips, please. Do you want a coke Andy?"

"Yes."

"Two cokes."

She's got money. I don't have to be a criminal. We stand by the stage and munch the delicious feast while the Bell Family tune up.

"Are you going up with Walt and Kit to start this Centre of Creation thingy then?" I ask.

"Yes."

"But I thought you wanted to do music."

She gives me a bitter look. Is she saying she wanted to do music, but only with me?

"They want to go electric."

"Who do?" I ask, spitting out a bit of vegiburger, which lands on her cheek.

"Clive, mainly," she says, wiping it off.

"But I thought they were proud of being acoustic. I thought anyone who went electric was a cop-out."

"Clive sees those electric cop-outs laughing all the way to their pink Rolls Royces."

"Oh. I suppose..."

"But if you're going to be electric you've got to have original songs and Clive couldn't write a song to save his life."

"Oh. Poor bastard."

"They want me to write their songs."

"Do they? Wow! Are you going to do it?"

"The Bell Family!" shrieks a speaker right by my ear. There's a smattering of applause. Clive's terrible nasal singing starts up. Amanda and I have to shout.

"Are you going to do it, then?"

"What?"

"Write their songs."

"No," she yells.

"Why?"

"Listen!"

"Oh."

I suppose we should listen.

"Awful isn't it!" she says.

"What's awful?"

"His singing."

"Yes. Like Joe Cocker."

"Worse," shouts Amanda. "Clive can't even hold a tune!"

"Why?"

"Tone deaf."

"Really?"

Amanda laughs.

"Let's get away from this speaker!"

"Okay."

I follow her.

"Our tent's on the side of the hill over there."

"...So you're not going to write songs for them..."

"No," she confirms.

"But you are going to start the Creation Centre."

"Yes."

If she still cares about me, why is she going off with Kit to live in the wilds of Scotland?

"I still love you, Amanda."

"Do you? That's a pity."

"Why?"

She's nearly in tears.

"I can't let Kit down, not now."

"Does Kit love you then?" I ask, managing not to gulp.

"He thinks he loves Beatrice."

"That's what I thought."

Amanda turns on me.

"He doesn't. He idolises her. It's not love, it's a fixation!"

"She is perfection," I say.

"Do you think so?"

There's a quaver in her voice.

"No," I reply, a bit quickly. "But Kit's a bit of a perfectionist, isn't he? - It's all or nothing with Kit."

Amanda nods.

"Yeah. All or nothing. But there's another problem, besides Beatrice."

"Oh?"

"You."

"Me?"

"Well, you and me."

"I don't understand."

"I think that, if Kit really believed it was over between you and me, he might trust me. And then, he might forget about Beatrice."

She bites her lip.

"Why shouldn't he believe it's over between us?" I ask, weakly.

Amanda shrugs.

"So, do you love Kit then?"

Might she say yes? I can't bear it. Is it really over?

"I love him. But I'm not in love with him."

"I don't understand what that means! I mean, either you love him or you don't! Which is it? 'Love but not in love?' What does it mean?"

"It means...!"

She has to think.

"It means I love his work! And... He needs someone..."

I follow on behind her, as meekly as a lamb. Kit pokes his head out of a posh new tent. When he sees me, a look of rage passes across his face and he turns away. What have I done?

Inside, Walt's rigging up some kerosene light and Kit is listening to Wagner, which seems to fit perfectly with Clive's nasal folk singing outside.

"Well, here we all are!" I say, to be jolly.

No-one replies.

"Well, anyway - I got here! Funny - I expected everyone to be naked!"

"Do you want to be naked Andy?" asks Walt, lighting the lamp.

"Not if I can help it!" I retort.

Amanda giggles. There's a huge flash from the kerosene lamp. The tent's on fire. Scramble out! Get away!

Look back in safety. It's like a flaming church except, suddenly, it's gone.

"The posters!" screams Kit.

The posters are burning. Kit jumps on them. We all jump on them. When we get off, they're all squashed into the mud.

It's the twentieth of March, 1969. Kit's 19th birthday. No party this year, with his vicious mother and pink splodgy cakes, collapsing magician, broken chess set and Jules and I helping him to leave home forever. No party, but another escape.

Walt's trust - the nice Mr Grebe - has bought the hillside farm in Scotland. Walt, Kit and Amanda are travelling up today to start the Centre of Creation.

Jules keeps saying how good it is. 'Diversification' he calls it.

My brother Colin is moving to Covent Garden to start 'Freaks Kitchen' with Sam and Becky.

Jules has been talking with Colin. Sam and Becky will run the café side of things. Colin will organise the selling of stuff produced by the Centre of Creation and Amazing Arts and Jules and Beatrice's magazine, which doesn't have a name yet. But it is 'diversification' - and it all fits together!

Except that I'm not together. They all drive off and I am alone. Nobody is telling me what to do. I don't have to do anything.

Do the washing up. Collect all the greasy, cigarette-stubbed plates, cups into the soapy water. Build up so much energy in the washing up, that I have the strength to dust and clean, until the place sparkles. Then decide.

Answer the phone. Print jobs, deadlines, requests for quotes. Defer all decisions.

Some friend of Jules wants to order ten 'Little Bo-Peep' posters.

"We don't have any. They were burnt."

"Can't you print some more?"

"What? So you can have ten posters? Anyway, how can I print them on my own?"

"Well, if you do print any more, perhaps you'd inform me?"

"Yes. Yes. Alright. What's your number?"

No sooner have I put the phone down, than it rings again. It's Mum, berating me for harbouring Colin and not telling them.

"It has nothing to do with me Mum, so get off my back!"

Slam the phone down. Stomp off into the kitchen when the kettle has boiled. Take my coffee into the sparkling living room and sit down.

The walls are white. Modern chrome, tubular sofas and chairs, stretched with fake black leather. It's a dark day. Turn on all the little sidelights in here. Wish we had a telly.

Put a record on. 'The Who'. Nasty, thrashy noise.

"If you're not with the one you love!" it yells. "Love the one you're with!"

Great. And if you're alone, then whom should you love? - They should be called 'The Whom'.

Fucking phone's ringing.

"Who is it?"

"Jeremy."

"Whom?" I boom.

"I'm trying to locate a guy called Andy. I met him a month or two ago. He mentioned that he worked for Amazing Arts. Do you know how I might contact him? Have you a phone number?"

"Jeremy?"

"Yes."

"It's me. Andy."

"Oh Andy. It didn't sound like you. I was just calling on the off-chance... Have you a moment to chat?"

"Oh. Okay. I'll get a cigarette."

Where are they? Okay, pull the chair up to the desk.

"Okay, Jeremy. So, how are you?"

"Terrible. Last night was the first night of my production of 'Romeo and Juliet'. I've just read the reviews."

"In the newspapers?"

"Yes. Times, Guardian, the lot."

"Were the reviews, er...bad?"

Jeremy laughs bitterly.

"No. Half of them say it's brilliant, modern, fab. The other half say it's a disgrace. But that's good."

"It is?"

"Good publicity. Controversial and all that. Listen, you don't fancy meeting for a drink, do you?"

"Okay. Where? Hang on, I'll get a pencil."

It's been threatening to rain all day. Hardly four o'clock but the sky is black and all the lights are on down Charing Cross Road, Trafalgar Square and across the river.

We're meeting at Jeremy's. There's a pub nearby. Why am I doing this? And why am I walking so fast? - Because somebody wants my company? So, it'll be alright.

"Andy, thanks for coming. Oh my goodness, you're soaked!" he says. "You'll have to change. Come in."

Jeremy fusses. It's like when we first met and I was freezing. He's always taking care of me. Is it paternal? Or friendship? Or sexual? Or a combination? Do I care?

"What will you drink? Scotch?"

"I can't drink whiskey."

"Why ever not?"

"Makes me choke."

"You get used to it. Gives you courage," he explains, pouring himself one and knocking it back.

"Does it?" I ask.

He stares at me.

"No. The opposite. Cowardice. What about you?"

"Just water will do."

"You want a coke?"

"Yeah."

He pours me a coke, and raises his glass, so I raise mine.

"To courage or cowardice?" I ask.

"Ha! To 'Cop-out' or 'Fake'. Yes, F for Fake."

"But if your play is controversial and that's good...?"

"Let me tell you what I did."

We're sitting side by side in comfy old armchairs, beside the pretend log fire with the rain beating down outside. I come closer so that he can confide in me.

"Do you know the story of Romeo and Juliet?" he asks.

"Are they lovers and they die?"

"Exactly. They die because their respective families are at war with each other."

"Yes. The Romulets and the Catapults."

"You see? You do know it! Another drink? A top-up?"

"I've still got some left."

He tops himself up.

"I saw last night's performance."

"Oh."

"It was shit."

"I'm sure it wasn't."

"How the fuck do you know? Listen. I made one of the families like flower children and the other family a bunch of stuck-up straights. Brought it up to date, you see?"

"Great!"

"Not great. Codswallop. Makes no sense. Sheds no light. I did it to be trendy. The costumes are frightful, the performances are worse. What made me think that I could get pop stars to act? It's turned into a terrible garish pantomime, with all this

indecipherable old English, like stuffing coming out of a sofa, and the performers hopping about, doing little bits of business, to try to hide the fact that it's fucking Shakespeare!"

He swigs back a Scotch and pours another.

"It's not as if it's just a bad production. I did it on purpose. And, if I'm honest, I know why."

"Why?" I ask.

"I'll show you."

We go into the other room. There are some photographs on a dressing table.

"That's my father."

The old black-and-white picture shows an Edwardian man with a big bushy beard and fierce eyes. Beside him, a pretty young flapper in white, with a parasol.

"He was a well-known playwright. Herbert Grimly-Barking. No, don't laugh. He was a contemporary of Shaw. Considered, at the time, to be potentially greater than Shaw. But then he met my mother."

"Is that her?"

"Yes. Her family were Canadian. New money. In any case they went off to Canada together and he never wrote anything ever again."

"Wow! Why?"

"I don't know. He turned against it. There was a kind of pent-up rage in him. If any of us ever tried to make something or do something, he'd tear it to shreds. Verbally of course, but it destroyed any impulse...When I elected to finish my studies in England, I discovered that my father was still well-known in theatre circles and that, as his son...it was a cinch."

"So are you Canadian then? You don't sound it."

"No. It's an act. F for fake."

He glugs back his drink, realises the bottle's in the other room, bangs the empty glass down on the dressing table and flops back on the bed. I'm all squeezed up sitting on the corner of the bed, peering at the photo of his parents.

"I've always treated life as if it were a show - something to shine in, but not real..."

"I feel like that," I admit. "I'm always trying to make a good impression, pretending I know what I'm doing, when everyone can see that I haven't got a clue."

"You know, if you'd said that, even a day or two ago, I'd have laughed at you. I'd have considered it a sign of weakness."

"It is a sign of weakness."

He doesn't hear me.

“Watching the press night, last night, the whole awful production fell away. I found myself hearing the garbled words and they made sense. It was a religious experience. Seeing the light. Hah! “What light from yonder window breaks...” As if a fissure opened in the rock, to reveal the fires beneath. And because I’ve never admitted to any fire, anywhere, only to conceits and calculations, I knew I was going to have to dive into the flames. And I think that’s what happened. I must have just dived in. This morning I felt this terrible sense of shame and loss. I’ve been in a panic ever since.”

He is shaking. Is this just an act to get me to touch him? He’s cold.

“Are you on drugs?”

“No.”

It’s not an act. He is shaking with what seems like fear.

I put my arms around him and hold him tight. This isn’t just for him. Be honest, I’m feeling all alone and panicky too.

He caresses my shoulders, like massage but not quite. It’s one of those moments. A question. Shouldn’t you try to experience as much as possible? Before you decide, shouldn’t you find out? And how else can you find out? Stop being frightened! Jeremy caresses me - arms, neck, down my back.

Why do I acquiesce? Do I like it? It’s all I can do, not to tense up. Daren’t turn to face him or caress him.

Slowly he brings his face to face mine. Slowly, giving me every opportunity to move away, he comes closer. His eyes are kind, passionate, painful. He kisses me. We embrace. We roll backwards onto the bed.

Lying here, kissing as I’m kissed, hugging as I’m hugged, I try to stop my anxieties churning. Try to give in to the experience. Try. My mind slips away, returning to find that I’m now naked. Jeremy is rubbing Vaseline into my arse.

Away I fly. All sorts of fears. Will it hurt? Will it tear? I can feel him starting to penetrate. It’s all I can do to control my breathing. So weird to have a prick inside me, pumping up my arse. Visions of pricks going up, meeting turds coming down...

Stop it. Treat it as love, passion. That’s all it is. And Jeremy is a kind, passionate person.

Jeremy ejaculates and falls back, heavily. I daren’t move. Stay deep inside myself, shaking. Searing pain up my bum and loads of spunk dribbling out. I hope I’m not pregnant.

Jeremy is sobbing. I’m the one that’s just been fucked. What gives him the right to sob? But he is sobbing.

“It’s alright,” I tell him.

“You didn’t enjoy it, did you?” he murmurs.

“But it’s alright. It’s alright that it happened.”

Thing is, we’re both in a bit of a state. Nobody knows what they’re doing, do they? Not Jeremy, nor any of my friends, not my parents, not world leaders. We’re all adrift. At least I’m not alone in feeling alone.

Centre of Creation
 Woodfoot Farm
 Nr Auldgirth
 Dumfriesshire
 Scotland

11th April 1969

Dear Andy

When my parents told Eloise, Gracie and me that they were emigrating to Vancouver, they made it sound as if we were being given something, as if we were privileged.

We were being given a whole house. Three floors. One for each of us. We were being given a weekly allowance. Enough to pay the bills and still have enough left over to enjoy ourselves. Above all, we were being given our freedom!

I've written three letters to my mother since I moved up here. Today I got a reply. It's from my step-father. He says my mother is running amok. Half the psychiatric patients referred to her, end up in bed with her. The other half jump out of windows. He signs himself "your ever-loving father, Roland."

I can't bear it. It's what I've always feared.

My real father was Oswald Bell. He was the grandson of Alexander Graham Bell, the inventor of the telephone. Oswald was also an inventor. He committed suicide when I was twelve.

Eloise, Gracie and I have always shared a joke - that Mum drove him to kill himself. But it's true!

What can I do, Andy? This letter is only supposed to accompany Kit's drawings for IT and Oz. I've been advertising for real craftsmen in local papers up here but really,

what would do it, would be for Oz and IT to advertise the founding of the 'Centre of Creation'.

I hate the name, by the way, but Walt won't even discuss it. He holds the purse strings. Not that he'll pay for advertising. I think Walt is happy the way things are - with his friends Zecky and Moodri. Honestly, they're wrecking the place.

The previous owners of the farmhouse put in all this formica and fablon. They boarded up every pipe, every beam and made it look like a council flat.

Walt and Zecky are ripping it out, even as I write. The trouble is that they're ripping out all the house's insulation. It's freezing at night.

Sun's out today. I'm sitting in the garden. I've planted vegetables. Unfortunately the goat keeps eating them. I can hear Walt and Zecky crashing about inside.

Kit has locked himself in the big room at the end and paints from dawn to dusk. He's decided to dedicate himself to portrait-painting (though he puts them in the most wonderful landscapes). He's forever grabbing Walt and racing off in the ambulance to grab some poor unfortunate person in a pub in Dumfries and drag them back here to sit for Kit. As the portraits mount up, the room seems to get smaller and smaller.

Walt pays for paints and canvasses, bless him for that. But the way I feel is, the sooner we get this on a firm financial footing, the better. I mean, there are no crafts going on up here, unless house-wrecking is a craft.

The drawings I've sent are to advertise for craftsmen (and women!) but they're so beautiful, I'm sure Oz and IT wouldn't mind including them for free.

I've just re-read what I've written so far - it's all higgledy-piggledy. Sorry. On the one hand, there's getting this craft centre up and running. On the other, my personal confusions.

What can I do, Andy? It's not just that I feel abandoned by my parents. Eloise takes after Mum (a saner version). Gracie is also like Mum, but seems to have learnt the quiet, appeasing quality of our Step-Dad. Thing is, I suspect I'm like my real Dad.

In pictures, his eyes are hungry, like mine. Like him, I've a compulsion to invent things - songs in my case.

I've been writing songs up here. Every evening I put all my clothes on (4 layers!) and climb the hill with paper, pen and guitar. I know it sounds romantic but it's the only way to get out of earshot of the racket Kit, Walt, Zecky and Moodri make - Doors or Hendrix up full volume...

I'm aware that my words and tunes are probably very unprofessional - and very self-centred. I'm trying to make sense of things because I feel so lost up here.

I wonder whether you and I could be pen-pals, Andy? Whether you'd mind if I splurged things out in letters to you? I'm aware that I'm doing it to you because I can't do it to my mum and dad. And I know that is pathetic. But it could work both ways. You could tell me your feelings too. And don't say you haven't got any - I've heard you play violin!

Love, Amanda."

The two drawings accompanying her letter, are of a farmhouse nestling in the hills. The one for IT is daytime. The one for Oz is twinkly starlight. They're a bit kitsch. No doubt Amanda stood over Kit while he did them. Beneath each picture is beautifully hand-written text - Amanda's.

"Come to

THE CENTRE OF CREATION

Calling all weavers - potters - jewellers - dressmakers - sculptors - blacksmiths - farmers - leather-workers - carpenters - furniture makers - inventors - artists and visionaries!

We feel deep disenchantment with the quality of products and the decline in standards of workmanship. General increase in awareness has led people to search for a higher quality of workmanship and durability. This we intend to foster.

Amazing Arts, a non-profit-making art organisation, has recently acquired a 30-acre farm in Scotland where there are facilities for a self-sufficient arts and crafts community.

Our resources are as follows:

- 1. Woodfoot Farm - 30-acres, comprising 20-acres of woodland, and 10-acres of pasture in the lowlands of West Scotland; farmhouse accommodation and large potential workshop space.*
- 2. Freaks Kitchen - a café and shop for retailing our work, soon to open in London's Covent Garden.*
- 3. Amazing Arts - fully operational offices in Goodge Street, London W1."*

It makes me proud to be part of such a big organisation. Don't know if I can get Oz and IT to print it, though. Scared to ask.

There's another piece of paper. What is it?

"DING DONG BELL

*Oswald Bell
Marries Giselle
Buys a one way
Ticket to hell*

*Giselle Bell
Belle of the ball
Glacial queen
Analyses it all*

*She drinks his love
Like blood which pours in
She for her part
Digs her claws in*

*Oswald Bell
Marries Giselle
Buys a one way
Ticket to hell*

The more he loves

*The more he declines
His every invention
She undermines*

*Finally feeling
He's no use
He invents a beam
A chair, a noose*

*Oswald Bell
Marries Giselle
Buys a one way
Ticket to hell*

*Now he's dead
But she's doing well
Driving her partners
And patients to hell"*

Oh my God. Oh Amanda. I've been seeing Jeremy. And, painful as it is, it's been putting some distance between me and you. So I don't know if I could write to you of my feelings.

And how could I write to you about Jeremy? I know I'm not homosexual and he knows. We talk. We cuddle. He wanks. I want to wank too but I don't dare. I'm all fizzed up inside and daren't let it out.

I'm sorry Amanda. I can't tell you these things. Perhaps I could fake it. Pretend to tell you my feelings - so that you would feel free to tell me yours.

But how can I want you to be alright without me?

Phone ringing. Amanda?

"Hallo?"

"Andy?"

Not Amanda. Sister - Gracie. Sounds a bit like Amanda. She's nice-looking too. Nice hips...

"...Andy, yes..."

"Andy - listen. I haven't got time to chat. Clive and I have had a row."

"But I thought you were with Neil."

"I am."

“Oh.”

Pity. If she were free. Nice hips...

“Clive’s got us to do this awful folk-pop single, ‘The Walla Walla Men’, and now...”

I hear Clive’s voice in the background.

“I didn’t force you!”

She ignores him.

“...And now we’ve got to do this pop tour to promote it and I wondered if you’d replace me...”

“Andy can’t replace you, you stupid bitch!”

“Yes he can, Clive. Now leave me alone!”

“Has he got red hair and great tits? Has he?”

He’s right. She’s got lovely tits...

“Andy, are you still there?”

“...Yes...”

“Listen, the tour starts next week in Manchester. Do you think...”

“Get off the fucking phone, Gracie. I’m warning you...”

There’s a kerfuffle. The phone is dropped. Lots of shouting. Are there others too? Phone goes dead.

What should I do? Freezing. Get some clothes on. But what if she rings back?

But I don’t want her to ring back. I couldn’t do a tour anyway.

But I’m all alone here in the freezing morning with loads of work to do and the sound of her voice, just imagining her soft hips and her warm breasts...

...Her breasts, just imagine. Her tits. Yes - tits, tits, tits! - So crude. ...Ejaculate, god damn it! Why can’t I come?

Maybe if I just do it technically. Squeeze my willy. Tug! Pull! Tug! Pull! Face up to the sexy feeling. Watch it grow! Tug!...Pull!...Tug... ...Pull... ...It’s gone all small and wobbly. It’s almost disappeared.

Okay. Remember Gracie. Her hips - visualise! Her tits! What are they like? Soft! Warm! See her face! Can’t see her face...

See anyone’s face! Look - down in the street. People going to work. Secretaries with big knockers, oh what’s the use?

Sitting naked in the office, looking out of the window for sexy ladies I can’t even see because I’m three floors up...

Phone rings. Whip my hand off my knob as if I've been caught.

"Amazing Arts. Who is it?"

"The Lady."

"You're not a lady."

"The Lady Magazine."

"Oh."

"And I am a lady." Oops. It is a lady. Such a deep voice though. That's alright. Ladies with deep voices can be very sexy.

"Sorry. I was miles away. Who is it."

I wonder if I dare touch myself while she is speaking? Just gently massage. She'll never know.

"Harriet Watts, The Lady. We spoke yesterday."

"Yes. Hallo Harriet. How are you today?"

She's flattered.

"Very well, thank you. I'm afraid I'm going to have to change our appointment."

"Oh. That's a pity Harriet. I was looking forward to seeing you - in the flesh, so to speak."

She giggles. She must be fifty or more but she giggles like a girl. She's sexy inside.

"Well I don't know about "in the flesh" but we could make it sometime in the afternoon. Say 3.30?"

"Oh, er..."

I've got hundreds of appointments tomorrow. Scrabble about on the desk for the diary. Where is it? Shit, I'm not going to find it. Say yes.

"Yes."

"I look forward! Byeee."

She's gone. So quick. My knob was all swollen, ready.

There's the diary. Staring at me the whole time. Who was it? Harriet Watts three-thirty. Shit I've already got a three-thirty. And now there's a great big gap in the morning.

Sort it out later. Get dressed. Phone's ringing. Hope it's a girl.

"Hallo?"

"Geoffrey Champion, Punch. Who am I speaking to?"

Champion Punch...Perhaps he's very muscly. Would that be attractive? Would it excite me? Try...

"...Oh, er - I'm Andy Parvin...er..."

"The very man!"

"Am I? Oh, thanks..."

"You've been chatting up my secretary!"

"Me? I haven't, honestly. I wouldn't do that sort of thing."

Looking down at my podgy goose-pimpled body... The man on the other end is laughing. What's funny? Who cares? Funny can be sexy. Am I supposed to be thinking about him or his secretary?

"Never mind," he says. "I can fit you in tomorrow."

"Fit me in?"

He chuckles.

"You can show me your oeuvre."

"Oh."

I'm bewildered and limp.

"...Say after lunch? 3.30?"

"No! I mean...Hang on a tick..."

What am I going to do? I can't see three magazines at 3.30. Mustn't say no, though. Maybe he's free in the morning.

"What about in the morning? I've got a great big gap."

"Have you indeed? No. It'll have to be three-thirty...or..."

"Three forty-five!"

"Three forty-five it is - and I hope you find someone to fill your great big gap."

Freezing. Get some clothes on. Need a coffee. Where are my cigs?

If I could get a hard-on, it'd warm me up. If I could come, I'd feel great. I could concentrate on all the boring business. Like this fucking phone...

"Hallo?"

"Bates, Vylona Carpets. Where the hell are our leaflets?"

"Ah. Yes. The leaflets. It must be Wednesday. Ah...I'll have to find out."

"What do you mean 'find out'? I've got the boss breathing down my neck. They're supposed to be here. You promised faithfully."

"Yes. They're on their way. That is, I'll phone the printers."

"Aren't you the printers?"

"Yes, but...I mean, I'll phone our printer at our own printing building and find out where the leaflets are."

"I see. You'll call me back immediately?"

"Yes."

Shit. Where's the number? ...Covent ...Covent ...Covent Garden Community Printers. Is that a two or a nine? It's ringing. Good.

"Hallo. Are you Covent Garden Community Printers?"

"Who is it?"

"Andy Parvin, Amazing Arts. You were supposed to call me yesterday so I'd remember to pick up the leaflets. They are ready, aren't they?"

"Leaflets?"

"For Christ's sake, my client's job is on the line!"

"I don't know what you're talking about."

"The fucking leaflets!"

"I think you must have the wrong number."

"Oh..."

Line's gone dead. Must've been a two. Redial. Make sure.

"...Hallo?"

"What is it, man?"

"Is that Covent Garden Community Printers?"

"Yeah."

"You've printed some leaflets for us."

"There's no one in."

"You're in! Where are my leaflets?"

"Phone back later, man."

We've got cut off. Maybe it's a mistake and he'll ring back. No. What am I going to do? Vylona need their brochures or we're ruined!

Phone ringing. Thank God!

"Hallo?"

"Hi! Andy?"

"Have you found the leaflets?"

"It's Colin."

"Colin?"

"Your brother."

"Colin? How come you're at the printers?"

"I'm at the café."

"Oh. Is it open?"

"No, it's a bloody derelict. Andy, I need your help. I've had a fall."

"What? What's happened?"

"I was up a ladder, trying to check the cistern. Bloody thing came off the wall and because my legs are still in plaster I plummeted. Left leg shot straight down the toilet bowl. Twisted. Excruciating. Luckily there was a mallet. Managed to smash it

so I could crawl in here to the phone. I can hardly speak for the pain. Andy! Can you come over?"

"Oh shit! I mean, I've got this client screaming for his leaflets. Isn't there anyone else? What about Sam and Becky?"

"Yes. Downstairs. They're not hearing me. All crashed out. Stoned. Please Andy."

"I'll be right over!"

Sod Amazing Arts! Go and help Colin. What's he doing up a ladder with his legs in plaster, anyway? Asking for trouble. Fucking phone!"

"Who is it?"

"Bates, Vylona. The leaflets! You said you'd call me back immediately!"

"Oh...Yes, only..."

"I'm not normally a violent man Mr Parvin..."

"No, no of course not, who is?"

"But..."

"Yes, well - as a matter of fact I'm just running out of the door now to deliver them to you personally, Mr Bates. Goodbye!"

Phone Covent Garden Community Printers again. Pray they've done them.

"Hallo?"

"Yeah?"

"Amazing Arts here. You were doing some leaflets - Vylona Carpet Sale?"

"Yeah? So what?"

"Are they done?"

"Got them earmarked for Thursday."

"But they're supposed to be ready now!"

"Can't help that, man. Anyway, you'll have them Thursday."

"Not Thursday! - Today!"

"Listen, man, you're lucky we're even doing them. We don't normally take on straight work. We're a community service."

"Well who's in charge?"

"No one. We're a co-operative."

"Then for fuck's sake, co-operate! Please. My client will lose his job! If you could print them this morning - I'd do anything..."

"I'd like to help you, man, but, as a co-operative, we have to agree, and we're not quorate... Okay?"

"I'll pay you extra."

"We're not breadheads like you, man."

Phone clicks dead. What should I do? Feel like I'm going to pop. Phone ringing again. Watch my hand reaching out...

"Hallo?"

"Andy? Jim here, from Oz.."

"Jim Anderson?"

"Yes."

Wow! He's an important person and he's ringing me. I like Jim ever such a lot. He loves Kit's work and he's always so friendly and positive about everything. He's homosexual and very kind. Jeremy's kind too, but I wish I could get excited by it and come...

"It's funny you ringing now, Jim. I've just got this beautiful picture from Kit. Only it's an advert as well and Amanda was wondering if you'd print it free, because it's so beautiful."

"Let me see it. I need to have a chat with you about something else. Can you come into the Oz office sometime today?"

There's a terse sound in Jim's voice. Is he upset with me?

"What's it about, Jim?"

"Tell you later."

"Okay..."

Does he fancy me? Do I fancy him?

Phone ringing.

"Amazing Arts. How can we help?"

"Antonia Williams here."

Find her name in the diary.

"...You're from Vogue. Ah. Three-thirty. I've a problem there. Double-booked."

Antonia giggles.

"Me too," she says.

I feel a quiver in my hand. I've got a hard-on.

"How about 11?" she asks.

"Tomorrow morning?"

"Yes."

She has a rich, creamy voice. I can hear her breathing. Can she hear me? I'm going all whirly. Got to keep the conversation going.

"Could it be eleven-thirty?"

"Perfect," she purrs.

The line clicks. She's gone. Gone before I could come.

Phone ringing. Never stops. Just the sound of it turns me on.

"Andy Parvin here, Amazing Arse, I mean Arts."

"Good morning Mr Parvin. This is Lucy Parkhouse calling from the Observer Colour Supplement."

Observer Colour Supplement? Look up and down my list but it isn't there.

"But I didn't ring you. Did I?"

"No, Mr Parvin. I've rung you."

"Have you? Of course you have. Why?"

"We've had a feature drop out at short notice. I was telling Beatrice Moore and she suggested... - Do you know Beatrice?"

"Yes, Beatrice, beautiful..."

The very mention conjures her sumptuous...

"Oh...oh..."

"Pardon?"

"Sorry?"

"Apparently you represent the new arts."

"Art - yes," I gasp, tugging at my tightening tool.

"Pop art, psychedelia, that sort of thing."

"Well I don't know what they're all called."

"You see, we might be in a position to run a full feature about your movement."

My movement? Can she see me?

"We're thinking something along the lines of 'Chemical Visionaries' or 'Addicted to Art.'"

The way she says the words, so cultivated and fruity. Voices can tell you so much. I bet she's gorgeous. What's her name? - Lucy. Juicy Lucy. Oh, that feels good. Keep talking Lucy...

"Incidentally, are any of your artists on drugs, by any chance?"

Sounds like a rich girl who finds drugs exciting.

"Would it be good if they were?"

"Obviously we don't wish to misrepresent. On the other hand, a good story is a good story."

"Well then, they're all heroine addicts."

"All of them?"

"Orgies."

"Orgies?"

She's really excited now. So am I.

"What about their work though. I mean, if they're always in a stupor, is it any good?"

“Crazy but brilliant!”

“Fab! When shall we make it?” she asks.

“Now!” I pant.

“No!” she cries. “I’m not ready!”

“Now...now...now...ah...”

“Tomorrow. Three pm. Okay? I’ll call to confirm.”

“Okay...”

Oh God. Sweating. Freezing. Spunk everywhere. Not another call...

“Hallo?”

Eugghh...I’ll have to clean the receiver.

“Andy?”

“Oh Colin. I’m just coming! Wait there!”

Slam the phone down. Leap from the chair. Clean myself with freezing water from the kitchen tap. Throw on my Balinese frock.

Speed. Efficiency. Got to achieve everything today. Think ahead. What will I need? Cheque book. Cash. How much? Don't dither, take the lot.

What else? Keys. Kit's artwork. A watch. Don't have one. Take the clock. Phone's ringing. Ignore it. Thunder downstairs and out...

Bright sunlight. Freezing cold. Armies of office workers, secretaries, shop assistants and post office counter clerks on their lunch hour. They are the loyal citizens of Great Britain. I am quick, efficient, a secret hero, skipping nimbly between them, zig-zagging down into Covent Garden, my batik a blur.

What if I can't get the artwork back? What if they won't give it to me? What if no-one's there and I can't get in?

My feet are heavy. I'm puffing like a train. A sweatball. Got to stop. Don't stop. Two voices in my head. One says succeed! The other says buy a milkshake. Which voice is me?

Long Acre. Somewhere off here. Ouch!

"Mind where you're going."

"Sorry."

There it is. Covent Garden Community Printers. Made it. I am a hero. Nothing can stop me now. Ring the bell. Try to breathe deep. Listen for footsteps. Nothing.

Ring again. Bang on the door. Ring. Bang. Ring. Bang! Door flies open, crashes back against the wall, dislodges some plaster. Dark hallway. Enter.

"Hallo?"

Room on the right with an offset litho. Floor awash with spilt ink and paper. Jesus what a mess. Just start scrabbling through stuff. It's got to be somewhere.

A light goes on.

"Who are you?"

Tall, dopey bloke with long, matted hair and a big conk peering in at me.

"I'm Andy. From Amazing Arts."

"You've broken our door," he says.

"I need the Vylona artwork," I explain.

"Don't know anything about it, man."

"Well, who does?"

"They're out."

"Out?" I shriek.

"You'll have to come back later," he says.

"No fucking way!" I reply, fumbling through a pile of grow-your-own-dope posters.

"Where is it?"

"You can't just come in here and start messing things up!"

"Messing things up?"

I look round at the utter chaos.

"If you don't leave, I'm calling the pigs."

We stare at each other. He's not going to call the pigs. He's not going to get me the artwork either. Either I give up and go, or...

I leap at his throat, twist his Che Guevara T-shirt in my fist and pin him to the corridor wall.

"Get me the Vylona artwork or I'll fucking kill you!"

He puts his hands up.

"Alright ...alright. Don't hurt me. I'll show you..."

I follow him along the hall to a room full of artwork folders, in piles or just scattered across the floor.

"We're a bit behind with the filing," he admits.

He's shaking. I'm shaking.

"Help me!" I order.

"What are we looking for?" he bleats.

"Vylona Carpets!"

It's a joke. There are hundreds of folders. One says 'Socialist Worker' but, inside it, is a knitting pattern.

"Did you say you were from Amazing Arts?"

"Yes!"

He's holding up a file marked Amazing Arts. I grab it. My fingers fumble inside, to check that the artwork is still there. It is. I run.

Out the door, round the corner into Aldwych, down to Instant Print on The Strand. They'll cost more. We'll make a loss. But I'll have saved Mr Bates his job and the honour of Amazing Arts.

"Out of my way!"

Can't be bothered to zig-zag between them. They'd better see me coming.

"Out the way! I'm coming through!"

Rushing headlong at the crowds, like a psychedelic bumble-bee. Startled faces, frightened, angry. Derisive laughter. I don't care.

Cross the beeping, honking road, into Instant Print and land, heaving and panting at the counter.

"Anyone about?" I wheeze.

Not a sausage. I'm not having it.

"Hallo?" I shout. "If there's nobody here, I'm going to nick all your paper and pens!"

A young man in a suit hurries in from the back.

"I beg your pardon, sir?"

"How quickly can you print a thousand, black-on-white leaflets?"

He's checking his list. I haven't got time for all that.

"Never mind about all that. How much to put my job first?"

"I couldn't do that, sir."

"Fifty?"

"Fifty?" he gasps.

"My client's job is on the line."

He nods, takes the artwork.

"Come back in an hour."

"An hour. Okay."

I take out my clock and set the alarm. Catch the printer looking at me, oddly.

"My watch is broken," I explain, leaving.

Where to now? Colin. There's a cab. Hail it. Jump in.

"114 Wexford Street. I'll pay you more to get me there quick."

Cab lurches off, throwing me back in the seat. Colin's probably been saved by now. What if Colin's dead? I'll never forgive myself.

"Quick! I beg you! It's a matter of life and death!"

We whiz across a crossroad against the lights. He's taken me seriously, carving up cars, screeching down backstreets. Can't keep my hold. Tossed around in the cab like a colourful cabbage.

But I'm really moving now. I've got the artwork back, put it in to print and now I'm off to save Colin, my brother!

"114, you said. That'll be five quid."

Crawl onto the curb and fish out a fiver. Taxi roars off.

114. Door's wide open.

"Colin?"

Poke my head into room after room. Makes Covent Garden Community Press seem like Buckingham Palace. No glass in the windows even. Low table littered with drugs. Not a soul about.

Is this to be the glorious shop window of all our enterprises? What am I doing here? Colin. Oh yes. He said he was upstairs. Find them. Up them, two at a time.

"Colin?"

"Andy?"

"Where?"

"Here."

Christ. He's in a heap on the floor. The plaster casts on both his legs are smashed and his face is grey. Suddenly I'm not a hero.

What am I doing? I'm running round the room going "aaaaahh".

I can see the broken toilet and the gouges on the floor where he dragged himself to the phone. Aaaaa...hhh....

"Ambulance!"

"What?"

Colin is staring at me.

"Ambulance," he says.

"Yes, of course. What is it?"

"999"

"Yes 999, I knew that."

Voice talking to me. Which service? What's the address? When they say they're on their way, I put the phone down.

"They're on their way."

Colin's eyes are all scrunched up. He's in pain.

"Why didn't you phone the ambulance? Colin? They could have been here hours ago. ...Oh, Colin."

He's trying to say something.

"What is it?"

"Hide the dope. ...Downstairs..."

"...Oh. Right. Yes - I'll be back."

Downstairs in two leaps. Scoop the drugs off the table. Out the back window. That was why he didn't call the ambulance. Where are Sam and Becky now? Off to score more drugs?

I don't mind drugs. You can see things differently and I am not loyal to the State. I mean, to me, this - this cesspit of a property in the centre of London - is the state of the State.

On the other hand, why didn't they check on Colin?

I can hear a siren. It's the ambulance. Run to the door.

"He's up there!" I say, pointing.

I follow the ambulance men up and hover as they get him on a stretcher. I can't bear it.

In the back of the ambulance, I hold Colin's hand, giving his name and details as a nurse sticks a syringe in his arm.

"Will he be alright? What's wrong with him? I should've gone earlier only there was a crisis with the printing..."

"Please calm down, Mr Parvin. Your brother needs to rest."

"Yes but how serious is it? I know you probably can't tell exactly, but..."

"Mr Parvin! Please be quiet."

My alarm clock goes off. Shit! The printing!

"Let me out! Stop! Let me out!"

Ambulance swerves to a halt.

"Let me out! Let me out!"

They let me out.

"Another endangered citizen needs my help!" I explain.

They're furious with me.

"Which hospital?" I yell as they roar away.

"Middlesex."

Middlesex. Visit him later. Turn the alarm clock off. Where am I? Ask someone.

"Where am I?"

"Earth."

Very funny. I think that's Charing Cross Road. Yes. Down here. Run! It's possible to achieve things if you totally put your mind to it and don't let anything stand in your way.

The printer's talking to some lady. Barge in.

"My printing's ready."

"Is it sir?" asks the printer, defiantly.

"Yes. You said an hour. I want it."

"I'll just deal with my customer, if you don't mind."

"I want it now! Your customer won't mind."

I turn to the lady.

"It's a matter of life and death!" I say.

She nods her consent. Grudgingly Mr Instant Print gets me my package. I write out the cheque and scarper.

Run all the way. Vylona Carpets. Only been here once.

"Mr Bates please."

"Are you the printers?"

“Yes.”

“Thank goodness. He’s been tearing his hair out. Mr King, our Managing Director, is with him now.”

The secretary presses a button.

“The printer is here, Mr Bates.”

“Send him in, Gloria.”

“This way,” says Gloria.

I go to shake Mr Bates’ hand but he snatches the printing.

“About time!” he barks, ripping the package open.

I turn to his boss, Mr King, to put in a good word for Mr Bates.

“Unfortunately our printer got the mumps,” I explain. “That’s why we’re late but I think that the quality will...”

“These aren’t our leaflets!” exclaims Mr Bates.

“Yes. Hard to believe. Fabulous job. I’ll be straight with you - they cost us a great deal more than we are charging...”

“These aren’t our leaflets! They are not what we ordered!”

“You ordered a thousand black-on-white, half-tone, seven-by-ten leaflets on 110-grams super-gloss card! Didn’t you! Admit it!”

“Yes,” Mr Bates admits.

His boss, Mr King, takes the leaflets.

“How can I make this idiot understand?” Mr Bates asks Mr Prince.

“Don’t bother,” replies Mr King, grimly.

But Mr Bates persists.

“This is not our artwork,” he tells me.

“Of course it’s your artwork. You gave it to us. We didn’t draw it, so it must be...”

Mr King is pointing at one of the leaflets. It says ‘Live Yoghurt’. They all say ‘Live Yoghurt’. Mr King is pointing to a notice on the wall. It reads ‘Vylona Carpets’. I look between the two. ‘Vylona Carpets.’ ‘Live Yoghurt.’

Something’s wrong. A memory pops into my head. Covent Garden Community Printers. Artwork strewn across the room.

The folder said ‘Amazing Arts’, I checked that the artwork was inside. But it must have been the wrong artwork. Shit. You’ve got to think of everything.

Mr King looks as if he’s going to explode. He jabs an intercom button.

“Can we have Reg in here, please, Gloria?”

“Yes sir.”

“I know what happened,” I say, trying to salvage something. “You see, Covent Garden Community Printers let me down so I took it to Instant Print, only...”

“You told me you were a new printing company. I took a chance on you!” says Mr Bates, imploring me, as if I could still make things turn out alright.

But I can’t.

“Have our leaflets in fact been printed?” asks Mr King. He’s very calm. Maybe it’s going to be alright.

“No,” I admit, coming clean.

“I see. And do you, by any chance, have our artwork?” asks Mr King, reasonably.

“No.”

Mr Bates grabs me by the throat and starts shaking me. Mr King and a huge fat bloke called Reg, pull him off.

“Reg, be so kind as to see this gentleman off the premises,” says Mr King.

Reg shows me the door.

“Please follow me sir. We don’t want any trouble.”

“Here! Take this!” says Mr King.

I think he’s going to hit me, but he just hands me back the Instant Print package. Reg follows me out and watches me leave.

There are some big, round metal bins in the car park. Toss the yoghurt leaflets in one, as I pass.

"What are your feelings about Jeremy Barker?"

"Jeremy?"

Jim Anderson nods. I'm in a panic. What can I say? How does Jim know Jeremy? Do all homosexuals know each other? Is it a secret society?

Jim must know I've been to bed with Jeremy. If my Dad asked me if I was queer, I would deny it. What about Jim, though? He's one of them...

"Jeremy is my friend," I blurt.

"Do you love him?"

"Yes. In a way."

"In a sexual way?"

"...No."

"Do you know how he feels about you?"

"...Yes."

"Then why are you leading him on?"

Jim Anderson has light hair and gentle blue eyes. He's the only adult I know, whom, I believe, knows about the world and is still kind.

"I'm not leading him on. I'm confused."

"Oh? What about?"

It's as if my stomach rips open. All the mess inside pours out.

"I didn't have sex till last year. Amanda."

"Do you love her?"

"She's with Kit now. She only wanted me so I could play violin in her band."

"Not good then."

"No."

"But you fancied her?"

"I suppose..."

"But you don't fancy Jeremy?"

"No, that is, I don't know. I don't know anything. The phone keeps ringing. Artists, magazines, printers. But I don't know anything about it. When I try to sort it out, I end up printing the wrong artwork for the wrong people. How can I know what I fancy? The only thing I fancy is a holiday on a tropical island. And that's Jeremy. He makes me cups of tea and asks what I'm thinking and listens..."

Jim seems to accept that I can't be evil, because I'm such a mess.

"I don't know which way is up," I admit, pitifully. "When I walked into the offices of IT and Oz just now, everyone was so alive. When I showed them Kit's adverts for

the Craft Centre, they just said, yes - they'd print them free of charge because it's what they believe in. But I don't know what to believe in. I can only do anything if I'm told what needs doing and how to do it. I'm just a blind slave!"

I burst into tears just as the waitress brings us our order. I plunge my teeth into a stale cheese roll. We're in a greasy spoon café opposite the fruit and veg market. People are clearing up and going home. Jim watches as I eat.

"I thought perhaps you were the kind to take advantage," he says.

"What advantage?" I ask.

"Sell your story to the press or bribe him not to. Jeremy's a leading theatre director. You could cause trouble."

"I wouldn't."

Jim nods, reassured.

"Not ever," I add. "I don't believe in it, I mean I believe everyone should be free to choose their own life, as long as it doesn't hurt anyone. I'm against prejudice. My father was Jew in the war. I don't think that, even if millions agree, they have the right to tell anyone else how to live. Because nobody can know anything for sure."

Jim Anderson gulps back the rest of his tea and stands up.

"Seems to me you believe in a whole lot of things, Andy. No blind slave you!"

"Thanks."

"But listen, about Jeremy. Unless you're sure about your feelings, let him get on with his life."

"You mean, don't see him?"

Jim nods.

"He gets hurt."

I nod. He leaves. I'd better pay.

"How much was it for us?"

"Your friend paid."

Suppressed giggles as I leave.

Where to now? Today started so well. I was going to do everything. Now I can't even go and see Jeremy. Better just go back to Goodge Street and be on my own.

Cut through Soho, where the lights are going on. Striptease shows starring Twenty Lovely Ladies. Restaurants in Charlotte Street. Nothing much in Goodge Street except the display in Mr Small's lighting shop.

Turn the key. Climb the stairs. Tiptoe, in case Stella wants me to bang more gas out of her walls. There's someone at the top.

"Hallo?"

"Is that you, Andy?"

"Yes! Hallo Jules."

I skip up the last stairs to embrace him but he pulls away.

"Where the fuck have you been?" he snarls.

I gulp.

"Out."

Beatrice is sitting in the office. She's so beautiful, she makes being bored and fed-up look like an art form. She doesn't even acknowledge me.

"We pass by, to see if you've sorted the launch party invites. Door's wide open. Nobody here. Phone never stops ringing. Beatrice and I have a national magazine to launch. Instead, we've spent the whole day sorting out your mess! I mean, what the fuck's going on?"

Beatrice has the most superior beauty. Who would you have to be, to warm your hands on her? Can't move, can't think. Jules is attacking me from behind. Words like machine-gun fire. I'm glad Beatrice isn't looking at me. It's humiliating enough.

I've had a day of people attacking me.

"Well?" demands Jules.

Turn to face him.

"Why shoot me down, when I'm already dead?"

"What?" he barks, exasperated beyond belief.

Beatrice stands, runs the fingers of her hands down the sides of her lovely, curvy body and leaves the room. Jules is about to follow her.

"Do you realise the workload I've got here?" I yell. "I mean, look at the desk! It's full of pieces of paper!"

"So?"

"So I've got nine or more magazines booked in for tomorrow. Some just 15 minutes apart. I don't know where they all are, or how I'm going to get to them. I've got the artwork and everything to get ready. I've got print jobs pending, publishers waiting. I've got Kit getting me to organise free ads in Oz and IT. Then there's all the work you and Beatrice keep asking me to do, to help start your bloody magazine. Plus I'm supposed to schlep round the poster shops with new posters - which means printing them. Letters I haven't written. Bills I haven't paid. When am I going to do it all? When? Tell me that! It's impossible! Impossible!! Impossible!!!!"

I fling everything off the desk, storm out of the room and march into the living room. Beatrice is huddled in a chair, looking even more pissed off. There's nowhere for me to go. So I march straight out, down the stairs and round the block.

Colin. He's in hospital. My feet walk me to the Middlesex.

"Colin Parvin. Is he here?"

"Are you a relation?"

"He's my brother."

I'm directed. So upset. More bewildered than usual. Can't see anyone's face or hear what they are saying to me.

"Andy. Over here."

I thank the nurses by mumbling. Colin's legs are jacked up.

"You alright then?" I say, cheerily.

"Fine. They said it was lucky. One of my legs was set wrong. They're going to break it and reset it in the morning."

"Well that's good then. Er...How did they get broken in the first place, Colin?"

He beckons me down beside him so that no-one else can hear.

"By the time we got to Bogata, Sam and Becky were spending everything on drugs. We were about to get chucked out. I got casual work, dishwashing, anything. Then I found out there was this farm you could work on. Steady wages. So I turned up at the market, crack of dawn, like they said. And got up on this open-topped lorry with a load of others."

"Wow. So you went to work on a farm."

"Yeah. But I thought we'd get delivered back at the end of each day."

"And you didn't?"

"Took us a whole bloody day to get there, man."

"Shit."

"And what's more it was a drugs farm. Valleys and hills full of steaming hash, far as the eye could see."

"Wow."

"We're working twelve or more hours, and crashing out in a barn. I asked to see the boss. I thought, if I told him I was English, he'd let me go. But he was suspicious. Kept asking me for the truth. That's when I told him about Fred the Red."

"Fred the who?"

"I made him up. I said Fred the Red had employed me to make connections. I said it could be very lucrative for all of us. Anyway, the boss, Signor Cadaves, wanted me to phone Fred the Red but I said I wouldn't do it on one of their phones. So they drove me back to Bogata. Sam and Becky had left. I found out they'd wired their parents and were already home. I went to the post office and made Signor Cadaves' men wait outside. That was when I phoned Mum and Dad. They were so bonkers, I knew if I told them the truth they'd have a stroke. Then you came on the line."

"Me?"

"Yes. You remember. You asked me how things were."

"And you said 'fine'."

"Yeah. And you put down the phone."

"Did I? Sorry. I didn't realise. Shit. So, what happened?"

"Well I couldn't escape, so I had to go on with it. I said Fred the Red wanted to do business. I made up an order and agreed a price. Signor Cadaves wanted two grand down. So I phone Mum and Dad and told them I was managing a farm and for two thousand pounds I could buy into it. Suddenly I'm on this ship with a cargo that says Colombian Coffee but which isn't, if you know what I mean..."

I'm dumbfounded.

"...Anyway," says Colin, raising himself up on his elbows and wincing with the pain in his legs. "Where was I?"

"Oh, er ...on a ship."

"Yes. Well just before we left, I managed to phone Sam. Told him to be at Liverpool docks with as big a van as he could find and a heavy bag. It was the only way I could think of. Maybe they'd think the bag was full of money and we'd load up and by the time they found out, we'd be gone. Either that or just scarper. Anyway, we dock at Liverpool, the coffee's unloaded, we wait. Finally Sam turns up, hours late, stoned. No van. No heavy bag. I make a run for it. There's a chase. I'm running between these two warehouses and they all jump out and beat me up. Somehow, Sam got me to hospital."

"Visiting time is over," a plump nurse informs us.

"Couldn't I have just a few more minutes?" I ask.

"Very well," she sings.

"What about the drugs?" I whisper, when she's gone.

"I reckon Signor Cadaves was already sorted. He had the two grand from Mum and Dad. He was just playing me along."

"Bastard."

"I admire him. He's a businessman. All those dopey hippies, smoking his weed and thinking it makes them independent, when it's just another form of control. Signor Cadaves is the independent one. And he's right! You know why?"

"Why?"

"Because God's a fucking businessman!"

The nurse storms over.

"Ssh! You'll have to go. This way - "

"...Couldn't I just..."

"No. You've made enough fuss as it is with your swearing!"

She's Catholic. We've offended her.

"See you Colin."

"See you Andy."

Wander back to Goodge Street. Beatrice and Jules will have gone by now.

"Hallo?" I call, climbing the last steps.

There's a note from Jules pinned to the office door.

Andy - First, don't waste your time running errands for Kit. If he wants free ads - or whatever he wants - put him onto me.

Secondly, I won't ask you to help with the magazine launch. Obviously you've got your work cut out here.

Thirdly, I've phoned my sister, Rachel. She'll be here tomorrow at nine, to drive you to your magazine appointments.

Finally - you're going to have to take some responsibility. If there's too much work, get people to help you. That's how come you're here. I got you involved. When you understood what needed doing, it freed me up to do other things. Now it's your turn.

Find people, co-opt them, inspire them! - It isn't hard. There are thousands of kids hanging around, who don't know what to do with their lives. Provide a bit of leadership, for fuck's sake! Only just don't be a victim yourself, simmering with rage and blaming everyone else! - Jules

Wow! His sister Rachel is going to drive me. I better start getting the artwork and everything ready. Got to be smart, relaxed, cool, easy-going, sense of humour, interesting and yet mysterious...

Better get weaving. Could take all night. Worth it though. I remember Rachel. She looks like Brigit Bardot.

There's a horrible ringing in my ears. Bloody blankets - get out of my way! - Switch that bloody alarm clock off -

Yes. I'm up. Only two hours sleep, but it's worth it. Everything's ready.

On the desk, lists of the magazines we'll be visiting, their addresses, the time of each appointment, maps of how to get from one to the next. Took hours to draw the maps. Took all night.

Boxes of slides, projector, books of Kit's drawings. Should I really take all the paintings as well?

Yes. I'm meeting Lucy Parkhouse and a photographer in the Observer car-park at three and she's going to do a full feature on us.

I'm not sure about the Patrick Woodroffe painting. It's huge. Countryside scene in great detail, like something Kit might do. Trouble is there are all these little goblins and fairies jumping out or hiding in the bushes. And why is it called 'Truth and Beauty'? Never mind. It's the largest watercolour in the world. Take it.

Get a move on! Rachel will be here in a minute and I'm not even dressed. I've got a new Geringsing. Well it's not a Geringsing, it's another kind of Balinese batik. Green with snakes and vines. And I've got new sandals. I'll look posh and weird. The sort of person who knows who he is. Unlike me.

Because this is the most important day of my life. I've got to impress all the magazines, especially Lucy Parkhouse who's going to do a full feature on us. I've got to impress Rachel with my efficiency and business know-how because she is Jules' sister and she'll tell him. And then there's Rachel herself...

"Aargh!"

I leap from the floor. Something furry on the carpet. What is it? And it's moving!

"It's a rat! It's a rat! Aaah!"

I've got rats. Rachel's just about to arrive and I've got rats!

"...They're ...not ...rats. ...They're ...puppies."

"Who are you?"

Tall, skinny albino bloke in the doorway.

"...I'm ...John."

"Are these your rats?"

"...Puppies. ...Yes."

"Well get rid of them. I'm expecting someone."

"...The ...lady ...across ...the ...road ...said..."

Does he mean Rachel? Is Rachel across the road?"

"Who? Which lady?"

"...Lovely ...Rita."

"Oh, the shop - Lovely Rita's Magic Beanbag. So what? What does she want? She's a breadhead. You're wasting my time."

"...She ...said ...you ...might ...have"

Why does he speak so slowly?

"Have what?"

"...A ...room."

"A room?"

"...I ...could ...pay ...rent."

A lightbulb goes on in my head. I remember what Jules said about co-opting people and inspiring them. When I arrived, I paid rent. And we could do with the money.

"...I've ...got ...a ...friend," says John.

"Oh, good for you."

Can't think about this now. If Rachel doesn't turn up in a minute, we'll be late for 'The Artist'. Got to think quickly.

"Listen John. Help me get all this lot downstairs. You take that one!"

"...Oh. ...It's ...very ...big."

"Yes, it's the largest watercolour in the world!"

Don't wait for him. A single conversation could last all day. Get down there. Rachel could be waiting outside and deciding to go, because the bell doesn't work. Or maybe she's got the wrong address. Or maybe Jules forgot to tell her.

The bell does work. I can hear it above the racket John's making.

"Be careful with that painting John!"

Where is she? Goodge Street is in bright sunlight. Air full of dust and people and cars.

"Andy?"

It's Rachel. She's in a car.

"Where can I park?" she yells.

She isn't stopping.

"Stop!"

Luckily the lights go red. I puff up to her.

"I can't park here," she says.

"Fuck that. I've got a pile of paintings to load up. Wait there! John?"

He'll need some help. Hope she doesn't drive off just because I said 'fuck that!' - I was only being efficient.

"Bung it in the back!"

"...It ...won't ...fit!" says John.

"Make it fit!" I yell.

I smile at Rachel to show that I'm not a nasty person.

"I've got some rope in the boot," she says.

In seconds she's used her skills with ropes and knots to tie the paintings on the roof like sails and rigging. I'm trying to help her but the cars behind us are beeping angrily and John is wittering in my ear.

"...So ...can ...I ...leave ...the ...puppies?" he asks.

"No!"

"...But ...I'm ...late ...for ...school."

I look at this lanky albino geek.

"You're still at school?"

"...No. ...I'm ...a ...teacher."

"You're what?"

I'm staggered.

"I've got to move the car Andy."

As I jump in beside Rachel, I call out to John.

"I'll be back tonight!"

"...But ...how ...will ...I ...know?" he calls.

We're already moving. How will he know what? Stupid geek.

"Hallo Rachel. Long time no see."

She flashes me a nervous smile.

"Which way?" she asks.

"Oh, er, left."

I fumble for my maps. We'll need to take the next right.

"I'm not very confident at driving in London," she admits. "People are so aggressive."

"Turn right!" I yell.

We swerve right just in time.

Rachel no longer looks like Brigit Bardot. She's wearing a huge swirly dress, embroidered with green leaves and her lipstick is green.

My new batik is green. We're both in green. Posh and weird. Except that she knows exactly who she is, whereas I'm just pretending. I'll have to fool her.

Hang on, this is the road.

"Stop!"

"No."

We've passed it. Rachel turns left into a side road and parks up. We've got to walk all the way back with all the paintings and stuff. She didn't do what I said.

"Let me do the talking," I say, grumpily, as we climb the stairs.

The 'Artist' offices are dark. Its walls are oak-panelled and hung with neat little pictures at regular intervals. Mr Swarek is a neat little man with timid-looking eyes, who jumps a step backwards when he sees us.

I wander about the room, looking at the pictures to give him a chance to study Kit's work.

"Because Kit Hogarth is a young, up-and-coming artist, we might be prepared to let you print his stuff for less. Maybe even a hundred? Just for the first time, you understand, until things get established, man."

I smile at Rachel, to reassure her, and flick my long hair casually. Mr Swarek still hasn't responded. Perhaps I should meet him halfway.

"Perhaps even fifty quid. If you were unsure, we might even do it for nothing. The first time. Certainly you can have the other artists for nothing. What do you reckon?"

"I'm afraid we never include paintings unless they illustrate a particular technique."

"What?"

"If one of your artists were to write an article..."

"Write an article? But they're artists..."

"I do understand," says Mr Swarek, putting out his hand for me to shake.

I don't want to shake his hand.

"But don't you promote the work of young artists? I mean, you are called 'The Artist' for Christ's sake!"

Mr Swarek is showing us the door and Rachel is following him. I'm not having it.

"So it's articles you want. We can do articles. What about? About perspective or how to draw animals? Never mind. We can do it!"

"I look forward," murmurs Mr Swarek, his face disappearing as he closes the door.

I don't want Rachel to think he got the better of me, so I march downstairs ahead of her.

"The man's a fool!" I proclaim.

It's been raining while we were inside. The streets are wet but the sun's out again. April showers. Except it's May. Where next? 'Vogue'. Sounds arty. Bags of time. It's only the afternoon where the appointments are all squashed together.

Grab the projector from Rachel, so she's not carrying everything. Bung it in the boot while she lashes the paintings back on the car.

Put stupid Mr Swarek behind me. I'm sailing across London with Rachel beside me. Sunlight shines in and heats up the air. I can smell her warm body. She smells nice.

Vogue's London offices are chic and trendy but the men still wear suits. Antonia Williams who sounded so rich and creamy on the phone, looks like a dried up prune. Her elegant French clothes and the way she moves would have you believe that she's 18, rather than 118. Seeing her face, I gasp. Hope she didn't notice. Who cares, if she did, it would only give me more power. Because I'm the real thing, I'm young. And Kit's the real thing, rather than all the poncy French design stuff on the walls.

Antonia, for her part, peers down her nose at us. She hardly looks at the paintings.

"It's hideous hippy crap!" she says and leaves the room.

A queer boy dances in and ushers us out. Fluttering his hands about like some demented bird. Completely unnerves me. We're on the street again.

"Penthouse next," I inform Rachel.

We're ahead of time. If Mr Brookes will see us early perhaps I could invite Rachel to lunch and tell her how I feel about her and maybe even get to touch her. This is going well.

Mr Brookes sees us immediately.

"Joe Brookes," he says, shaking my hand, whilst oggling Rachel.

He's a fleshy man, sweating in a white bri-nylon shirt. He glances at the paintings and flicks through the books of Kit's drawings.

"That's enough of that," he says. "To be honest, I got you in here with the idea that paintings might give us a bit of class. But I don't know about this."

He hands me the book.

"But it's full of class. Look at the detail in his work."

I show him the one of Kit's step-mother, where you can see all the lines on her face and you can tell just how horrible she is.

"Have you ever looked at a copy of Penthouse?" he asks me.

He's caught me unawares.

"Er..."

He thrusts a copy in my face. It's glossy. There's writing down one side. Well printed. And on the other, a picture. My mouth drops open. It's a half naked lady. Got to recover quickly.

"Oh, tits, yes of course. And you want to add a bit of class. You don't just want tits, you want artistic tits. Kit can do artistic tits. I've seen him do them."

Joe Brookes isn't taking any notice. He's looking Rachel up and down.

"You could be a model if you weren't so fat."

I'm shocked. Rachel doesn't reply.

"Not that I mind personally," he says, sliding his short fat fingers around her waist and giving her a squeeze. She's smiling and she's being professional. I hate this man. He's touched my Rachel. All my courage bursts open.

"We're leaving!" I announce.

"Suit yourselves," he says, watching us load up. "I don't know what you've got to be so hoity-toity about. Only being friendly. Your lady friend here didn't mind. Did you love?"

Rachel gives a nervous little shake of the head. She did mind.

"You shouldn't be allowed to touch women!" I shout, so everyone in the open-plan office can hear. "Your fingers are too short!"

I dart out the door quick in case he hits me. Rachel follows me onto the street. It's been raining again. But again the sun is out. We're being lucky.

"Fancy some lunch?"

Rachel seems glum. Everything I ask her, gets answered 'yes', 'no' or 'maybe'. She has hardly touched her cheese roll.

"You know when that horrible bloke called you fat?"

"Yes?"

"You're not fat."

"I am."

"You're not!"

"I'm like Mum. Can't pass a cake shop. It was alright while I was sailing."

"Aren't you sailing any more?"

"Disaster. Lost every race. Lost my nerve. I used to love sailing. Now I never want to do it again."

I'm unprepared for her outburst. I can only think of putting my arm round her.

"I'm sorry," I murmur tenderly.

She bursts into tears. I hold her close. There's a clock on the wall. It's raining outside. What's the time? Christ!

"Can we have the bill please?"

We need to shift and Rachel's not shifting. Manage to break free of her.

"We're supposed to be at 'Horse and Hound' in five minutes," I explain, paying up.

Dash to the car through the rain.

"Why are we going to 'Horse and Hound'?" asks Rachel, revving up and pulling out into the road.

Is she being shirty?

"It's the next one on the list," I tell her.

"But they only do photos."

"Do they? Left at the lights."

"Photos of horses."

"Are you sure?"

"There's probably the odd hound."

"Take a right! So you're saying it's not worth it. Just give up! Forget the whole thing!"

"Well if we're late already... What's our next appointment?"

I consult the list.

"Er... 'Art and Artists'."

"Well that's much more likely."

“Okay! Turn around!”

I know Rachel doesn’t like me barking at her, but she’s so dithery and, if we don’t look out, we’ll be late for ‘Art and Artists’ as well. There’s more traffic and we’re stuck in it, like a piece in a jigsaw.

“We’ve got to get out of this traffic. Turn right!”

We should’ve stuck to our course. Now I don’t know where we are. None of my little maps fit.

Rachel runs the car up on the pavement and pulls out a London atlas.

“What’s the address?” she barks.

“Er.”

“Give it here!”

She grabs my list, finds the address and lurches out into the traffic again. I’m fuming.

Derek Naylor, of ‘Art and Artists’, has a soft, cultivated voice like Jules. He’s wearing a fine lightweight suit and he’s dry, whereas I’m dripping from head to toe. Rachel’s dry because she used the huge Woodroffe painting as an umbrella.

“Oh how awful,” he purrs. “Come into my office. You must be soaked through. Let me see.”

He studies the work. I stand by the window, dripping. I’m fed up.

“My, my! And what is this one called?”

“Oh. That’s by Patrick Woodroffe. It’s the largest watercolour in the world. It’s called ‘Truth and Beauty’.”

“Truth and Beauty...” he echoes. “Perfect.”

He really likes it. I never took him for a goblins man. No accounting for taste.

“Do you really like it?”

“It’s so left-field, so outré. As if ‘There Once Was A Painting...”

I too look at it, and am astonished. It’s blank. Where have all the flowers gone? The whole tapestry of nature? Nothing. Not even a goblin.

“There once was a painting...” I mumble.

Shit. I’m in real trouble. Patrick Woodroffe will go bananas. Must’ve been the rain. Watercolour. That was the clue. Now it’s blank and this posh nerd likes it. Might as well give up.

“So you like it, do you?”

“Perhaps not for the magazine, but personally, I admire...”

“You like it? You can have it! Now, what about the rest?”

“I don’t actually see anything here that we can actually use, I’m afraid.”

“Right! That’s it! We’re off.”

I thrust the projector at Rachel, grab the other stuff - all except the big one - and nudge her over to the door.

"You can't leave this here!" he calls after us. "It's vast! What am I going to do with it?"

"Burn it!"

Outside there's sunshine and rain at the same time. Rachel's getting as soaked as me. I think she might be pissed off. When I look at her, she looks away.

Inside the car I consult my list.

"Next appointment, Observer Colour Supplement. It's down by the river somewhere. Hang on."

Unfortunately the little map's got all floppy and the ink's run.

"I've got to get back home now," says Rachel. "I didn't know it was going to take all day. I said I'd go shopping with Mum."

"But you can't. I mean, the Observer are going to do a full feature on us. They're meeting us in the car-park. They're going to take photos. It's our big chance!"

She stares at me, unsure.

"Please Rachel. I've got to get there."

"Alright. I don't mind delivering you, but then I've got to go. Which way?"

"Oh, er, right. No. Left."

Rain's stopped again. With a bit of luck it'll be sunny. Lucy Parkhouse will be outside, as arranged. The photographer will start taking photos. It'll all seem glamorous and Rachel will stay. Perhaps I can talk her round.

"So if you don't fancy sailing any more, what are you planning to do?"

"I don't know."

"Left!"

Phew. Almost missed it.

"Well, what do you feel like doing?"

"No idea. I thought it was the right moment to find out about London. But since I've been here all I've done is..."

"Next right!"

"...All I've done is go shopping with Mum and paint the garage doors for Dad. The rest of the time I've just been in my room."

"That's interesting. Take a left."

"Here?"

"Yes, I think so. Hang on."

"I can't hang on!"

"Well take it then."

We swerve left. It's not the right one. It's not even a road. Entrance to some builders. Rachel backs us out. She looks flustered.

"So, do you enjoy sitting in your room then, Rachel?"

She glares at me.

"Just give me the fucking directions!" she yells.

"Left out and first left!"

Her driving has changed. It's fast and erratic. She doesn't seem to care if pedestrians live or die. She's flushed and her breasts are going up and down.

I think I love her.

"There's the car park."

"Where?"

"On the right!"

We swerve into the car park. I can see a man with a camera. There's a lady beside him. Lucy Parkhouse? Rachel isn't going to stop for them. I can see the sudden panic on their faces.

"Stop!" I scream.

We screech to a halt just inches away. I jump out and greet them.

"Hi! I'm from Amazing Arts. You must be Lucy Parkhouse!"

"Are you Kit Hogarth?" she asks.

"No. I'm not Kit himself, I'm..."

She doesn't hear me. I'm drowned out by a terrible clattering sound. It's Rachel. She's tossed all my stuff out on the tarmac and is reversing madly. We watch her turn the car and roar away.

I turn to Lucy Parkhouse, with a grin to hide my despair.

"Chicks! I don't know. What can you do with them?"

I'm pleased as punch. An article in the Observer Colour Supplement. Fancy! I think Lucy Parkhouse was impressed. Almost crashing into her was a stroke of luck.

She acted like I was mad and on drugs the whole time. Anxious and gushing. Asking me stuff. Waiting for my every 'yes', 'no' and 'maybe' with bated breath. As if I knew things she didn't. Cosmic secrets.

Managed to get some photos before the rain came down again. Managed to keep bright, even though my heart was pounding. Pleased with the way I managed to take my leave saying my chauffeur's going to collect me. That was a brainwave.

"He'll be along in a minute," I said. "Yes. Don't worry about me. You get inside in the dry. I'll be fine. He'll be along in a minute. Bye."

Haven't even got the money for a bus. Spent it on those cheese rolls. Still, I don't regret it.

No point going to the other appointments. Can't go carrying all this palaver about in the rain. I'll phone and say I was unavoidably delayed.

The fancy lights in Mr Small's electric shop look like Christmas. Can't wait to be warm and dry.

I'm not stopping in the hall. If I put things down even for a second, I'll never pick them up again. I'm going straight upstairs and collapse.

Should make the phone calls first. Come on - last few steps. I'm a hero! Chuck the stuff down, crash into the dark living room and fling myself down on the sofa.

Wrecked. Soaking wet but I can't move to change. Love a cup of tea but I'd rather lie here and catch pneumonia.

There's a funny squeaking noise. Puppies! Get the light on. Oh no, I'd forgotten. And little pools of shit. That fucking albino. If he doesn't come back, I'm going to throw them all out the window.

Well I'm not clearing it up. I'm not doing anything. I'm going next door to stand over the fire in the artwork room. Ouch. I didn't put that there. What is it? It's a bloody great record player. And there's two bodies huddled in sleeping bags.

"What the hell's going on?" I thunder.

A head pops out. It's that albino geek.

"Have you been here all day?"

"...No," he says. "...I've ...been ...school-mastering."

I stare at him. Everything seems to function, but at ten percent the speed of the average human. How does he teach? Does he say 'get out your books', and the bell goes for end of lesson?

"So how did you get in?"

"...The ...lady ...downstairs ...let ...us ...in. ...We ...fixed ...her ...gas."

"Stella?"

"...Yes. ...John ...here ...knows ...all ...about ...pipes."

A second face peers out. Masses of dark curly hair and the tiniest eyes I've ever seen.

"John? But you're called John, aren't you?"

"...We're ...both ...John," says albino John. "...It's ...hard ...to ...tell ...us ...apart."

What does he mean? They're like chalk and cheese – dark, curly cheese.

"Well never mind all that. You can't stay here with those puppies."

"What do you feed puppies on?" says a little high-pitched voice.

It's the other John.

"What?" I bark.

"We tried bread."

"Bread? Milk! They look as if they're only a few days old. Where's their mother?"

"We had to take them away. The lady was going to drown them."

"But they'll die without their mother. Are you mad?"

His tiny eyes flicker strangely. Oo-er. Perhaps he is mad.

Phone rings.

"Before you go, you can clear up all the shit!"

"...What ...now?"

I nod furiously, reaching for the receiver.

"...Come ...on ...John," says John.

"Albino Arts. Can I help you?"

"Andy?"

It's Jules. Rachel will have spoken to him. She was cross with me. She'll have told him all the failures at the magazines. But she doesn't know about the Observer.

"Have you spoken to Rachel?"

"No. I was wondering how you'd got on."

"Fantastic! The Observer are doing a full feature on us in their colour supplement."

"Wow!"

"Yes. The journalist thought I was Kit but it doesn't matter."

"When's it coming out?"

"I don't know. But soon, because they only did us because another feature fell though."

"That's fantastic, Andy."

"It's going to be called 'Addicted to Art - The Amazing Story of Britain's Young Artists!'"

"You see Andy? When you put your mind to it you can do it!"

"Yes. And I've got two guys here at the moment, I'm going to co-opt and inspire them."

"That's great. Listen. There's a party on Saturday at Brian Jones' place. Do you fancy coming?"

"Yeah."

"The idea is to drum up some commissions and I wouldn't mind some help."

"Sure!"

"Great. We'll be leaving here sometime late morning. Best to get over here for ten."

"Okay. Listen - Jules?"

"Yes."

"We weren't having much success with the magazines early on and Rachel got a bit upset."

"Oh never mind about her. All she does is mope about the house. Anyway. Got to go. Great news Andy. See you Saturday."

"Byee."

Yes!!! Okay. Action stations. Sweep into the next room. The two Johns are playing with the puppies.

"How much rent could you pay?" I ask.

"...I ...could ...pay ...three ...pounds ...a ...week. ...And ...if ...you ...could ...help ...John ...to ...get ...his ...dole ...money..."

"Okay, okay! First thing you should know is that this is no ordinary company. It isn't just here to make money like Lovely Rita's Magic Bumfluff. Amazing Arts is on a mission to promote the work of young artists. We believe in it. And it's all hands to the millstone if you're going to stay here! So we better get started. There are a number of magazines that need ringing. Too late now. We'll do that tomorrow. There are a number of printing jobs pending. You'll find details of them on the desk. I'm attending a party on Saturday at the home of a Rolling Stone. Anyway, I'll be away Saturday. You'll have to hold fort. Now it's a matter of getting this place shipshape. There's water in the kitchen. I'm going upstairs to bed."

Got my sopping batik caught under my feet climbing the ladder. It peels off while I'm still in view. Hurry up the last few rungs and flop on my mattress.

Colin. He's still in hospital. I should go to see him. I'm too tired. Shut my eyes. Colin said God's a businessman. Can he really have become so cynical? Perhaps he's right.

I don't know how people maintain a steady course in life. You're supposed to believe in things. Like God or justice. But how can you?

Born into a crazy world. Two years ago they killed all the sheep. Two huge countries spend their time building atom bombs and pointing them at each other. And in all the films there's a hero who saves the world. Who do we think we are? You'd have to believe that we are special. Are we special? Or are we just helpless fools?

Why does everyone have to have a job? And why are all the jobs boring? And why do they do them anyway? You can't believe in any of it.

Except Rachel. I'd love to be cuddling up to her on this mattress. The very thought makes my toes go warm. I wonder what she looks like underneath her clothes. Has she got fat? I wouldn't mind.

If I were cuddling up to Rachel, all my cares would go away. I can imagine her moping about her room. I could come in and apologise for what happened today. We could get talking and, before you know it, we'd be cuddling on the bed and our clothes would fall off.

No. Stop it. Go round early on Saturday. Invite Rachel to the Brian Jones party.

Yes. And until then - no wanking. It's dirty and my feelings for Rachel are pure!

"I think we should have a business meeting."

It's a hot summery day. We're in a car with the windows down, driving to Brian Jones' party. And Jules wants a business meeting.

I'm proud. The last time we were driving anywhere, it was to Walt's lawyer, Mr Grebe, to set up the company. Then Walt was driving his ambulance and Kit was egging him on. They were the main people with Jules. I didn't even know why I was there.

Now Jules is driving and I'm sitting next to him, like an equal. We are two leaders. His girlfriend, Beatrice, is sitting in the back with his sister, Rachel. And that's what makes me really proud. This morning, when I arrived at Jules' parents' posh house in Kensington, I found the front door wide open. I thought thieves had been. Not a stick of furniture even. Except in one room upstairs.

There I found Rachel asleep on a mattress. I told her there had been thieves. But when I showed her the empty house to prove it, she got angry. Apparently it's empty because they haven't properly moved in yet. And I'd woken Rachel up.

But it didn't matter, because Jules and Beatrice appeared and Rachel ended up coming with us, so all hope is not lost.

"What about you, Andy?"

Jules has just given a report about plans for the magazine launch. Now I'm supposed to report on what I've been doing. First light a cig.

"Well, Jules, Beatrice and Rachel. The Cyclops t-shirts for Nirvana were completed. We had to order a second batch of t-shirts due to an unforeseen spillage. But it doesn't matter because they'll come in useful as rags. Several magazines have expressed an interest, not to mention several other phone calls about this and that."

I can't help it, I'm bragging for the girls. I say everything as if it's good news. But Jules is pleased.

"That full feature in the Observer Colour Supplement was a real coup, Andy. When's it coming out?"

I'm glowing with pride.

"Sometime in the future," I inform them.

Jules is cross because the girls in the back have started nattering to themselves.

"Is this East Grinstead? Beatrice, you've got the map. Where are we?"

Much flapping of maps in the back. I should be helpful.

"It looks like East Grinstead."

Don't know why I said that. I've never been to East Grinstead. I've never even heard of it.

So, is it East Grinstead?" hisses Jules, exasperated.

"For the fourteenth time, yes!" Rachel hisses back.

I don't think I've seen brother and sister together before. Perhaps they don't like each other.

"Straight on to Hartfield," purrs Beatrice, reassuringly.

"When we get to this place, we've got to remember that we are there on business. Each of us has to choose a star and get them to commission Kit to do a portrait. Everything else we're doing - the art agency, the posters, the craft centre, the shop that Andy's brother is opening, even the magazine - is nothing compared to the opportunity that this party presents. Once Kit's done one star's portrait, the rest will follow."

"Absolutely right!" I confirm.

Jules is so inspirational.

"Watch out for a small road on your right," says Beatrice, leaning forward and nibbling Jules' ear, tenderly.

I wish Rachel would lean forward. I twist round to see her. She notices me looking. Can't think what to say.

"The house we're going to. It used to be owned by A.A. Milne, who wrote 'Winnie the Pooh'," I inform her.

"Oh," she replies and stares out the window.

She's in a world of her own and no wonder. It's like entering a magical world. We're on a little gravel lane and the plants each side are so high that they block out most of the sun. The foliage is so deep and detailed. As if we are entering Patrick Woodroffe's huge watercolour before it got washed away in the rain. I could almost believe that fairies and goblins might appear from under stones. I study some stones in case. But we rattle by too quickly.

"Cotchford Farm. This is it," hums Beatrice.

Her voice always sounds like honey. She's excited and so am I. As we bump along through a tunnel of foliage, I see a vision that takes my breath away. A big old farmhouse and hundreds of little beautiful people scattered across the lawns with drinks.

The people get bigger as we get nearer, until Jules pulls up, and we get out and we're engulfed. People and sunlight.

Before we got out I was thrilled at the glamour. Now I'm terrified. I'm going to have to make conversation. Jules and Beatrice have immediately whirled off to a group over by the house. I can hear Jules making introductions.

"Hi! I'm Jules and this is the exquisitely beautiful Beatrice!" he says.

Simple as that and he's in, chatting away. I should do the same. I should bound up.

"Hi, I'm Andy and this is the most incredibly attractive Rachel!"

Where is Rachel? She's disappeared. I can't just stand here rooted to the ground. People will start noticing that I'm standing alone. They'll start giggling. Someone will come up and start talking and then what? Walk around. Prepare yourself.

All the beautiful people here are sedate. The women wear pretty dresses and the men are either in jeans and T-shirts, which show their hairy physiques, or in trendy suits. Jules and Beatrice fit right in. I'm beginning to feel like a bit of a buffoon in my bright Balinese frock.

There's a swimming pool round the side of the house with groups of elegant hippies posing around it. Can't talk to them. At the last moment I change direction and almost fall down a grassy knoll.

Don't want to go into the house. Might have to talk to somebody. But that's where I'm heading and people are looking, so I don't dare swerve away again.

I'm in a kitchen. But what a kitchen! Modern space-age gadgets among ancient beams and flagstones. And the people posing on the flagstones, chattering away. To think - they're all stars. This is the heaven in which they really live. There's a blond bloke in a white suit, cutting a loaf. Looks like Brian Jones. But would a star cut his own bread? Maybe he's a servant.

I need the toilet. But I don't want to go upstairs, because I might go into the wrong room and interrupt stars making love. Somebody's seen me. I lean on the banister, as if I'm meant to be standing here. It's Beatrice.

"John Lennon's here," she whispers, excitedly, skipping up the stairs.

"Where's the loo?" I ask.

She shrugs.

"Probably up here."

Now I've got to follow her up. I skip up lightly, as if nothing's too much trouble. It's obvious which one's the loo. There's a queue of pop stars outside it. I'm too embarrassed to wait. But they're looking at me.

"Byee!" I wave, twirling around and falling down the stairs.

"It's alright! I'm fine!" I say brightly, picking myself up.

Good. No-one's noticed. Ow! Foot hurts. Limp away, quickly, into the kitchen. Bloke in the white suit sees me enter. He smiles. I smile. It is Brian Jones.

"We walked up the stairs together at the Amazing Arts opening, when I thought everyone was looking at me, but it was you," I remind him.

He grins, but I don't think he remembers.

"Want one?" he asks.

I come over to see what he means. He's pouring a drink. He pours me one.

"Thanks," I say, receiving it.

"Here you go," he says, handing me a tiny pill.

He's got one too. He puts the pill on his tongue and raises his glass. I do the same. We clink glasses and drink.

"Kit Hogarth wants to do a portrait of you," I venture.

He's nodding slowly and grinning, as if we are experiencing something truly wonderful together.

"Kit is famous," I assure him, "or he will be, when the Observer Colour Supplement comes out. Anyway, Jules says that, once Kit's done one star's portrait, the rest will follow."

I don't know what else to say.

"I was thinking of having a portrait done for the music room," he admits, shyly. "Only it'd have to be in keeping with the house."

"Wow!" I say, excited. "Yes, it's huge."

Beatrice has appeared and is hovering. I wish she wouldn't, it's making me nervous. My leg is throbbing as if it's about to drop off and, if I don't get to a loo soon, I'm going to piss myself. Got to keep going though.

"Where my Mum and Dad live is tiny. You could have a massive portrait. Lots of them. Kit could come down here and paint your face on the walls, even the outside walls."

Beatrice swans over to us, elbows me in the ribs and takes over.

"This used to be A. A. Milne's house. So magical. Kit could paint your portrait, surrounded by Christopher Robin, Winnie the Pooh, Piglet..."

She's purring and touching him and he's grinning like a fool, just like I would be. Even stars bow to beauty. I'm just hanging around, on the edge of their conversation and my head's gone swimmy.

Rachel passes the window. Yes! This is my chance.

"Excuse me," I say and nip out the door.

Mustn't limp or walk funny because I need a piss. Where is she?

Groups of trendy gods and goddesses grouped like statues around the place. A huge black Afghan hound leaps across the lawn followed by a yappy little spaniel.

There's Rachel, walking away, like a ghost through the statues. Perfect. I'll follow her. Act casual though, as if I happen to be going this way too.

There are real statues too. Little ones of Pooh Bear and Eeyore and Christopher Robin. There's a sundial and a rose garden. The air is warm and delicious and my heart is thumping.

If Rachel turns round now, she'll know I'm following her. What would I say? She is turning round. Quick - hide! I jump into a prickly bush and peer out. She's climbing over a stile. She's getting away.

Rip myself free of the bush. Searing pain in my right leg and my asthma's come on. Barely make it over the stile, wheezing and groaning. Where is she?

Follow the path. Which way? Choose one.

This could be the wrong way. Thick undergrowth. Trees overhead. Sound of a trickling stream. Got to piss now. Just time to lift my frock, extricate my willy from my underpants and - Yes!

"What are you doing here?"

It's such a shock that I twirl round, spraying the bushes and just manage to drop my frock in time to avoid spraying Rachel.

"Rachel!" I say, feigning happy amazement.

"Were you following me?" she asks.

What can I say?

"Do you know where there's a toilet?"

Stupid. Don't need one now anyway. Only scared that the nasty wetness will show through.

"Did Jules tell you to follow me?" she demands.

"No."

"There's nothing wrong with me you know. There's no need to fuss. I'm not going to do anything to myself."

"Aren't you?"

"No. I just fancied taking a walk on my own. What's wrong with that?"

"Nothing."

"So you don't need to follow me."

"But."

"What?"

"Does that mean you don't want company?"

"Exactly."

She's going to walk away if I don't say anything.

"But I love you Rachel."

She rests her hand on her curvy hip.

"Hah!" she says. "You don't even know me."

"I do," I protest.

"How could you? I don't even know myself!"

"Well that's possible. Because other people see themselves differently. So you could not know yourself but somebody else could..."

I'm hanging by a thread here. Persevere!

"..Because their bodies are on the outside whereas your body is on the inside. Not that I mean anything rude by that."

"What are you talking about?"

"I'm explaining how I know I could know you and that would explain how I know I love you."

"How do you know you love me?"

"Well, I think about you all the time."

"Do you?"

“Yes. And that’s why I was a mess when we went to those magazines. Because I’d just met you and you were so wonderful, I just had to impress you but...”

“You were trying to impress me?”

“Yes but it made me so tense I got everything wrong.”

Rachel starts walking.

“Well if I bring out the lunatic in you...”

“No, not anymore,” I say quickly, following at her side. “Not now I’ve told you.”

We walk in silence but at least I’m with her now. Got to let her know how I feel, before it’s too late. Don’t know where to start. The path is leading up between two fields. One has sheep in it.

“Look,” I say. “Sheep.”

I smile indulgently, as if I love sheep. Rachel manages a smile back. My leg has stopped hurting. And where I got prickled in the bush. It’s as if the sun has healed and delivered me. A warm fizzing sensation in me, as if there is sunshine inside bursting to get out.

“I love you Rachel. You’ve got to understand that. I love you, whoever you are. You don’t know who you are and I certainly don’t know who you are. I am attracted to you. No, it’s something in you, your soul is drawing my soul to your soul and there’s nothing that my body can do.”

She’s in my arms. Got to keep going.

“If your soul is unclear as to your own nature, it may be that my nature is right on the money. Who can know? It’s just that I’m made so unstable by what’s happening to me, that I couldn’t be sure of anything. But I must love you, or my body wouldn’t need to cuddle you so much. Not that it’s just about bodies. I think you’re highly intelligent, sensitive, deep, complex. But that’s not why I love you. I loved you before. I loved you the first time I saw you.”

“When was that?” she asks.

My hands are cuddling all over her at a million miles an hour and they can’t stop. My lips are planting kisses all over her face and beyond. Her arms are politely around my waist but she doesn’t move a muscle. She’s like a warm statue.

“Jules invited me down to Hayling. You were working on your boat. You were blond and incredibly beautiful. You looked like Brigit Bardot.”

Her body is shaking. Is it silent mirth? Is she laughing at me? Her face is wet on my neck. She’s crying. Oh dear.

“Oh Rachel. Don’t cry. Whatever the problem is, I’m sure it can be sorted. Look, I’m kissing you all over.”

I kiss her all over her face.

"See. I love you. Listen, I'm supposed to co-opt people to work at Amazing Arts. Why don't you come and help me? I've got these two weird blokes at Goodge Street at the moment. They're both called John. One's a big hairy thing with tiny mad eyes. He's Mad John. The other's an albino and I call him Slow John. Not to his face of course. Slow John has this gramophone but only one record because apparently Mad John broke all the others. Anyway, they're no good. So if you come and run the company with me, then I'd be so happy and you'd be happy, because you wouldn't be moping around your room anymore. We'd be successful together. What do you reckon?"

We're walking again. The air is full of buzzing insects. Each leaf seems like a world within itself. The sun turns scarlet and blue and I'm getting dizzy spells, but now that I've started, I've got to convince Rachel. It's the perfect solution.

"Will you? We'll get up every morning. It'll be like a home."

"I'm supposed to be going to Martinique with Graham this summer."

Who's Graham? It's like a body blow. I stop still and the world goes all wobbly. I can hear Rachel telling me I've got to walk. She can't carry me. She's tugging at my hand, urging me on.

I think I'm walking. Must be, the scenery is changing. All the plants are huge and not necessarily friendly. Got to take Rachel's mind off the danger.

"Doesn't matter about Graham," I tell her. "You can go there and come back. Anyway we'll be successful by then. What do you say?"

"Just get over this stile, Andy."

There's criss-crossy bits of wood in my path.

"How?" I splutter.

"Like this."

She shows me. I try. Have to hold onto her. Shaking.

"Now just a little bit further," says Rachel, encouragingly.

There's a field beneath us bathed in light, full of beautiful young people. Someone dives into a pool, others splash about. Bystanders applaud. It's a world within itself. Like one of those snow-scenes Mum has on the mantelpiece. Only this one, when you shake it, golden sunlight spins around.

I can hear Rachel calling.

"Jules! Beatrice! Over here!"

"Where the hell have you two been?" calls Jules.

"It's Andy. I think he's on something."

Jules' face looms up like the face of the moon.

"I've got it!" I tell him. "It's all those golden people in their golden world. You see, what good would it be if every bird that sang, sang the same tune? And yet one vibration is no vibration. Like one of those coloured disks going around and producing off-white. But most people try desperately to merge. The fact is, they run from their uniqueness. Jules, you've got to listen."

"Get him to the car."

"The thing is, the famous people. They get their pictures taken and everyone buys it and reads out what they said because they know that their lives are ruled by it. And because it's something to read while they travel all squashed together like timid maggots on the way to a job where they work from nine to five, thirty weeks a year or however many there are, until they stop at sixty-five and waste away on some pension scheme - hey, what's happening?"

They're squeezing me into a small space. An engine's going on. It's the car. Never mind. What was I saying?

"What was I saying?" I ask.

No-one replies.

"Did you have any luck with your business?" asks Rachel.

"Yes," says Jules. "Beatrice has completely sold Brian Jones on a huge portrait of himself. Vain bugger!"

"Does he mean me?"

"He was a bit stoned, but I think he'll remember," Beatrice purrs.

"Fantastic!" says Jules. "Let's get out of here."

I remember what I was saying. Yes. Got to get this thought out before it's gone forever.

"The point is, why don't people individually, decide to stop creating serpents and holding onto them and being eaten by them, instead of facing the real world?"

"Shut up Andy."

Striding up the hill from Kensington High Street. No asthma. My heart is full of joy. The big houses hover poshly in the twilight. For once they don't intimidate. I'm a live wire.

The only other time I've been to the Marsden-Hunt's new place, it was empty. Except upstairs, where I poked my head around a door and saw Rachel. Rachel! My head is full of music.

I recognise the music. What is it? Turn left here. The music gets louder. Halfway along the darkening street there's a circle of people, lit by the lights in the Marsden-Hunt's house.

The music is real. The Beach Boys. Good Vibrations. "She's givin' me ex-ci-tations." Yeah! Scanning the people's faces for the only face I want to see.

"Andy!"

"Oh!"

It's Jim Anderson from Oz Magazine.

"Hi Jim. How's tricks? Have you seen Rachel?"

Jim gives me a blank look. He doesn't know who Rachel is. Another man slides in, next to Jim.

"Hallo Andy."

Jeremy. Oh God, it's Jeremy. But Jim told me not to see him. So I haven't. But does Jeremy know that it was Jim?

"Hallo Jeremy."

What if he asks me why I haven't called? Should I tell him it was Jim? What if he's angry?

"I'll leave you two together then," says Jim, disappearing.

What? I can understand Jim being invited to the magazine's launch party. But why would he invite Jeremy? What's going on?

"I miss you, you know," Jeremy whispers.

"I miss you too," I lie.

Why did I do that? I do like him. But not in that way.

"I do like you. But not in that way."

"I know."

Phew.

"So have you found someone else?"

Rachel is on my lips. But wouldn't it hurt him? I don't want to hurt him. He's a man with a warm heart. For some reason, he cares about me. His soft, indulgent eyes.

"I don't want to hurt you Jeremy. That would be the worst thing. You're ever such a nice person. But I don't know how to just be friends with you. And I feel guilty."

He latches onto this as if it were manna from heaven.

"Guilty?"

"Well, for not being homosexual."

"I suppose you were just finding out," he observes bitterly.

"Don't be bitter. It wasn't because it was you. I think the world of you Jeremy. You've got a warm heart and you've been very kind to me. It's the fear that I might have made you less warm-hearted that makes me feel guilty."

"Kit!" calls Jules.

My head swerves round. Is Kit here? Haven't seen Kit for months. My heart is fluttering. Has Jules managed to entice him down from the Centre of Creation for the magazine launch?

Jules rushes over and embraces me warmly. I'm a bit embarrassed, in front of Jeremy.

"Where's Kit?" I ask.

"You're Kit!" Jules announces.

What's he on about?

"But I'm..."

He's explaining to Jeremy.

"I wonder if you would excuse us, only I need a word with Kit here."

Jeremy doesn't understand. Nor do I.

"Back in a minute!" I call as Jules leads me away.

"What is it Jules?" I ask.

He leads me down some steps to the side of the house. I can see people and coloured lights in the garden beyond. Parties. Life is a party.

"I'm here."

Jules pushes me sideways through a basement door, along a freshly painted corridor and into a room with desks and typewriters.

"Look!" he says.

"Is it your new magazine?"

"It's the Observer Colour Supplement. Look!"

It's a face. It's my face. They've printed a big picture of me.

"It's me."

Jules bursts out laughing.

"Yes!" he says. "And look at the caption!"

The caption says 'Kit Hogarth - Genius or Madman?'

"I told Lucy Parkhouse, the journalist. I told her I wasn't Kit."

"Doesn't matter. It's fine. In fact it's bloody brilliant. There's a bloke here from Time Magazine. Bert Kaplin. He wants to meet you."

"Me?"

"Yeah - you, Kit!"

"I've got to be Kit?"

"Listen Andy - if we can get a feature in Time Magazine... I mean, that's international. I mean, you've already got us this brilliant feature in the Observer."

"But won't Kit mind, when he sees the magazines and it's my face?"

"Fuck Kit! I've begged him to come down to London for this. Does he fuck you up, the way he does me?"

"No."

"I mean, when you get him commissions, does he do them? Do they arrive on time?"

"Mostly."

"Mostly?"

"Sometimes..."

"Well, what do you do? How do you explain it to the magazines or whatever?"

"Mostly, Amanda makes sure he does them. She sends them down with a letter from her."

"Well anyway, he could've been here. And the point is, you're doing him a favour. You're making his work successful. In fact..."

Jules prances about the room, rubbing his hands together.

"...In fact, it's very contemporary. Andy Warhol sends impersonators out to do his interviews. That's it! There are two Kit Hogarths. Kit is the Private Kit - the artist. You, Andy are the Public Kit. And you're an artist in your own way too!"

"Who's Andy Warthog?"

"Honestly, Andy! Don't you know anything about art?"

"Have you seen Rachel?"

"No. Never mind about her. Come and met Bert Kaplin."

The garden has been decked out in Ralph Marsden-Hunt's Krazy Paving. In fact we pass Ralph, barking on about business to a couple of helpless hippies.

Jules' mother is surrounded as usual. Because she is a famous concert pianist. So when she rants on about the importance of Beethoven, people actually listen, God help them.

"Kit, this is Bert. Bert, this is Kit."

I'm shaking hands with a skinny old Jew in a suit. Leathery face with large blackheads.

"Hi, I'm Andy. Kit. Shit!"

Shit. Rectify it.

"So you're Ben."

"Bert. Bert Kaplan. I've just been admiring your work. Tell me, do you work in oils? Acrylic? Gouache? The article didn't mention which medium you use."

"Oh, er, paint mainly."

"Kiiiiit! Darling!"

It's Beatrice. She looks ravishing. She's putting her arms around me and kissing me. Is it because I'm Kit? But she doesn't like Kit. Oh, it's for show. And it's worked. Bert Kaplin has gone all sweaty and red.

"I was just asking Kit what kind of paints he uses."

"Oh you like all kinds, don't you Kit?" she purrs, draped about me.

"Yes. Oh yes. Oils, acrylic and what you said, goulash. Sometimes I even use dirt off the floor."

"You paint with dirt?"

He's repulsed but he wants to understand it. He wants to be hip.

"Yes. All kinds of dirt. Sometimes it's smelly dirt."

"You mean...?"

"Yes. Shit. Dog shit, pig shit, sheep shit, cow shit, but mainly chicken shit. You see, I live on a farm in Scotland. With all the animals around. It's spiritual. It's the Centre of Creation!"

"Scotland is the centre of creation?"

"Er, yeah!"

"Where exactly? I know Scotland pretty well."

"Oh. The Mountains."

"Which mountains?"

"The secret mountains."

There's a sudden hush. Two policemen have appeared. We all draw back.

"Whose party is this?" says one. "There's been a complaint. Who owns this property?"

Sonia Marsden-Hunt steps forward.

"My husband owns this house."

Ralph steps out beside his wife.

"Ralph Marsden-Hunt. Krazy Paving. You've probably seen my television advertisements," he says, forcing the constable to shake hands with him.

"Yes, very nice, sir."

"And my wife is Sonia Marsden-Hunt, the well-known concert pianist."

The constable nods at Sonia, by way of respect.

"I appreciate that, madam, sir. But several of the neighbours have complained and it is our duty..."

"Oh duty! Duty for goodness sake!" booms Sonia, flinging her arms out like an exasperated duchess. "Can't we have a little fun? They're just envious because they're all straights!"

Her voice ricochets around the neighbourhood. The hippies titter. She's twice our age but she's one of us.

"I appreciate that madam, but if you could turn the music down...?"

"Okay. We'll turn the music down. Honestly, I haven't got time for it! And nor should you have!"

As Sonia sweeps away from the pigs, she see me.

"Andy! Haven't seen you for ages!"

It's a show for the police.

She's chosen me because I'm wearing a frock.

"You haven't got a cig have you?"

Fumble for my pack. I'll light it for her. I admire her.

"Thanks," she says. "Awful neighbours! Sending their bloody police dogs round!"

The policemen don't seem to take offence. Ralph Marsden-Hunt is shaking their hands. It's bank notes. He's giving them banknotes. He's bribing them. Wow! He's a god.

He's a god and he's joining us.

"That was brilliant!" I say.

"Oh? What?"

"I saw what you gave them! And they took it! Amazing!"

"Happens all the time."

"You didn't give them anything, did you, Ralph?"

"Oh, best to be done with it. Anyway, how are you Kit?"

"He isn't Kit! He's Andy! Honestly Ralph! How many times?"

"But you are Kit Hogarth, aren't you?" asks Bert Kaplin.

"Ah!" I say.

“You see?” says Ralph, “this man thinks he’s Kit too!”

They’re all looking at me.

“Well actually I’m both. There’s the Private Kit who lives in Scotland and the Public Kit. And that’s me, Andy.”

Jules passes by.

“Julian!” commands his mother. “Is this Kit? He’s Andy, isn’t he?”

“He’s Kit, Mum!” says Jules

“I told you he was Kit all along!” barks Ralph.

“Kit!” coos Beatrice, coming over.

She’s been alerted by Jules. Suddenly my arms are full of gorgeous Beatrice again. A light goes on above us, as if we have been blessed. I look up and see a face at the window.

The face disappears. It was Rachel. She’s in her room. I must go to her.

“Excuse me.”

Hear Sonia behind me.

“But Kit Hogarth is a wiry little chap. That one’s dopey Andy.”

Shoot out of the garden, avoiding all the colourful obstacles with their drinks and cigarettes. Skip between others, milling about the stone path that runs down the side of the house. Image of Rachel at the window burning a hole in my heart.

Revellers spilling out into the road. Music still blaring out. It's live. It's a live pop group! I can see them through the window. My mum wouldn't let a live pop group in her house. And I thought Sonia Marsden-Hunt was classical.

It's a new world. Where everything can join up. And everyone can join up. And I'm part of it. Even dopey Andy. And Sonia is right. Sod the neighbours. They're part of the old, dead world, the establishment. The crumbling British Empire. Long may it crumble!

And we are the young and young-at-heart, like Sonia, dancing on the ruins. Yes! Got to save Rachel.

"Andy!"

Jeremy. Oops. Not now.

"Sorry Jeremy. I'm on an important mission."

Take the steps two at a time, in through the entrance. People everywhere. Glimpse gyrating bodies in the room where the band is bashing. Up past the bodies on the stairs. Now stop, puffing. Knock on the door.

"Rachel?"

No reply. Should I go in? How long should I wait?

"Rachel? It's me, Kit. I mean Andy."

Room's in darkness.

"Can I come in?"

Bedside light goes on.

"You're already in."

"No, I mean, sorry. I mean, can I come in further?"

"Why?"

"I've been wanting to see you all night. Didn't know where you were."

"I've been here."

"Yes. Well, that's the point. You see, I've had this brilliant week and it's all because of you."

Sit on the bed beside here. The room is now furnished. Her sailing certificates and medals form a shrine. But not the only shrine. A shrine of teddy bears on and around an armchair. The bed itself is a shrine with a white canopy. The same

material is draped across a sofa, forms curtains rigged to a pole like sails. The room is a womb.

Throb of the bass from the band below. Chattering and laughter from the garden. Its coloured lights reflect around the window. But nothing really gets in. Except me.

"The thing is, we've had mags ringing up for artwork. Loads of print jobs have come in. My brother Colin is out of hospital and busy setting up the café with Sam and Becky. That's where we'll be selling everything. The arts and crafts from the C of C. That's the Centre of Creation. Jules may have mentioned it."

"You think Jules talk to me?"

She's interrupted me, mid flow.

"Do you mean he doesn't?"

"The only time Jules speaks to me is if he wants something. The last time was when he asked me to ferry you around the publishers."

"Yes. Well I'm glad he did. I mean, if he doesn't talk to you it's probably just because he's such a busy man! Anyway, there's the café and the magazine's coming out and there's the Brian Jones commission. Kit doesn't want to do it, but Jules says it will make his name, so he probably will. And what else is there? Oh - the article in the Observer Colour Supplement. Have you seen it?"

Rachel shakes her head. Am I doing okay here? Can't tell.

"Never mind. The point is that everything in my life is turning out right and ...and all because I'm in love with you, Rachel. And that's the point, because you're here in this room on your own, when you should be out there with me."

"What on earth makes you think that?"

"Because it's a feeling. Listen, you don't know your future, do you?"

"No."

"Well then - it may be with me."

"I can't make any decisions in my life at the moment, Andy. And surely I would have to feel something for you."

"Don't you like me?"

"I have no idea. I don't seem to like anything."

"But you've got to come out of your room."

"Have I?"

"Yes, listen. You know I care about you, don't you?"

She shrugs.

"Come on, look at me. I care about you, don't I?"

"You say so. But I don't see how you can."

"Well look. It's in my eyes."

For a fleeting second she looks, but doesn't see. Frightened. Protecting emptiness, like me.

"Why not trust me? We could be friends. We could go about together. And I'll try and make you happy."

Is she going to look up? Yes.

"I might even succeed!" I say, trying to give her lots of love with my eyes. "And if, when you're happy, you fall in love with someone else, it'll be okay."

"But I'd just drag you down."

What? What does she want? Blood?

"No you wouldn't Rachel. Look, I'm not Mister Confident. Not that you think that. I've behaved like a lunatic. But I'm not a confident lunatic.

"Aren't you?"

She's smiling. Is she laughing at me?

"No. I don't know what I'm supposed to be doing. Or if I'm doing it. Or if there is anything I'm supposed to be doing. Or not. It's just that loving you gives me strength so that it doesn't matter so much, feeling lost."

I've said something right.

"Lost," I repeat.

Silence. What now? I open my arms.

"...Found?" I bleat.

She opens her arms and lets me in. Wow! This is great.

"Why do you feel lost, Andy? You seem very confident. Like everyone else in London."

"It's a fake."

"Is it?"

"Well, for a start I'm not doing what my parents think I should do, which is to go to university. So what am I doing? I should have a job. I should make money. But the idea of a boring job is just as bad as school. So how can you survive without a boring job? How?"

Rachel doesn't know.

"Find something you like?" she suggests.

"And what's that? I'm not doing what my folks or their generation are saying I should do. Instead, I'm following other people my age. Doing what they say. Like Jules."

I'm in a very uncomfortable position, twisted around her. I want to stay in the embrace but the effort not to fall off the bed, is making me shake.

"So, what about you?" I ask, trying to rearrange myself without breaking the spell.

"Everyone in my family has to achieve things. Look at Jules and his magazine. Or Mum, constantly on tour - concerts, recitals, recordings. You know she's booked up for the next three years! And Dad's the Krazy Paving King. They've all got something they're good at, except me. If I could just decide. It wouldn't matter what. But I don't know how to choose. It's as if I'm doing something wrong and God's cut off the supply. Emotions wash over me but I don't feel them. Nothing registers. As if I'm shutting down."

"But you're a great sailor. Look - there are all your trophies."

"I lost every race last season."

"No-one can be successful all the time."

"It isn't that. I've lost my nerve. You need nerves of steel when you race competitively at that level. I've tried and I've found that I just can't hack it. I just can't!"

"I don't know what to say, Rachel. I've never done anything like sailing. My mother did yoga once but she broke her arm."

I'm slipping off the bed. Ouch. Fucking hell.

"What happened?" she asks, peering down.

"My leg went to sleep and now it's all tingly."

She helps me up. She's wearing a big white nightie.

"You're freezing," she tells me.

I look at the open bed. Does she mean?

"Do you mean?"

It seems to be what she means.

"At least take your shoes off Andy!"

It is what she means. Great. Get my shoes off, my socks, my Balinese frock. Should I take off my trousers? No. She's wearing a nightie. Quick dive in beside her. We're lying side by side, looking up at the white canopy, not touching. Should I snuggle up and cuddle? Not yet. It's not the point. Not crude sex, but love. What was she on about?

"Maybe your nerve will come back," I suggest, optimistically.

"Graham has invited me to Martinique."

"Is Graham your boyfriend?"

"He's a friend. He runs a business out there, hiring yachts."

I imagine blond brawny Graham on a boat in the glittering Caribbean sea, splicing the main thingy with Rachel on board looking cute, saying "aye aye Cap'n".

"But I don't want Graham to see me as I am now, all fat and frumpy. Anyway, I wouldn't be any use. Even just crewing. If anything happened, I'd fall to pieces."

She's so upset. Comfort her with kisses and gentle caresses. Shit. I've poked her in the eye.

"Sorry. Anyway. This is cosy. Anyway, this is what I think we should do. You should move over to Goodge Street with me. We could run things together, side by side. And if you didn't want to work, we could walk in a sunny park. And when Amazing Arts is big and the money's rolling in - or, either way, you could go to Martinique and come back. Or, even if you didn't, at least we'd have some time together. What do you say, Rachel?"

"You're sweet."

We're going to make love. I can feel it. It's coming from her too. Her nightie's rucked up. My hand comes into contact with a warm thigh. Her face is clear and beautiful. Somehow I'm on top of her and she's letting me. It's going to be alright. Just keep talking to disguise what's going on down below.

"It's a big organisation you know. What with the Centre of Creation and Amazing Arts and Colin's retail outlet. You're going to love it."

I'm getting very excited.

"...And now the magazine. It's called 'It's All Lies'. I don't know why. Jules says it's satirical, but I don't know why people would buy a magazine that tells you lies. Anyway, it's out once a week from now on and..."

She throws me off her with great force.

"I'm sorry Rachel. Did I hurt you? Don't you want to make love?"

"Do you usually make love in your trousers?"

I look down. Still got my trousers on. No wonder I was finding it hard to get inside her.

"Sorry. Could've sworn... What with all the excitement..."

She whips them off me and leaps on top. Christ she's heavy. And so passionate. Pumping, biting, squeezing. Try not to grimace.

It's like she's sailing me single-handed across the Atlantic. Good God, it's a wonder she doesn't break every boat she's in.

Flings herself up and down, up and down, up and down and flings herself off and lies beside me breathing heavily.

Is that it? I haven't come, have I? Surely I would know. No. She has though. Oh well. It's a start.

Maybe if I cuddle up. No. She wants space. She's hot. What should I do? Go back to the party? She'd think I didn't care. Lie here I suppose.

I'm pretty sure she'll come to Goodge Street. We'll turn the artwork room into a bedroom at night. Every morning I'll get her cups of tea or coffee and buns. We'll manage the business like a king and queen.

The door opens. Voices from the hall.

"I think it's in here."

Two party-goers peering at me.

"Oh hallo," I say, bobbing up and waving.

"Sorry, man," says one.

The other giggles. The door clicks shut. Rachel snores. Cuddle up beside her.

To the world I might be Kit, but to Rachel I'm just Andy.

When the sunshine gets to a certain temperature it turns everything gold. Even the dusty centre of town scrubs up nice. These leafy suburban streets seem positively regal.

I'm a bit anxious. Suppose Mum and Dad aren't in. Have to lug all this washing back dirty. Feels strange to be coming home after so long. A lonely feeling. Not my home any more.

Mr Bailey is washing his car.

"Hallo Mr Bailey!"

Mr Bailey looks up.

"Huh!" he says and goes back to his job.

What's wrong with him? Blimey! What's wrong with our house? Where are the trees? The car's sitting in the middle of the front garden. It's been paved over.

Press the doorbell.

"Nrrrrrrrrgh!"

What's that horrible sound? Where's the friendly ding-dong of yesteryear? Peer through the letter box. No-one coming. Are they out? Car's here.

Notice Mr Bailey looking at me. Wander over to him.

"Are they out?"

"Harrumph."

Has he lost the power of speech? Interesting...

"That's a new car, isn't it, Mr Bailey?"

"No thanks to you!"

I see. Clara Goldberg smashed up his car. The very thought of her makes me shudder. Does Mr Bailey blame me? Does he blame our whole family?

I remember Mum pulled out some old roots and the fence went over, flattening Mr Bailey because he was sunbathing. But that was years ago.

I remember Dad poured water on the cooker and the lights went out down the street.

"Have you seen my parents? Are they in?"

No reply. Pity. He used to be such a nice man. Have we pushed him over the edge? Try ringing the bell again.

"Nrrrrrrgh!"

"They won't hear you. They're in the garden."

"Thank you Mr Bailey. So, they're in the garden? And they won't hear me?"

"I'm not going through and telling them," he grumbles.

“Andrew? Is that you? I hardly recognised you.”

It’s Mrs Bailey. But there’s nothing different about me. I’ve specially worn boring shirt and trousers to please my parents.

“Hallo Mrs Bailey. Apparently my parents are in the garden.”

“Don’t you go doing him any favours!” Mr Bailey tells his wife.

“Nonsense!” she replies, drawing me over. “How are you Andrew? You’re a big cheese in the city we hear.”

“Am I? Oh, good. Listen, is Mr Bailey alright? We haven’t pushed him over the edge, have we?”

“Over the hedge? No. He’s been ill. He’s not the same man any more.”

Her lip trembles. Our front door opens and Mum’s face appears.

“Oh, Dorothy,” Mrs Bailey coos. “I was just coming through to the garden to tell you. Only I saw you out there while I was dusting.”

“I thought I heard the bell,” says my mother, in the posh voice she uses outside the family.

“Your Andrew has grown up. I hardly recognised him. He’s a big cheese in the city now I hear.”

What’s she on about cheese? I’m standing between Mrs Bailey and my mum, grinning like a twerp.

“Wasn’t Brian out cleaning the car yesterday?” my mother asks, deftly changing the subject.

“Yes. Most days,” replies Mrs Bailey, sadly.

“Well, we better go in. Come along Andrew.”

I wave goodbye and follow Mum through the house into the back garden.

“It’s Andrew,” Mum announces.

My Dad pops up from a hole in the ground that used to be the air-raid shelter.

I’ve suddenly got this weird sensation that they’re not pleased to see me.

“Hi Dad!”

I reach forward to greet him and almost slide in.

“What’s this?” demands Mum, picking up my bag of washing.

“It’s my washing.”

She pokes her nose in.

“Phew! This’ll need a wash,” she announces.

I follow her into the kitchen.

“I’ll do it,” I offer.

“What on earth are they?” asks Mum, pulling out the Geringsing Wayang and my other beautiful batiks.

"It's my clothes."

"Look more like dresses!" says Dad, coming in.

"Cyril!"

Mum warns him with a look. Then she studies my gear.

"They'll all have to be hand-washed," she announces, binging my batiks in the sink.

"You're not going to do his washing, Dorothy!" bellows Dad.

"I said I'd do it," I tell him.

Dad glares at me.

"You don't visit your mother for months. You don't even phone. When you do show up, it's with your dirty washing. Have you no consideration? Do you know how she worries?"

"Okay! Okay!" I shout. "I'll do it!"

I grab the soapy Geringsing from Mum and start washing it.

Mum grabs it back from me.

"If I can't clean my own son's clothes!" she howls.

She's close to tears. Got to do something.

"Stop!!!" I scream.

Everything stops. What now?

"I'm sorry," I say. "Sorry for everything. Could we have a cup of tea?"

"I'll get it!" says Mum, leaping into action with kettle and cups.

I leap into action, helping her. Dad stands around like a prune.

We gather around the small table my granddad got, when he worked at the stainless steel factory.

Mum jumps up.

"Biscuits?"

"So how are you?" I ask Dad.

"We're landscaping the garden. Getting rid of that awful air-raid shelter," says Mum.

"I thought it looked quite nice," says Dad.

"Honestly Cyril! You just didn't want to do the hard work!"

"I don't mind hard work, where it's necessary."

"Then why haven't you refitted the kitchen?"

"Everything costs money. If we're to afford a holiday on the continent..."

"A holiday. That'll be nice," I say quick, before Mum can start rattling on about putting work before pleasure.

"We haven't booked it, yet," says Dad, shyly, hopefully.

I'm beginning to wonder whether I'm ever going to get them calm enough to ask them the big question.

"I think you should take a holiday. You deserve it."

"You could come."

"No Mum. I'd like to but it's so hectic at the moment."

"What are you doing, exactly?" she asks.

Here goes.

"Well, it's a huge organisation. I don't know where to begin. There's Amazing Arts. That's at Goodge Street. Then there's the shop. Then there's the national magazine, the craft centre in Scotland."

"But what do all these things do?" asks Dad.

Good. He's hooked.

"Let's take Amazing Arts. That's what I run. We have a print shop, which takes on commercial work to subsidise the printing of our own posters. We also function as an art agency. Numerous magazines take our work and we're planning an assault upon the galleries."

"Are you still smoking?" asks Mum.

"A little bit," I lie. "Anyway, our main artist is Kit Hogarth and he's got a commission to paint Brian Jones, from the Rolling Stones. And look..."

I get the Observer article from my back pocket, and unscrumple it.

"...This is an article all about Kit in the Observer Colour Supplement."

I knew that would impress them.

Dad turns a page and Mum almost jumps out of her seat.

"It's you!" she cries, studying the picture of her son with pride.

"Why does the caption read 'Kit Hogarth - genius or madman'?" asks Dad, suspiciously.

"Well that's because I'm Public Kit. It means Kit can do painting, which is what he likes, and I can swan about, saying crazy artistic things. So, anyway, things are going great, only we've got a tiny cash-flow problem and I was wondering if I could borrow two thousand pounds."

Dad explodes. He rises so quickly his chair falls over and the cups rattle on the stainless steel.

"That's why you're here! Money! I might have known! Get out! Get out and take your dirty effeminate laundry with you!"

"No! No!" squeals Mum, turning to me. "Your dad doesn't mean it! He doesn't mean it!"

"I do mean it! He isn't here to see us anyway. He just wants our money."

"But we're the same firm, surely..." wails Mum, her eyes pleading with me to make it right.

"You gave Colin two thousand quid," I proffer.

The House gasps.

"Yes!!" roars Dad. "And you gave him two broken legs!"

"What?" I ask.

"Cyril! We agreed not to mention it!" pleads Mum.

"Is it true that Colin broke both his legs redecorating a condemned building for your so-called Amazing Arts! Well, is it? Or isn't it?"

"No."

"No?"

It isn't. He broke both his legs because he tried to swindle some dealer out of half a ton of drugs. But I can't say that.

"...Well, yes, sort of."

"As a result of which!" bellows Dad, "Colin has been unable to return to Colombia and has forfeited his stake in the farm - in which, as you so kindly pointed out, Dorothy and I had invested two thousand pounds!"

Uh?

"...But I'm not responsible.."

"Not! Responsible! That's exactly what you are! You send your younger brother into a condemned building and you're not responsible. Have I got it right?"

Mum can't help me.

"Yes. No."

"And are you also not responsible for what happened to Clara Goldberg?"

"No! Cyril! This is too much! We don't know for sure!"

"Well why don't we give Andrew the opportunity to explain himself?"

"What's it all about?" I gulp.

Did she blame me for smashing all the cars? I'm not taking the blame for that.

"Tell me!" I insist.

"You tell him Dorothy."

Mum finds it so difficult she can't look at me.

"Clara Goldberg has written to us. Apparently her marriage to Ira has ended. Unfortunately she has a child, which she claims is.....yours."

"Admit it!" storms Dad. "You committed adultery with your second cousin on her honeymoon!"

He's snorting like a bull about to charge. But I'm not having it.

"She forced me! I didn't want anything to do with her! That's why I left the house! And the reason they've divorced is because he's queer!"

"Queer?" roars Dad. "Do you mean homosexual? That's a very serious allegation! If you're going to accuse others just to..."

Mum starts screaming.

"No! Don't say it! Cyril, if you say it! If you say it!"

She's hysterical.

"...As I was saying!" booms Dad. "Just to divert attention from your own perverse habits!"

He raises a soapy batik from the sink with his thumb and forefinger.

"We've been phoned repeatedly by a man with a lisp. Lost your number, he says. Describes himself as a close friend. ...Does the name Jeremy ring a bell? Yes. I can see by your face. Admit it."

"Yes."

"And is this Jeremy a homosexual?"

"No!" Mum whispers.

"Yes," I admit.

"And have you and he...?"

"No!" screams Mum and runs off into the garden.

"Have you?" repeats Dad.

But I can't listen to him. I think Mum's fallen down the hole.

"I think she's fallen down the hole."

"Answer me!"

I'm running outside to check.

"Mum?"

She's sitting in the air-raid shelter hole, rubbing her leg. Dad's at my side. We're looking down at her, concern on our faces.

"Well help me out then!" she barks.

Good. She's alright then. I leap bravely into the hole and pass her up to Dad.

"Are you alright dear?" asks Dad.

She's all muddy.

"Looks like permanent brain damage," I quip.

"Be quiet, Andrew," growls my father.

We get her in and tip her into a chair. I kneel beside her and take her hand in mine. I'm getting points for this.

"I'm sorry Mum. Sorry for causing you distress. And you, Dad. I owe you an explanation. The truth is, I did go to bed with Jeremy. I wouldn't mind being

homosexual. He's a nice person. But, as it turns out, I'm not. I don't know why he's ringing you or where he got your number. He's probably just upset because he likes me. But I can't. Anyway, I've got a girlfriend."

"A girlfriend?"

She says it as if springtime may be returning to the land.

"Yes. Rachel. Jules' sister. Dad's the King of Krazy Paving. Mother's a concert pianist."

"Is her name Sonia Marsden-Hunt?" asks Mum.

She's contemplating her imminent relationship with a luminary of the arts. Sonia would eat her for lunch.

"Yes. Anyway, listen. I want to explain about Clara."

"Oh you don't need to," says Mum. "The woman's probably unstable. Most of Cyril's relatives are barking mad. They're Jewish."

"I object to that," says Dad. "It's a racist slur."

"Please," I beg. "It's not her race. She's unhappy. Ira didn't want sex with her and it was her honeymoon. When she drove up to Oxford he had his hand on my knee and she crashed into all those cars. After the concert he was eyeing up all the young men. She insisted on giving me a lift back and she drove like a maniac. I was so scared, I passed out. And when I woke up, I was in your bedroom and she was on top of me."

"Our bedroom?"

"Honestly Mum. Then the police started banging on the door about the cars and I got out the window. That's why I left home! I didn't want to leave home."

They're concerned, comforting me because I'm crying. Am I faking it? Trouble is, I'm not. Hated Clara for that. First time I've thought about it since. Has she really got a child? Is it really mine? Put it out of my mind for now.

"We should never have let them stay here," says Mum.

Dad is non-committal. But he believes me. So he should.

"Thing is," I say, stretching and standing. "I think you imagine a world full of dangerous homosexuals and drugs. What the newspapers say. But there's nothing sinister about what Jules and me and Rachel and Colin and others are doing. We try to promote the work of young artists. Your generation lived through a depression and a war. We would like to make the world a more beautiful place. What's wrong with that?"

"Well, if you break the law..."

"Who's breaking the law Dad?"

He shakes his head. It doesn't matter.

"As for Colin. I'm not in charge of him. He fell. I took him to hospital. I visited him. He's back at the shop doing it up. It's not a condemned building Dad. We're opening it as a café where you can buy our arts and crafts."

"What do you need the money for, Andy?"

Oh Mum. I could kiss her.

"Dorothy!"

"I want to know!" she insists.

I can hear myself launching into the structure of Amazing Arts, the magazine - careful not to tell them it's called 'It's All Lies'. The farm in Scotland where Walt, the millionaire's son, and Kit and Amanda rule over an army of potters and handloom weavers.

A cheque has appeared on the table. Dad is aghast. Now Mum's getting a pen.

"Sign it, Cyril. All you've done is take other people's word against him. He's your own son."

Dad starts to fill out the cheque. Two thousand pounds. It'll save us. But I don't want to con him.

"We don't need a holiday," says Mum, lightly. "There's plenty to do in the house."

"Not your holiday!" I blurt.

"It's fine," says Dad, calmly. "You believe in what you're doing, don't you?"

"Yes."

"And you believe that this will make the difference?"

"Yes."

He signs the cheque. I do believe in what I'm doing. Don't I? I bloody hope so.

"Will you stay for tea, Andy?" Mum asks.

I could say I've got an important meeting with an adviser to Harold Wilson, but...

"I'd love to, Mum. I'll help you."

Rachel's warm body beside me. She's still asleep. Good. Got to think what to do. Got to stop her running away. She runs away nearly every morning and I have to decide whether to run after her, or stay in the office and do the work. Mum and Dad's loan makes everything possible, but only if I do the work.

If I run out after Rachel, it can take the whole day just to find her. Or she'll be halfway along the street, tears streaming down her face. Wordless for hours.

If I grit my teeth and choose work, I worry. It's not as if she's running to somewhere nice! She's just running somewhere she can hide and be unhappy.

Sometimes I don't even know she's gone. She'll slip out while I'm on the phone.

What I want is - we both jump out of bed, grab a coffee and start work. Then when Amazing Arts is really successful, we'll take a holiday and spend some time together.

I'll make her breakfast in bed. I'll do it. We've got bacon and I think there are some eggs left. Full breakfast.

I'll bring it in to her, we'll eat it and then, casually, we'll be getting dressed and then we'll be in the office working and she won't even have noticed.

What's that bloody racket? Oh no, Slow John's put his bloody 'Obladiblada' record on. Rachel will wake up and spoil everything.

Ease out of bed quickly, run in and stop it.

"Hey! Slow John! What are you doing? Stop it! The music! Switch it off!"

His long, hollow, albino head stares down at me.

"...Who ...are ...you ...calling ...Slow ...John?" he asks.

I haven't got time for this.

"Sorry John. But turn the music off. It'll wake Rachel up."

"...I've ...just ...got ...it ...on ...while ...I ...get ...ready ...to ...go ...to ...school. ...I'll ...be ...gone ...in ...a ...jiffy."

It's no good. Just make the breakfast and hope she doesn't wake up. Where are the eggs? Who's stolen my eggs? Oh there they are. Where's the pan?

Mad John is in his sleeping bag. His tiny little eyes are staring at me. Unnerving. Yesterday he asked me what he could do to help. Sweet, considering he needs Slow John to tie his shoelaces. I gave him a piece of 20 by 30 poster paper and told him to do us some artwork. He showed it to me in the evening. In the centre - about one inch square, was a faint muzzy blur. He'd been on it all day.

Kettle boiling. Bacon crackling. In go the eggs. Bit of shell. Never mind.

"Ob la di Ob la da." Hate that bloody song. Over and over he plays it.

I should never have let the two Johns stay. Jules said co-opt people and inspire them. But there's no point. Slow John is out all day teaching and Mad John is mad.

"Make way! I'm coming through!" I yell, zooming through the living room, tray in hand.

Rachel's awake, staring at the ceiling.

"Good morning darling! It's a beautiful day and I've made us a beautiful breakfast. Sit up! There! That's nice isn't it?"

I don't actually fancy any of it. I need a cig.

"...Excuse ...me..."

"Oh, hallo John. Come in."

"...I ...just ...wanted ...to ...remind ...you ...that ...it's ...John's ...day...for ...signing ...on. ...You ...said..."

"Yes. I'll take him down there. You on your way to school John? Good. Bye!"

"...Oh ...er..."

Ignore him.

"So, Rachel, how is it? Nice bacon, huh?"

Sudden smashing sound next door. The music has stopped. Got to find out. Phone starts ringing as I pass it.

"Rachel? Answer the phone, would you?"

Mad John is in the living room, beside the gramophone. Pieces of Slow John's last remaining record all over the place. They'll 'Ob la di ob la da' no more.

"...Be ...calm ...John," Slow John advises.

It's like a red rag to a bull. Mad John picks up the gramophone and hurls it against the wall. Turntable, speakers, knobs, wheels and springs fly everywhere. I've had enough.

"Get out!" I scream, rushing at him, fists clenched.

Seeing my fist, a terrified look comes over his face. But I don't care. I've got the advantage.

"Get out!" I say, again and again, till he's on his way down the stairs.

Fling his stinking sleeping bag after him.

"...What ...did ...you ...do ...that ...for?" asks Slow John. "...How's ...he ...going ...to ...survive...? ...You ...heartless ...capitalist ...bastard."

"Well then, you can get out too!" I shriek. "Go on. Take your stuff and go!"

"...I ...will!"

"Good. Now Rachel. Rachel?"

Rachel is standing with the phone in her hand. Something's happened. Her face is ashen. I can hear an angry voice on the line. Some angry client? Rachel hands it to me and walks out of the room.

"Hallo? Andy Parvin here. How can I help you?"

Rachel is walking down the stairs. She's leaving. She's unhappy. I've got to stop her. Who's this on the phone?

"Who is this?"

"Is that you Andy?"

Huge, booming voice from the past - Clara Goldberg.

"Clara?"

"What's your address, Andy? I'll send you the air ticket! You won't have to pay for anything! Just come over! You can explain to them! They'll understand and let me go!"

"Who?"

I'm holding the receiver at arm's length. If she gets any louder it'll crack and crumble into dust.

"My folks. I ran away but they found us. They've taken her away from me Andy. They won't even let me see my own daughter!"

"Who? What are you on about?"

"Ira found out! He knew it wasn't his. We never made it together. I told him I was just putting on weight. But when she was born... - She's beautiful Andy. She looks just like you. Her name is Andrea. And they won't let me see her! But it's okay! You can fly over and tell them how we feel about each other. They'll have to..."

"I can't just..."

"You can't? You bastard! You've wrecked my marriage! You're a father, Andy! Get over here!"

She's in distress. Out of control. Is she a prisoner in her parents' house? Or have they got her daughter and she's somewhere else? Is she in the nuthouse? I should fly over and save her. Do the honourable thingy.

"You can pursue your music over here! Get a place at the Julliard! Andy, you've got to! You're a brilliant violinist!"

How can I save her? I can't stand her. She raped me. Didn't she? I didn't want her to drive me home. I didn't want her to make love to me. I woke up and she was on top of me. I distinctly remember. Eugh!

But she's got a daughter called Andrea. She says it's my daughter and it could be. So what about Andrea? If I'm her father, I should be her father. I should go over there and live another life with screaming Clara.

"I'll send you the ticket. You'll meet my folks. They're open-minded people. They'll forgive you. They're good people. They'll pay for the wedding."

"No. I can't. Listen, I'm married."

"Married?"

"Yes. Three children."

No, that's not possible.

"Not three. That's just what we're hoping for..."

She isn't listening.

"You've got triplets?"

"Yeah. Triplets. All the same age. ...Hullo? ...Clara?"

"No I won't get off the fuckin' phone, Pa, and how dare you come into my room!"

Her Pa's shouting back. Can't hear what he's saying. Some clunking sounds. Line goes dead. I'm shaking like a leaf.

Rachel. Got to find her. Clothes on. Down the stairs, two at a time.

"Rachel?"

Bump into the old lady from the flat below.

"Stella. Sorry. Haven't got time now. Got to find Rachel."

"She went that way," says Stella, pointing down the stairs.

Goodge Street jammed tight with cars and pedestrians. No-one I can ask. She could've gone to the station. Try.

What is she wearing? Green hair dye, blond roots. Look for yellow and green among the bobbing heads. There she is! My heart leaps. No. People billow out of the station. How am I going to find her? How?

Probably didn't even come this way. Go back. No point looking. Work in the office. I'll worry - well, be disciplined then. You've borrowed two thousand pounds from Mum and Dad. You've got to make this company a success. That's what you should worry about!

There's a letter for me in the hallway. From Amanda. Probably means Kit hasn't done the artwork for IT. When is it going to be done? Shit. Stella.

"Didn't you find her?"

"No Stella."

"She was crying, poor little mite."

"Yes, she's unhappy."

"You didn't do anything to her, did you?"

"No. Anyway. Got to get to work now."

"I'll tell you if she comes back."

"Yes. Thank you Stella."

Okay. Now, straight to work.

Maybe I should give Jules a call. Rachel's probably gone back to her parents' house in Kensington. If I told Jules to look out for her, he could ring me when she arrives and I could go over. After work, of course. Don't want him to think I'm faffing around with his sister and not doing any work.

What excuse shall I give for calling him? Dial it, I'll think of something. Give him a general report of everything that's happening. Then casually mention about Rachel. ...If he's in.

"Jules?"

"Yes?"

"Oh, great. Well we've got four more print orders. I've booked them in for the weekend and there are going to be loads of people helping whom I've co-opted and inspired and..."

"Andy, I'm in a rush. We've got the layout for an entire issue to get out by lunchtime. I'll phone you back."

"Oh, okay. No! Hang on. Jules, have you seen Rachel?"

"No."

"Well, if you see her..."

"I'll tell her."

He's put down the phone. He doesn't even know what to tell her. Anyway, better get to work. Phone calls, phone calls, millions of phone calls. First, read the mail. Letter from Amanda.

"Dear Andy,

Sorry about the artwork. Things are a bit chaotic here at the 'Centre of Creation' (ha ha!) Anyhow, I'm sure Kit will get round to it when things calm down.

Zecky and Moodri have been building a kiln. On Monday they fired it for the first time and it cracked in half. So Zecki started shouting and Moodri went to live in the tent.

Then on Wednesday, it was Pippin's turn to bake the bread and she got waylaid with making her Jewellery and it burnt.

But the worst thing is that Mr Grebe has died. Apparently he's the executor of Walt's trust and was always having to prevent Walt's dad from stealing Walt's inheritance. The point is: He was like a father to Walt.

...Anyhow, Walt sobbed uncontrollably all night and then left the farm, ambulance and all.

So the vibe here is bad and it's hard to get anything done.

I've written a song lyric, which I enclose. Hope things are going well for you, Andy.

Amanda

xxx

Scan the lyric. Every stanza ends with 'The Centre of Destruction'. Must be a joke on Kit's name for the craft centre. Mustn't waste time reading this. There's work to do. Phonecalls to make.

Trouble is I can't concentrate. Where's Rachel? Mustn't lose her as well!

Packing the posters into batches of five hundred, I'm exhausted. Feel like everything's in slow motion. A batch of five hundred posters is called a ream. I've got nine reams. Three each of three designs.

Colin chose them. He insisted. Freak's Kitchen opens today. He says we've got to be commercial. Anyway, he insisted and I promised.

Load them onto the wheelbarrow. Glance round the print shop to check I haven't forgotten anything. It's been my smelly damp home all weekend. I've grown fond of it. Anyway, lights out, lock up. Sun's not yet up but the air's already warm.

Wheelbarrow weighs a ton. Bump in the pavement, nearly tugs my arms off. Hardly in control of my vehicle. Wobbling along Camden Road and it seems so far to go.

More and more people passing like shadows on their way to work. More and more cars and lorries and buses. It's hot and sticky. Warren Street tube station awash with grey suits, as if they've been belched out of hell.

They can't see my barrow. It's lower than their eyes. In their rush to get where they're going, they keep bumping into it. Should warn them but I haven't got the energy.

Sun comes out. Just like that. As if someone turned on the lights. Suddenly we're in the tropics. And someone's turned up the volume. All the cars are beeping, and people who were talking, are now shouting.

Hot sunlight on my forehead, strange fizzing in my bones. I've done it. Didn't even know I could silkscreen on my own. Four thousand, five hundred pristine posters. Wow.

And I've done it without spending any money on myself, hardly. Just the occasional cheese roll and sleeping on the print shop floor. I'm a hero.

And I've done it despite the fact that I've missed Rachel every moment of that time. While she's spent the time moping about the family villa on Hayling Island, getting her sodding head together.

And it doesn't matter, because I'm a hero. And it doesn't matter that no-one knows because that's the point. I said I'd do something and, even though I didn't know how I was going to do it, I did it all by myself. I don't think I've ever done that before. It's a new feeling. I am an achiever. I can achieve all that is before me.

"Out of my way! I'm coming through!" I cry.

Goodge Street is full of beautiful young secretaries.

"Out of my way - or you'll get hurt!"

They scatter.

Park the barrow in the hall and fumble my way upstairs.

"She's back!"

A luminous old witch appears on the landing above me.

So adrift in my mind, I nearly fall backwards.

"Ah! - Stella. You surprised me."

"I told you I'd tell you when she comes back."

"Who? Rachel??"

"Yes. And she's got a young man with her. They've been up there the best part of an hour!"

"Oh. Thanks Stella. Better get up there."

Who is it? Has Rachel got a new boyfriend and she's coming to say goodbye? Are they making love on our bed?

No. She's on the phone. She's checking details for some print job. The place is gleaming. She must have cleaned it. Does it mean she's back?

Oh joy! Cuddle up beside her and mess playfully with her naughty bits while she blathers on about image size, half tones and colour separation. Heaven.

"Buzzzzzz!" I purr in her ear while my hands buzz around her lovely body.

She tries to fend me off, so she can concentrate. This is fun. I'm like a bee around a honey pot.

"Buzz! Buzz! Buzz!"

Oo-er. There's a man in the room.

"Who are you?" I ask.

"Andy," says the man, rising to shake my hand. Another Andy? Two Johns are one thing. I don't want two Andys. And this one's a disgrace to all Andys. Pink bri-nylon shirt. Blue tie and socks. Navy trousers with smart creases and a shiny pair of Clarke's Tuff Shoes. Face looks familiar though.

"It's Roy," he says, noticing my confusion.

I'm none the wiser. Try to cover my bafflement with a smile.

"Roy Carmichael."

Penny drops. Roy Carmichael. Head Boy at school. Mister Clever Handsome Bastard. Top in every subject, including the girls. Used to laugh at me and boss me about because I was a fat fool.

He looks different. His face has gone all blobby and his eyes are dull.

"Yeah, so..." he says. "Beatrice gave me this address. Will she be along later?"

"I've honestly no idea, Roy. She doesn't normally. But perhaps, if you made an arrangement..."

"Yeah. Brill. I'll hang around then."

Ending her call, Rachel comes over, puts her palm on my chest.

"I've said no to Graham," she murmurs.

"You're not going to Martinique?"

"No. I've decided."

She gives me such a warm smile. If Roy wasn't here... But he is.

"Do you want a cuppa?" I ask him.

"Yeah. Brill. So what do you do here then?"

"I'll put the kettle on," says Rachel.

"Well, Roy," I say. "How are you? Lorraine told me you were at University."

"I was."

"So are you still there?"

"No. I'm here."

"Right. Listen. I've just remembered. There's something I forgot to tell Rachel. Back in a tick."

I'm through the living room in a flash, into the galley kitchen and locked in a passionate embrace with Rachel. Our kiss goes on and on, as the kettle boils and fills the place with steam.

Rachel pulls away awkwardly. Roy is standing in the doorway, watching. Has he been here all the time?

"So is Beatrice with anyone at the moment?" he asks.

"Yes. Well I think so. She was two days ago. She's with Jules."

"Who's he?"

"Jules Hunt. He was in the upper sixth."

"The berk who got expelled? She's with him? Well that won't last long then. He was a complete wanker."

"Hang on a second," I say. "For a start it was Jules who started Amazing Arts. There's also the Centre of Creation in Scotland. Plus Jules and Beatrice are running a national weekly magazine. Unless you've achieved more since school, I don't think he's the wanker."

"He's also my brother," says Rachel. "Here's your tea."

"Oh. Pardon. No offence. So, when do you reckon she'll be here then?"

"How should I know?" He's getting on my nerves. "Have you arranged to meet her here today?"

"Isn't she normally here?"

"No."

"So when do you reckon then?"

I want to head-bang him, but there are footsteps clumping up the stairs. It can't be Beatrice, surely. Beatrice wouldn't clump.

It's a policeman. Two policemen. And a nervous Mr Small, the landlord, in his white coat, coming up behind.

"Sorry to bother you sir. You aren't Walter Haitch Wallace by any chance?"

"I'm not actually."

"But you know someone of that name."

"Yes."

"And your name is?" asks the second policeman.

"Andy Parvin."

"May we come in for a few moments?"

"Okay."

They trudge in, including Mr Small, and congregate in the living room.

"You know this Walter Wallace, you say?"

"Yes."

"Is he staying here?"

"No."

"Do you have an address where we may be able to locate him?"

"I'm afraid not."

"A telephone number?"

"Sorry."

Hope they don't ask to see the address book. Not that Walt's at the farm any more, according to Amanda.

"How often do you see him?"

"He just turns up sometimes. What's he done?"

"Do you know if he owns an old Red Cross ambulance with the inscription..." The copper checks his notes. 'Walt Weirdness Total Weirdness 5 Flavours Strawberry Vanilla and...?'

"Shit? Yes he does. Not only that. He's got an armchair for a driver's seat. Slides all over the shop when you're going along."

"Does it indeed. Well I'm afraid your friend Mr Wallace has accumulated rather a large number of traffic offences. Ninety-six to be precise. He has failed to provide his documents within the statutory five days on seven separate occasions.

"You say he's committed ninety-six offences. But supposing you're out of date?"

"No sir," sneers the second copper. "His vehicle has been impounded. It was blocking both carriageways of the A1."

"So where's Walt?"

I'm worried about him. Mr Grebe died. Walt cried all night and left the farm. Where is he?

"That's what we're asking you!" declaims copper two as if he's scored a point.

"Listen," I say. "There's something you ought to know about Walt. Would you like to sit down?"

"We'll remain standing, if you don't mind, sir."

"Fine. Anyway. The thing about Walt is that he's lost. His parents have money. He's got an inheritance coming to him. But it doesn't make him happy. It makes him unhappy. Because he can't trust anyone, not his dad, not anyone. Except Mr Grebe. And he's dead. Do you see?"

"Do you happen to have his parents' address sir?"

"No."

"Very well, sir. When you do see him, ask him to pay us a visit. Tottenham Court Road Police Station. It'll be better for him."

The policemen are leaving. Whew. Mr Small isn't. He's snooping about. Thank God Rachel cleared up.

"We've never had the police here before," he announces.

"Oh. That's good then," I suggest.

"I've been here twenty-six years and my father ran the shop before me. Sold the first electric lights in the area.

"Pioneers then," I say, flashing Rachel a loving look.

"We have always been on very good terms with the police."

What's the time? Christ I'm supposed to get over to Colin's with the posters.

"Rachel - I've got to deliver all these posters to my brother. Would you like to come with me?"

"But shouldn't I stay here to answer the phone?"

"You owe me rent! Pay up or I'm giving you your notice here and now!"

Mr Small is furious. He really wants to chuck us out.

"I haven't got any cash on me."

He turns to Rachel who shakes her head.

"Right! One week's notice as of now!"

"How much is it?" asks Roy, opening a brown plastic wallet and pulling out two ten-pound notes.

"I don't know," I admit. "How much do we owe you Mr Small?"

He's pissed off. He wanted us out. He snatches Roy's money and leaves.

"And move that bleedin' wheelbarrow!" he calls from the landing.

"Righteeho!" I call back. "Sorry about that Roy. We do have money. Just not cash. I'll pay you back."

"If you need someone to man the phone, I could do it."

Who is this new Roy Carmichael who pays your rent and is eager to please?

"If you want," he adds. "The thing is, I haven't got anywhere to stay, but if you needed help..."

Alarm bells in my head. All very well Jules saying co-opt and inspire, but after the two Johns...

"Great Roy. Yes - I'd love you to man the phone this afternoon. Just make sure you take their names and phone numbers. And be polite. And don't make a mess. And..."

"Don't worry," he assures me. "It'll be fine. Have a good time."

"Come on Andy," says Rachel, already on her way down.

"You won't go off before we get back and leave the place open for thieves, will you Roy?"

"I'll be here," he insists.

He even smiles at me.

"Okay. You can stay the night. We'll discuss anything more long-term when I've got a moment to think."

"Thanks."

If he's staying, he'll have to change out of those horrible bri-nylon clothes.

Down the stairs. Out into the sunshine. Me and Rachel, side by side, pushing our wheelbarrow, like a couple with a pram.

Freaks Kitchen is crowded with hippies. Makes me want to run away. My limbs are loose with lack of sleep. Can't make sense of the noise and sunlight.

Colin races over.

"Where are they?" he yells, almost falling over the wheelbarrow.

"Wow!" I say, admiringly. "I haven't seen this place since it was a dump. Now it's a psychedelic dump!"

Colin isn't interested in my jolliness. He has a bushy beard, long hair and fixed eyes. No trace of the insecure boy who used to be my younger brother.

"Let's just get these posters in. I thought you were going to be here by eleven."

He grabs a few reams and starts pushing through the stoned throng. A goddess appears. A young, beautiful, black goddess.

"Hallo. I am Monique. Are you Colin's brother? I've heard so much about you."

She's French. She grabs some posters. Rachel and I manage to pick up the rest and follow Monique in. It's like walking behind a naked woman. She's built like an athlete. I smile at Rachel to show that I'm not looking at Monique. But Rachel is studying the movement of Monique's bum, a sense of amazement on her face. I pretend not to have noticed.

"You know Sam and Becky?" asks Monique.

I nod.

"They were in Colin's class at school," I explain.

Sam and Becky are serving their customers.

"Beer and cakes? Is that what they're selling?"

"Hash brownies," says Monique, slapping her posters down on a large trestle table opposite the café area.

"Have they got real hash in them?" I ask.

"Of course."

"But what if the police find out?"

Monique gives me a curious little smile. I smile back before I realise what her smile means. She's wondering if Colin's brother's a straight?

"Yeah! Let's all get stoned!" I say, laughing loudly to show that I'm free and easy.

Several hippies give me uncool looks. Out of the corner of my eye, I see Jeremy. He's pushing his way towards us. Why do I immediately think of Clara? People I've let down. But he shouldn't have rung my parents.

"It's Jeremy!" I exclaim.

"Oh," says Rachel, not knowing who Jeremy is.

"Hi Jeremy."

"Andy, I want you to meet Philip."

Philip is incredibly handsome. He smiles at me.

"Hi," he says.

"Hi," I say.

Is he an American?

"I've heard so much about you," he purrs.

I look from Philip to Jeremy. They're together. Jeremy has got himself a gorgeous American boyfriend and he's brought him to show me. I don't know what to say. Not much good at small talk.

"I've got a girlfriend," I splutter before I can stop myself.

"Oh that's nice," says Philip.

Philip and Jeremy agree that it's nice. Where is Rachel? She's right beside me.

"Oh there you are darling. Rachel this is Jeremy. Jeremy this is Rachel. Rachel this is Philip and Philip this is Rachel."

Rachel smiles. She's shy. Her green hair has almost grown out. Her face is puffy. She's wearing a big sweater over her jeans, even in this heat, to hide her plumpness.

"Have you tried the brownies?" Philip asks her.

She shakes her head. She can't speak. I'll have to say something.

"We've just brought these posters here. I printed them all myself."

We look over to where Colin and Monique are sticking up a display of the posters on the wall behind their trestle table.

I hate these posters, even though I printed them. One's just psychedelic patterns so, when you look at it, your eyes go funny. Another's a painting by Kit. A fantasy picture of Beatrice in the nude. She'll be furious if she finds out. The third poster's a slogan. It says 'God is a businessman'. Colin chose them. To be commercial.

Monique is on a chair, sticking up a sign. 'Only £2 each', it reads. What a rip-off! But my eyes are diverted to the sight of Monique's bum as she stretches up with the sticky tape.

Two hands appear around her waist to help her down. Colin's hands. They're together. Lovers. My brother and this Amazon goddess. How can it be?

People are swarming around the posters, drawn, no doubt, by the sight of Monique's bum. Jeremy and Philip have disappeared. I smile at Rachel.

"I'm a bit tired," I confess. "Shall we go?"

Rachel's relieved. It's stuffy and airless in here. We hold hands and zigzag between the hippy folk. Cooler on the street. Must be late afternoon.

We wander, in silence, across the Leicester Square and up Berwick Street, where the fruit market's just packing up.

Visions of Jeremy and Philip, Colin and Monique flit through my head. It's as if everyone else knows what they're doing, where they're going. They're getting their act together.

"So, you're not going to Martinique then?" I ask Rachel.

"No. I think I was just flattered that Graham had asked me."

"Oh."

"While I was down on Hayling, I was thinking about you, Andy."

"Were you?"

"Yes. Because you are doing something real and important here in London."

"Am I?"

"Going to Martinique would just be running away."

I've stopped walking. A great wave of emotion floods through me.

"Would you marry me, Rachel?"

"Yes."

"Yes?"

I can't believe it. Her face is all smiley. She means it. Oh. Our arms are around each other. Our mouths are together. Vaguely hear a chorus of oi-ois and wolf whistles from the market traders. I'm weak with relief. But Rachel is strong. She takes my hand and leads me up Berwick Street.

"I think we should have lots of babies," she says. "Sod the population explosion and the people who say the world isn't fit to bring children into. Lots of babies. At least four. And a house by the sea so I can mess about with boats."

We cross Oxford Street. We'll be back at the office soon.

"Rachel, do you think we should tell anyone?"

"That we're getting married?"

"Yes. What do you reckon?"

"Let's not."

"Okay. I agree. Because it's not the marriage, is it. It's us. How we feel about each other. Private. To be honest, I don't even believe in marriage."

"Don't you?"

She seems shocked.

"I believe in us," I explain.

"That's alright then," she says, squeezing my hand and leading me along Charlotte Street, where the restaurants are all lit up.

"You wouldn't think of working for Dad, would you?" Rachel asks.

"Your Dad? You mean pavings, patios and pools? Not really. Not that I've got anything against it. It's a fine trade."

"Pays well."

"Oh."

Fumble for my key. We step inside the rat-stink hall and shut the world behind us. Rachel pins me against the wall and we cuddle.

There's a noise coming from somewhere. A banging. Rachel can hear it too.

"Is it coming from upstairs?" I ask her.

She doesn't know. I think it is. Shit. Get up there quick. Take the stairs two at a time.

Stella's standing in her doorway, white as a sheet. She hasn't even got her teeth in.

"I don't know what it is. I was too scared to go up. It's been going on for hours. Should I call the police?"

"No!" I wheeze, zipping past her, bounding up the last flight and spinning into the living room.

It's full of people. Someone in a Sergeant Pepper uniform is bouncing around on a pogo stick. A goofy bloke in a grey cowl and cloak is trying to balance what looks like a telegraph pole.

"What the hell's going on?" I yell.

Walt's face appears from the kitchen.

"Walt! What's happening here?"

"I'm not called Walt any more."

"What?"

"I'm Left Hind Leg of the Woolly Mammoth."

"Woolly? ...What are you talking about?"

"This is Right Hind Leg."

A pretty girl steps forward. She has twinkly eyes, as if she has just seen God.

"How do you do?" she asks in a posh voice.

I've had enough.

"Stop fucking pogo-ing!" I shriek. "There's an old lady downstairs trying to sleep! What's all this rubble everywhere?"

"Had a bit of an accident with the ceiling I'm afraid," twitters the upper-class loony with the telegraph pole.

I look up. There's a bloody great hole in the ceiling. Gazing about the room, I begin to see the scale of the damage.

"How could you let this happen, Walt?"

"Left Hind Leg," the girl with God in her eyes corrects me.

I stare at her, trying to understand. It's a tragedy. I mean, it's one thing ugly people being off their trolleys but she's really pretty.

Goofy drops his telegraph pole. It smashes our lamp.

"Out!" I scream. "All of you! Now! Out! Out! Out!"

I shepherd them towards the door.

"Take your stuff! Go! Don't come back! And Walt..."

I grab his shirt and shove my fist in his face.

"...If any of you makes a noise going down those stairs, I'll beat the shit out of you! Do you hear me? Woolly Mammoth will be extinct!"

Roy has appeared. He doesn't know if I mean that he should go as well.

"They said they were friends of yours," he explains.

I ignore him. Hover on the landing till I hear the front door slam. They're gone.

Rachel is already sweeping up. I gape at the hole.

"I've no idea how you plaster a ceiling."

"I could do it," says Roy.

"Could you?"

"Well, - no."

"Then shut the fuck up!"

"But I've got an idea..."

Ignore him.

"...I could pull down the rest of the ceiling."

"What?"

I stare at him. My blood's up. I want to hit someone. Roy will do.

"...Well, if the ceiling wasn't there, I could stretch material across the beams. Put some lights above it. They'd shine through. It'd look great."

"Stop a minute, Rachel."

"We'll still have to clear up," she says, exasperated at the blokes talking while she does the work.

"Yeah, but it might be better to move things out, if the rest of the ceiling's coming down."

"Lot cheaper than getting a plasterer in," adds Roy, championing the idea.

It does seem like the best plan. Especially if Roy is going to do it. If we choose the right material. Blue, with lights shining through it, like stars in the sky.

We wipe and stack the furniture in the next room. Just want to get done and to bed now. Can hardly lift my end of the sofa.

Office is beginning to look like a store room. We won't be able to get anything done. It's all too much.

"I'm going to phone up all my friends and get them over to help," claims Roy.

"Okay. Thanks. But listen. Rachel and I are going to have to run the office. So we can't have a lot of noise and mayhem. It'd be impossible!"

"We'll be quiet as mice," he assures me, flinging a chair into the corner, with a great crash.

"Quiet!" I thunder.

"Sorry."

"And I don't want Mr Small to know, so any rubble needs to go in bags and get tip-toed out. Cos he's always in his shop, waiting to pounce. He'll have us out. Any excuse. Do you understand?"

Rachel can see that I'm nearly hysterical. She guides me into the artwork room and lays me down on my bed. I want to pull her down on top of me. But, kissing my forehead, she steps back.

"Get some sleep," she coos.

I hear the door click shut. Hear them stacking rest of the furniture. Thought pops up in my head. I'm getting married. Panic. What am I doing? Zzzz...

Wake up. Room full of light and noise from the street. Feels late. Ten to twelve. Can't be. Stagger into the office. Rachel's on the phone. Furniture piled high all around her. She smiles.

"Has Roy started work?" I ask.

She puts her hand over the mouthpiece.

"I think he's making a meal."

She has to go back to her call. I need a coffee to wake me up. Wander through the living room. Empty, hole in the ceiling. Nothing's changed. Roy's clattering about in the kitchen. I can't get past him to put the kettle on.

"All my friends are arriving at twelve," he says.

I want to get past him to put the kettle on.

"Yeah? Yesterday you said Beatrice was coming over," I say sarcastically.

"I've spoken to Beatrice," he says, prodding some bright green things in a frying pan.

"Have you? How did it go?"

"I think she's just playing hard to get."

"Oh. What's this?"

"Potatoes."

"But they're blue."

"Vegetable dye. Makes even the most ordinary food seem exotic."

The doorbell rings.

"That'll be my friends. Will you go and let them in?"

"No. I need a coffee."

"But the liver will burn, if I go."

"What liver?"

"Keep prodding it! Don't let it burn!" he calls, thundering down the stairs.

Bright green liver. Turns my stomach. All I want's a cup of coffee. Better not let it burn though. Fill the kettle with one hand, prod the liver with the other. The kettle isn't filling. It's got a hole in the bottom. When did this happen? Have to boil water in a saucepan. They're all being used.

Hear a voice in the living room.

"Ooh. It's nice in here. Ooh. I see what you mean about the ceiling, Roy. Never mind. I'm here now. Ooh, hallo Andy. Ooh, you're wearing your Geringsing. Haven't seen you down the shop lately."

It's Lorraine. She's holding a huge pickaxe. Why didn't Roy carry it up the stairs for her?

"You been seeing each other then?" he asks, suspiciously.

"Oh nothing like that, you silly," she says, giving his arm a squeeze. "Andy gets all his batiks from us. Actually you're a bit of a star down the shop, Andy. No-one can believe you actually walk about wearing those things!"

The frying pan is on fire. Lorraine pushes me out of the way and blows it out.

"Honestly! Men!" she says.

"We should serve up," says Roy. "No point waiting for the others. Serve up will you, Lorraine? I'll go and tell Rachel."

"What is this food?" asks Lorraine.

"Liver and potatoes. I don't know what those brown lumps are," I say.

"Who cooked it?"

"Roy."

"I'm sure it will be lovely. Have you got any plates? Or bowls? Bowls would be better."

"I don't know where anything is. I need a coffee."

"Don't worry. I'll find things. You go and get the table ready."

I'm standing in the living room looking for a table. Lorraine breaks the spell, coming through with the food.

"Where's the table?"

I look around. Not a stick of furniture in the room.

"We'll sit on the floor," says Roy, opening a bottle of beer.

"Want some?" he asks Rachel.

She doesn't.

"Want some?" he asks Lorraine, who's serving up.

Can't believe I'm sitting on the floor with a plate of bright blue and green food. If Jules turned up now, he'd go berserk.

Can't eat this food. Nor can Rachel. Even Roy's plate is untouched. He is, however, on his third bottle of beer. Lorraine's the only one eating.

"Anyone want any more?" she asks, before helping herself. She must love Roy.

"Oh well," says Roy, opening another bottle and getting to his feet. "No point in waiting for the others. Better get stuck in."

Next door, the phone rings. Rachel goes to get it.

"I'll be with you in a tick," I promise her. "I'll just get a coffee."

Have to clean one of the pans. Lorraine bustles in, dumping plates in the sink, just as I'm trying to get blue spud off a pan.

There's a tremendous smashing sound. Lorraine and I rush through. The living room ceiling is on the floor. Bricks, wood, soot and plaster swirling in the air.

"He's underneath it," says Lorraine, scrabbling about, searching for him.

"What should we do? What should we do?" I cry.

I'm bad at this. He'll be hurt. There'll be blood and guts.

"Oh God, oh God!" I cry, striding about, wringing my hands.

Rachel appears in the doorway, sees what's happened and runs back into the office. She's phoning the ambulance. I can hear her giving our address.

Some lumps of lath and plaster move. Roy's head appears.

"What happened?" he asks, slurring his words and rolling his eyes.

"You're a clumsy so-and-so, that's what happened," says Lorraine, dabbing his face with a wet dishcloth.

Rachel re-appears.

"Are you alright?" she asks.

"Any more beer?" he burbles.

"Shall I cancel the ambulance? Rachel asks me.

"Oh dear!" says Lorraine, clutching her stomach. Her face has gone white. Now it's gone green. Her eyebrows rise with a look of astonishment. Her mouth opens. A cascade of blue and green sick flies out of her mouth and lands on Roy.

Lorraine falls to her knees, clutching her gut and groaning.

"I don't feel very good," she says and passes out.

I panic.

"What are we going to do? What are we going to do?"

"Listen!" hisses Rachel.

Sirens. The ambulance is here. People trampling up the stairs. Just manage to get over to Lorraine and look like I'm helping her in time.

Two big sturdy men in uniform trot in. In seconds they've got a stretcher out and are carrying Roy out.

"Not him!" I yell. "He's just drunk. It's Lorraine. I don't think she's breathing!"

My eyes make contact with the eyes of Mr Small the landlord. He's gazing round the room, bug-eyed with rage. He starts spluttering. No words, just spluttering, as Lorraine is carried out.

Roy lumbers over to Mr Small and puts his arms around him.

"Ibby alrigh...doe new worry..."

Mr Small lets out a long, hissing sound.

"I-want-you-out-by-the-end-of-the-week," says the hiss.

"Ibby fix in a jiffy," Roy assures him.

Mr Small sneezes and storms out of the room. I follow him down the stairs, at breakneck speed. At the entrance to his lighting shop, I cut off his escape.

"There's no way you can evict us. We're tenants."

"You're a business."

"We live there."

"You've destroyed the place. First the police. Now it's the ambulance brigade. Dear oh dear. Whatever next!"

"It's your ceiling that fell down on us. Have you got insurance?"

He looks me in the eye.

"Are you threatening me? Because, if you are..."

"I'm saying your ceiling came down. We are prepared to meet the repair costs, but I don't think you can avoid taking some responsibility."

"It was a perfectly good ceiling. What were you doing up there?"

"Nothing. It fell on us."

He's wavering.

"It wasn't safe and now there's a girl in hospital!" I add.

"And you say you'll pay for a full repair?" he asks.

"Yes Mr Small. On my word of honour."

He looks down at my batik dress.

"We'll probably have to buy some expensive new lighting from your shop," I suggest.

"Oh. Yes of course," he says, suddenly appeased.

I hold out my hand.

"I'll have it done in a week," I promise.

We shake hands. Men together. Fearless but fair.

"Just pop in any time you want to choose your lighting. The new Volene Range has just arrived. Might suit you."

"Oh, yes. Volene."

"Very modern."

"Okay. Better go and start clearing up."

He nods and disappears into his shop.

Trudge slowly up the stairs. No energy. Now I'll have to use hundreds of pounds of Mum and Dad's money, just to fix the fucking room.

Phone's ringing in the office.

"Amazing Arts, can I help you?"

"Andy?"

"Kit???"

"Yeah. Hi."

"How wonderful to hear your voice, Kit. I often think about you. Well of course, because I'm always selling your work. Your work is wonderful. Actually I did an interview with the Observer Colour Supplement about you. Actually they printed a picture of me with your name. Hope you don't mind. Anyway it's great to talk to you. I always think that we should talk more often. Kit? Hallo?"

"Where's Walt?"

"I don't know."

"You've got to find Walt."

"Oh. He was here last night."

"Was he?"

"Yes. He's changed his name to Left Hind Leg. There's loads of them. They're called Woolly Mammoth. They were pogo-ing all over the living room. They put a hole in the ceiling. I had to chuck them out."

"You chucked Walt out?"

"I had to."

"You stupid fat fuck! If you don't find Walt, and get him back up here, the whole of the Centre of Creation will go caput. We've got no money, nothing. We'll all be labourers! Labourers!"

"Oh. I see. I'll do what I can. I think I've got his parents' number."

"Not his parents! He won't go there!"

"But how...?"

"Just find him!"

He's slammed the phone down. Can't think what to do. Where's Rachel?

Roy's sitting in the rubble swigging a beer. He looks at me guiltily as I enter.

"Where's Rachel?"

"Went with Lorraine."

"Oh."

I stare at the devastation.

"Want some help?" asks Roy.

"No I don't want any help. I want some fucking coffee."

"I'll get it."

"No! Stay where you are, Roy. You're a fucking nightmare. Where's the coffee? Where is it? Here! Oh, there's none left. Have you drunk all our coffee Roy?"

"Sorry. I needed it to make the sprouts brown."

Duck out of the sunshine, down the steps. Basement door's open. Someone's in, I can hear talking. Pop my head round the office doorway. Desks strewn with paper, Jules at one. Someone else in the corner. A timid bald man in a suit.

"Come in Andy," says Jules. "This is Peter Wilkins. He printed our first issue."

I put my hand out to shake. Peter ignores it, staring at Jules.

"Listen, just give me something on account, so I can pay my staff."

"We agreed 90 days," says Jules, returning to his desk.

"We're a small firm. It was a big job. The way you spoke, you were a national magazine, you'd be able to pay us in no time," says Peter.

There's something helpless, pleading in Peter's voice. But Jules ignores him, busying himself with his magazine layout. Better keep out of the way. Find a desk and sit behind it.

"If you could just give us a bit on account, save us going under."

"I would if I could," spits Jules, irritably. "Our distribution is building. If you want to help, help me layout this issue. It's got to be done by four. You want to help?"

"I haven't got time," says Peter.

"Well nor have I," hisses Jules. "Andy. You can help me. You can do the contents page. Just arrange the articles as it says on the diagram. Here's some glue."

He thrusts a load of paper at me and clears a space on my desk, by pushing other things off. The contents page tells you all the articles in the magazine. And which pages they are on.

Every article has "It's All Lies!" stamped on it. "Nuclear Power - It's All Lies!", "It's a Man's World - It's All Lies!", "Freedom of Speech - It's All Lies!", "We Need More Houses - It's All Lies!", "Democracy - Hypocrisy!" - Oo, that's different. "Vietnam - It's All Lies!", "Money - It's All Lies!". There's a section called "Lies, Lies & More Lies". Makes me interested to know the truth. Or even just how to use this glue.

"So you can't give me something on account?"

I'd forgotten Peter was here. Jules looks up.

"Should have something for you next week," he assures him.

Peter shrugs.

"Nice to have met you," he tells me and leaves.

We hear his footsteps as he climbs up the stairs and onto the street.

"Will he really lose his business?" I ask.

Jules is staring at my desk.

"What the hell have you done?"

He grabs the artwork I've stuck down. It is a bit grubby. And some of the bits of paper aren't exactly in the right place and I used too much glue so it's a bit rumpled and torn. Jules stares at me. Takes it back to his desk and starts to repair the damage. It's not my fault. I only came here to tell him about what's going on up at the craft centre.

"Sorry Jules. I'm only here because I got a really upsetting call from Kit last night. He says if we don't find Walt, the Centre of Creation's sunk."

"Why is it our responsibility to find Walt? Eh?" Jules barks. "If he wants to find Walt, he can find him himself!"

"No, but the point is, I've seen Walt. He's with a troupe called Woolly Mammoth. They put a hole in the ceiling. I had to chuck him out."

"Well you've answered the question then, haven't you! Walt's found a bunch of like-minded loonies! That's where he is - with the Woolly Fucking Mammoth!"

"Yes, but the police were round. He's got all these traffic offences against him. His ambulance was found on a road. Kit's right. I shouldn't have chucked him out. I mean, what if he's in trouble?"

"Never mind Walt! Never mind Kit! We've got our work cut out here! That's the point! If I don't get this issue out..."

"The point is, have you got any phone numbers for Walt? That's the point!"

I'm angry. I want to say 'fuck your fucking magazine'.

"I've got his parents' number. But they wouldn't know."

"They might."

"Well, call them if you want."

"No. You call them. You're better at things like that. Go on, it'll only take a moment."

He gives me a look, but dials.

"Hallo? Yes, er. Good afternoon. My name is Julian Marsden-Hunt. I'm trying to locate Walter Wallace. Do you happen to know...? No, he's a colleague... ...Yes, I just want to find out where he is. ...Simply out of concern for him. Oh. He's safe. That's good to hear. Does that mean you've seen him? Is he with you? I'm sorry, who am I speaking to?"

Julian mimes "Fa-ther."

"...So, you know where he is? Might I have his address? A phone number then?"

Jules is silent, listening. I can hear a man's voice. Sounds angry. Can't hear the words. A look of fury passes across Jules' face.

"Is it true, Mr Wallace, that if Walt is found to be of unfit mind, you stand to inherit his trust fund? Is it? Never mind who I am. I'm a journalist. Yes. Do you

inherit? Never mind that - are you unwilling to answer the question? Mr Wallace?
...He's hung up."

Jules replaces the receiver and returns to salvaging artwork.

"Well anyway, now we know," says Jules, under his breath.

"What?"

"Walt's in the loony bin."

"The loony bin?"

"It's all money. Destroy someone for money. ...But to destroy your own son."

"But isn't Walt a bit mad anyway?"

"How did he get in that state? No love in that family."

"What about Kit?"

"No love in that family either."

"I mean, where does that leave the craft centre? If Walt's gone..."

"For Christ's sake, Andy, we can't wipe everyone's arse. All those craftsmen have to do is send their stuff to your brother's shop. That's right isn't it? He'll sell them?"

"Yes. Colin's already sold out of the posters. The craftwork he was promised hasn't turned up. But supposing they really are starving, like Kit said? Supposing they really do need help...?"

Jules has cleaned and remounted the contents artwork. It looks jazzy but smart.

"Well done," I say.

"Okay. I've got it. We'll drive up on the weekend."

"To Scotland?"

"Yes. We'll take loads of food. We'll find out what's going on. We'll bring all their craft-stuff back for Colin's shop. Colin should come with us, make the connection. We'll go up Friday evening."

I'm thunderstruck. I can't go up on Friday evening. I'm getting married on Saturday morning. Rachel got the papers. We signed them. Saturday morning, nine o'clock at St Pancreas Registry Office. I can't miss my wedding. And I can't tell Jules, because we're not telling anyone. And now someone's coming down the stairs.

"That'll be Beatrice," says Jules.

I've missed my chance.

"Hi Andy. Jules - Nova want me for a series on art."

"What do you know about art?"

"I'm young, I know everything. So, what's new Andy?"

Beatrice is wearing a little black dress, nothing really. Just the dress, the dark wavy hair and the twinkle in her beautiful eye, that says she knows something I don't. I want to answer but I'm tongue-tied. Doesn't matter. Jules answers for me.

"Walt's dad had him certified," he tells her. "It's a trick to steal the trust fund. We ought to run an article. Or better still, get one of the big papers to run it."

"Poor little rich boy? Not much of a story. Anyway there'd be writs flying every-which-way. Haven't you finished the paste-up? I thought it was supposed to be at the printers by now."

"Well if I had a bit of help!"

"...And if I didn't have to take crap work to keep us afloat!"

They're angry with each other. I should go now. But I've got to say that I can't go on Friday night.

"Anyway," I say, getting up. "I'd better be going. Listen - I can't make it Friday night."

"Oh?"

"What's happening Friday night?" asks Beatrice.

"We're all going up to the farm to sort things out. You should come with us. Kit could be your first subject for Nova."

"Kit? Are you kidding? He's not famous. I'm meeting David Hockney at three. Anyway, I'm not schlepping up to Scotland. And nor is Andy, are you!"

"I could make it Saturday, after lunch."

"Why? Why not Friday?"

"A wedding."

Shit.

"Who's the lucky girl, Andy?" asks Beatrice, beaming at me.

"No. Not me. Tony. You haven't met him. Tony Benn."

"The politician?" asks Beatrice.

"No. Not Benn. Bennett."

"The singer?" asks Jules.

"No. No-one famous. Honestly, you haven't met him. Anyway, got to dash. See you Saturday!"

Out the door, up the stairs, into the sunshine and along the road before they can ask me any more questions. Phew!

I'm getting married. I wonder what that'll be like.

Go through the list again: Get married. Get back to Goodge Street. Pay for the lights. Have I got my chequebook?

Let go of Rachel's hand to be sure that it's safe in my right-hand trouser pocket.

Rachel is dawdling, suspended like some plump, fluffy cloud. I always think that girls are pretending when they go soppy about things like marriage. Keep expecting them to come to their senses and act normal.

Grab her hand. Smile to reassure her and drag her along.

Colin better be there by the time we get back. Don't want him keeping Jules waiting. It'll look bad for me, if my brother's late. Mind you, Jules is always late. Sometimes he doesn't even turn up. But he's the boss, so he can't complain about himself.

I don't want anyone to be late. Supposing Kit is really starving. We'll buy food. Wait till we're out of London, or we'll never get going. There are shops outside London. Rachel has ceased to walk at all.

"Come on!" I bark.

"We're here, Andy."

"Oh. ...Good."

Tiny brass plate by the door: "St Pancreas Registry Office." Locked. Not open yet. Consult my watch, even though I don't have one.

Rachel cuddles up to me embarrassingly. Not that there are many people about. Hardly any cars. Light blue sky. St Pancreas Station opposite, black with dirt, like some vast gothic palace. Dust on the road waiting to be churned up into the air. It's going to be a hot day.

"I wonder where we'll be in ten years' time?" Rachel muses.

"I just want to be at the Craft Centre in ten hours' time! Supposing Kit's starving..."

"Don't worry."

"I'm not worried."

"Nervous, then."

"I'm not nervous. What have I got to be nervous about?"

"Hallo there!" says a large, middle-aged woman with the face of a delighted baby. She fishes out some keys from her handbag.

"Are you our first?" she asks, smiling joyfully.

I nod, grinning like a goon.

"I'm the Registrar," she informs us, switching on the lights and waddling to her desk.

We sit down in front of her. She smiles. We smile. She shuffles some papers. I rap my fingers on the side of the chair.

"When are we going to start? I ask her, trying not to sound irritable.

"I assume we're waiting for your witnesses."

"What witnesses? Is this a court? Are we in the wrong place?"

"We need witnesses, Andy," says Rachel's voice beside me.

"We haven't got any witnesses!" I explain.

"I'm afraid you'll need witnesses to sign," says the Registrar.

"Oh well, never mind," I say. "We'll get married some other time."

"Hang on!" says Rachel, nipping out onto the street.

A young couple are walking towards us. Rachel apprehends them. They are ordinary-looking.

"Will you witness our wedding?" asks Rachel.

Their eyes light up.

"Now?" asks the man.

"Yes," says Rachel.

"Yes," says the lady.

"Yes," agrees the man.

"In here, it won't take long," Rachel assures them.

I smile so I won't have to say anything. Our witnesses are introduced to the beamingly maternal Registrar. Lots of jolly banter as names are filled in on forms.

"Not every day you get hauled off the street to be best man at a wedding!" quips the man witness.

It all floats slowly by me. The Registrar starts reciting words. The more words she says, the more strange I feel. As if all the fight has gone out of me and I'm incredibly emotional.

Zillions of couples have got married since time started and zillions more will get married when Rachel and I are dead and buried. Even though we're not in church and there is no choir, it's as if we're passing through Heaven's gates. Being counted. Two more sheep. Why am I doing this when I love Amanda?

"...for as long as you both shall live?"

She's looking at me.

"Baaah..."

The Registrar mouths "I do."

"I do."

My voice is quavery and cracked.

"And do you, Rachel Cecilia Florence..."

How many first names has she got? Feel like I'm going to pass out.

"Andy?"

Tiny voice in the darkness.

"Andy?"

Open my eyes. Christ, I'm on the floor.

"I'm alright! I'm alright!" I tell them, leaping nimbly to my feet. "Must've slipped.

Is it over?"

"We're supposed to kiss," murmurs my wife, shyly.

We kiss.

The witnesses giggle and the Registrar says "Ahhh." I feel sick.

"Sign here."

I sign.

"Need some air," I say. "Meet you outside."

Lean against the building. Hot sun now. Roar of traffic and pedestrians. Awash with people and noise and light. Rachel is thanking the witnesses.

"Come on Andy."

She leads me along Euston Road. Only thought is that I'm not thinking. Mid-air without a control panel.

I wonder if it's like Samson and Delilah. She's from the other side but he trusts her. But she cuts off his hair when he's asleep. And when he wakes up, he is no longer a hairy man. He is powerless.

"You won't tell anyone I fainted, will you Rachel?" I ask, realising we're nearly home.

"We're not telling anyone anything, are we?"

"Oh. No. I forgot."

She kisses me. I'm putty in her hands. That's me, putty.

"I'll get the car round. You get the lights up to Roy."

I watch her bum wiggle round the corner. What did she say? Lights, yes. Mr Small.

"Dingalingaling."

Shop full of bright lights and no-one in it.

"Good morning, Mr Parvin. Your purchases are all packed, ready for you, there."

It's Mr Small. I thought he was a standard lamp.

"I've included twenty-five foot of five amp cable. Should be enough. I've given you a ten percent discount being as it's going upstairs. The amount is...Well, there it is..."

He jabs an invoice. I fumble for my chequebook and fill it in without registering the amount. Hard enough to remember how to do my name.

"There's Mr Marsden-Hunt. He could help you up with it."

I swivel. Jules has seen me through the shop window. He enters with Beatrice.

"Hallo Andy," she purrs.

How can something so gorgeous be so close to me and I'm not allowed to jump on it?

"What's this?" asks Jules, picking up a box.

"Lights," I explain, picking up the other box. "Ceiling was unsafe. Anyhow, I'll soon have it fixed."

Mr Small lets us go through his private door, which leads out to the bottom of our staircase.

"But we're going to Scotland, aren't we?" asks Jules.

"Yes. But Roy is upstairs and..."

"Roy?" exclaims Beatrice.

Jules chuckles.

"Roy keeps sending Beatrice letters. Don't worry love. I'll protect you."

But Beatrice can't see the funny side.

"He seems to believe we're engaged," she tells me.

I'm puffing up the stairs behind her, obsessed by her bottom.

"He's out of his tree," confirms Jules, starting up the last flight.

Better not tell him that Roy's doing the lighting then. They hover on the landing.

"Where do you want this box put?" asks Jules.

I lead them into the living room. Lorraine is lying on a mattress with Roy asleep beside her.

"Hallo Beatrice," she says, cheerily. "Long time no see. Sorry we're still in bed. Roy was shifting sack-loads of plaster down the stairs till all hours and I've had food poisoning. That's why I'm off work. I work down Carnaby Street now, you know. I could get you a discount on the gear."

"Carnaby Street?" says Beatrice, as if it's shit on her shoes.

At the sound of her voice, Roy sits bolt upright. His eyes pass from Beatrice to Lorraine beside him.

"Arghhh!" he shrieks and leaps up, as if Beatrice seeing him in bed with Lorraine was an illusion.

"Bbbeatrice. I wasn't expecting you," he burbles, seemingly unaware that he is in the nude. "It's not the way it looks. Lorraine was upset. I was comforting her..."

He has knobbly knees, pigeon chest and a long droopy willy. I remember it from school. Roy Carmichael. Head boy. Smart, boring and always on the adults' side. And here he is, stark naked in front of four of his old school friends, blathering on about how great the ceiling's going to look, as if Beatrice cared.

Calmly, Lorraine gets up. She too is naked. She diverts attention, walking over to her clothes, which are gaudy and minuscule compared to her lumpy peasant body.

"What the fuck's going on up here?"

"Colin!" I say. "Where've you been?"

"I've been downstairs with Rachel, waiting for you lot. There's a traffic warden about to book her!"

"Oh. Shit."

I'd forgotten about Rachel.

"Come on everybody!" I yell, hurtling down the stairs.

"What kept you?" asks Rachel, upset.

There is a traffic warden, peering suspiciously at another illegally parked car.

"Sorry," I say, jumping in beside her. "Roy and Lorraine started jumping about naked and there was nothing we could do about it. Beatrice is here so there'll be a squash in the back. I think we should wait till we're out of London before we buy food." Rachel smiles at me, she's gooey with forgiveness. We're married. I forgot.

"Sorry," I repeat.

She's about to kiss me.

"Here they come!" I shout, warning her.

Beatrice, Jules and Colin get in the back. Rachel steers out into the traffic. We're off!

Although the pedestrians and other motorists don't know it, our car is full of special people. There's Colin, my brother. There's Jules, a leader of men. His girlfriend, Beatrice, the most beautiful thing on two legs. And - ssh - my wife.

Colin is excited about seeing the Centre of Creation and all the crafts.

"Freak's Kitchen's a big success. I can mark up the prices 300%. Still sell like hotcakes," he assures us.

I'm proud of my brother. He's making a good impression.

"I never knew you were so materialistic," observes Beatrice.

"Hah! If you'd seen valleys of opium and hash, you'd know that it's nothing to do with hippie-trippie love and peace. It's about dollars, backed up by weapons."

"Well, you would know, Colin," I say, turning round to support him. "You've been there. You've seen it."

"Money!" hisses Jules lasciviously, and starts fondling Beatrice.

From crawling along the Edgware Road, suddenly we're on the M1 and zooming along.

"This is great!" says Jules, coming up for air. "I feel as if we're all married."

As Rachel brings the car to a halt at the end of a dirt track, Amanda appears, wiping her hands on her dress. Seeing her freckly face and her tangle of russet hair, makes my heart sing.

Jules is first out. He and Amanda throw their arms around each other, and hug for ages. It's very emotional. We've all known each other a long time. Amanda and Beatrice hug and kiss each other, and study each other's faces, and squeal with delight, like kids at school. I love it when my friends are affectionate with each other. Amanda embraces Rachel and then Colin and then me.

"Let me show you the view from the hill, before the light fades," she says.

We follow her along a path, leaving the car open, unlocked, unguarded. You couldn't do that in London. It's a nice feeling.

"That's our vegetable garden," she tells us, pointing at a piece of scrubland with a broken fence. "Unfortunately, the animals keep getting in."

It's colder here than in London. I've got to be careful that my batik doesn't get caught in brambles. I should have worn something warmer but I like walking up a wild Scottish hill in an exotic swirly cloak. I feel brave and free and slightly asthmatic.

"There's a clearing beyond these trees. Jason's building a geodesic dome, using the original Buckminster Fuller plans. It's where I come to write."

The path continues through a wood. Rachel, Jules and Colin are striding along with Amanda. Beatrice is finding it heavier going in her pointy heels. I've got to hoik up my batik to keep up. I smile at Beatrice but she doesn't smile back.

I puff up behind the others, who are staring at a strange wooden construction, like an avant-garde sculpture. Slats of wood all patterned together in honeycombs that make up a dome shape about eight foot high. I'm gobsmacked.

"Jason wants to live here when it's finished," Amanda explains.

"He'll get wet," says Beatrice.

"It's fantastic," says Colin, full of admiration. "The skill. If the rest of the craftsmanship is anything like this, we'll make a fortune."

"Shall we go inside? It's a lovely feeling," says Amanda.

We file in. You can see the sky between the wooden triangles.

"Sssh," says Amanda.

We sssh. I can't hear anything.

"What is it?" asks Beatrice.

"Just the quiet, the peace," Amanda tells her.

It is peaceful and, looking up at the sky, it feels quite lonely. If I lived at the craft centre, I'd come up here and play violin, like Amanda comes here to write. Haven't played violin for ages. Hard to get time in London.

Amanda smiles at me. I smile at her.

"After you!" she says.

The others have already left. I step out and see the view.

"Crikey!" I exclaim. "I hadn't realised!"

We're on the top of a hill. There are hills and valleys all around us. Gorse and heather, their colours deepening as evening comes on. I can see the farmhouse and barns beneath us, and a silver stream winding down across the land.

It's a sombre landscape. Wuthering Heights and Lorna Doone. Makes me shudder. The others are already wandering down towards the trees. They're probably cold. Rachel is waiting for Amanda and me.

"Isn't it beautiful," I say.

Rachel smiles nervously. Perhaps she doesn't like the loneliness of it. Never mind, we'll soon be cosy and warm.

The path through the trees is a lot steeper than it seemed on the way up. Rachel and I have to cling onto branches and each other, so as not to slip. Amanda is used to it. Coming out of the wood, the sky has darkened. It's hard to see our way.

"Amanda? Why isn't there a proper sign up?" asks Jules. "It just says Woodfoot. We almost drove right past. I'd have thought Kit would have painted some glorious picture with 'Woodfoot Craft Centre' or 'Centre of Creation' or something emblazoned upon it. I mean, I'd have thought that would be the first thing you'd do. Otherwise, who's going to find you?"

"Life is harder here than you think, Jules. We're having to do three things at once. Build up the farm, produce the crafts and survive. Hard just to survive."

"Yes but..."

"Mind the stream."

We stop in our tracks. Amanda leads us along the side of the stream to where it's narrow enough to jump across. I'm last. It's hard to see but I strain my eyes and get over safely. Some drops of rain land on my head. Lucky we're nearly back. I can see the shape of the farmhouse.

"Jason!" Amanda calls.

A small wiry man with a lantern strides up to us.

"I could tell you'd arrived, by the car, but couldn't work out where you were. Hi, I'm Jason."

He embraces each of us. The way he embraces the girls is a bit sexy. Even my Rachel. He's got masses of frizzy dark hair, a face like a skinny old lion, with a scar across his cheek. Quite striking in the lantern light.

"We were up the hill, admiring your dome," Amanda tells him.

"Oh, wow! What did you think man?"

"It's beautifully constructed," says Jules.

"Constructed?" he mimics poshly. "It's fucking cosmic man!"

He laughs. I can't tell whether he's laughing at us or he's just jolly, despite the scar.

"Come and see the rest of my stuff man!"

We follow Jason through a surprisingly muddy farmyard.

"This used to be a cowshed," he explains as we enter. "Pippin! These are the guys from London. This is Pippin, my lady."

I recognise Pippin. She was dressed as a squaw at the opening party for Amazing Arts. She looks different. How come her face is so thin and her body is so fat? She's pregnant. Oh, with Jason.

"Pippin's into making candles."

The little cowshed is lit by three little white candles. It's like the nativity.

"Oh, those aren't my candles. They're from the shop. I haven't quite got the hang of it yet."

"There are some of yours in the house," Jason reminds her.

"Oh yes."

"Great," says Colin. "So where's your stuff then, Jason?"

"Everything you see man!" he says proudly, hanging his lantern from a beam and lighting up the shed.

We look around. There's a sort of table made of logs nailed together. And maybe those other logs could be used as chairs. I mean, you can sit on a log.

"I don't understand, Jason," says Colin, looking horrified. "I mean, the geodesic dome on the hill is so perfect. Each section sanded, polished, perfect. And this..."

"Primitive," says Jason nodding and grinning.

He steps over to the table-thing.

"See? Still got the bark on them!"

"So you've changed your style then, is that it?" asks Jules.

"Well, actually, Walt did most of the stuff on the hill."

"Oh," grunts Colin.

"It's awful what's happened to Walt," says Amanda. "Pippin's been to see him."

"Really? When?" asks Jules.

"I've just got back. I went to see Brian Jones' house. I had all these feelings and I knew I had to go there. To say goodbye. I couldn't get in the house but I saw the pool. Weird vibe. The locals say he was murdered."

"Brian Jones is dead?" I ask, shocked.

Everyone looks at me, as if I should have known. I look to Jules for confirmation. He nods, grimly.

"...If Kit had done the commission when I told him to," he observes.

He and Beatrice share a look. Another chance missed. I think about the small man in white, cutting his own bread in the kitchen. He gave me a drink. We popped pills together. I can see his sweet grin, as if we were experiencing something wonderful together...

"Anyway," says Pippin, her voice trembling with grief, "I knew that Walt's family were in Rye, so I went there. His parents didn't want to know me. Wouldn't let me in or anything. Told me he was in the hospital, but only relatives could visit. So I told the hospital I was his sister and they let me in. The ward was full of nutters. People mumbling, or standing like statues, or strutting around, proclaiming that they plan to invade Russia. Walt was sitting up in bed. He was really pleased to see me. I told him all the news and he told me that, when he gets out, he's going to do a special delivery service around the world for anyone who wants a letter or a parcel taken from one place to another. Like the postal service, only personal. Then he asked me if I had a car and told me he was trying to get his dad to set him up as a rally driver, which he's wanted to be since he was a boy. We got interrupted then, by some old lady selling invisible perfume. Walt started telling her he was going to start up a perfume factory, using only the finest rose petals and I burst into tears, and a nurse came over and asked me to leave. I tried to get in next day, but they'd found out he didn't have a sister, so I hitched back here."

It's raining on me. Raining hard. I must be under a hole. Look up - there's no roof at all!

"Run for it!" cries Amanda.

We run.

"The barn! It's much quicker! Turn right!" yells Jason.

We turn right and tumble into the barn.

There are three people in the barn. They are dressed up as medieval peasants. Or perhaps that's just their clothes. I recognise Zecky and Moodri. They were playing guitar and bongos at the Amazing Arts party and they're still playing them now. And Moodri still looks like she's just seen God.

Everyone's getting introduced. We don't know the third person. His face is all blobby and lopsided. Just needs a funny hat with bells. I've never seen anyone who looked more like a fool. Makes me almost giggle out loud. Actually, he looks a lot like me.

"Hallo," he says, coming over to embrace us. "My name is Ross."

Jules avoids him. Why is Jules so curt with people he has no time for? Ross is probably very intelligent.

Zecky and Moodri have jumped up, seeing us London hippies, and are proffering their wares.

"What is it?" asks Colin, vaguely irritated.

"A belt," Zecky informs him.

"It is a length of leather, I'll grant you."

"Look, simple - just wrap it round you and tie it in a knot."

I understand. Zecky is a leather-worker. He makes belts and these are they.

"Anything else you've done?" asks Colin, lightly.

"Not as yet. It's a question of finding the leather. I was only able to make these by cutting up my leather jacket."

That's what these belts are. You can see it now. A leather jacket cut into strips.

Moodri does tie-and-dye, which, looking at it, means taking a t-shirt and chucking it around in dirt.

Ross is a potter. His pots are in the house.

"Let's go there!" says Jules, enthusiastically.

He just wants to get in the warm, like I do.

Rain's pelting down. Halfway across the farmyard, Beatrice's shoes get sucked off in the mud and she falls over. I can't help laughing. Oo-er. Wrong thing to do. Rush over and yank her up.

"Yaaah!" she goes.

I think I've hurt her arm. It's alright, Jules is seeing to her.

"Oh how awful, Beatrice. Darling, let me help you in."

She's alright. Just a bit of mud. Suits her.

The kitchen is a frightful mess and leaking. Where's it coming from? There's two floors aren't there? It can't be leaking through two floors.

Pippin runs about lighting candles, which fizzle and melt lopsidedly. It's freezing. A terrible thought occurs to me. Perhaps there's nowhere warm. We've all got our hands in our pockets.

"It is a bit cold, but you get used to it," says Amanda, picking up the vibe. "When we arrived here, we discovered that the whole place had been decked out like some

council house. Fablon surfaces and formica panels as far as the eye could see. The first thing Kit and Walt did was to gut the place. No insulation. No gas or electricity."

"But why?" asks Jules, incredulous and sympathetic to her plight.

"Fuck knows. Baby tyrants, the both of them," says Amanda, sadly.

"Total self sufficiency!" proclaims Jason, proudly.

We look at him. He saunters over to a huge table, made of logs nailed together. One of his.

"Here, at the Centre of Creation, we are totally self sufficient," he says, patting the table and nodding sagely. "When the bomb drops, we'll be the ones who know how to survive."

"That reminds me," says Jules, "we've got some food in the car. We ought to get it in."

At the mention of food, everyone rushes bravely out into the rain. Except Beatrice, who's going to change into a sack, kindly provided for her by Moodri.

We've done a huge Tesco shop. Amanda, Jason, Ross, Pippin and Zecki's eyes light up with joy. I grab as many plastic bagfuls as I can manage and stumble back through the rain.

There's a candle in a window. It's floating about. Two eyes next to it, peering out. Kit!

One of Ross's bags splits. Comestibles all over the kitchen floor. I like Ross. He's even more goonish than me. He makes me feel I could be attractive to women.

Beatrice is sitting on a log, shuddering in her sack. Zecky is chucking wood in a fireplace. Moodri is boiling water on a small black stove. Perhaps we will be warm.

"Where should we put the food?" asks Jules, staring at it, piled high on the creaking table.

"Get it out!" screams a voice from hell.

Kit bursts in.

"Get it out! We're vegetarians! Get it out!"

Nobody moves. It's frightening.

"Get it out!!" he insists.

Still no-one moves. He rushes over and upends the table which collapses back into logs, sending all the food flying like a fountain through the room. Spuds kamikaze into trifles. A leg of lamb hits Beatrice in the ribs. It's not her day.

Kit's noticed her. He stops, transfixed.

"We'll put the meat in the boot of the car," Jules suggests, calmly. "Is that okay, Kit?"

Kit turns on Jules.

"You think you're so superior, don't you, with your vacuous magazine, proclaiming your vacuous ideas. I used to respect you Jules. But you've always been weak. Always vain. A parasite on creation! And you, Beatrice, whom I loved ...Ha! Look at you, covered in shit like the shit you are!"

"You pretentious little cretin!" she screams. "Hiding away in your pathetic little craft centre. What a joke. Barren, north-facing hillside, no-one in their right minds would want. Ugly, useless crafts, no-one in their right minds would buy. And you expect to be taken seriously?"

"Hang on, Beatrice," says Jules. "These are early days..."

"Don't give me 'early days'! You were the one who said 'we don't need money to start a magazine!' Oh no? How many copies did our first issue sell?"

"I don't know," Jules stammers, surprised and hurt by her attack. "It's not the point. The point is we're promoting the work of young writers and..."

"Thirty-nine! Nationwide! And the second issue? Forty-three."

"It's an improvement," quips Jules, trying to be light-hearted

"Oh yes? It seems to me I've fallen in with a bunch of hopeless losers. I was doing better before."

"Beatrice..."

She ignores him and fixes her eyes on Kit again.

"As for you saying you loved me, as far as I'm concerned you're a psychotic little fantasist and I've always avoided you like the plague!"

Kit leaps at her.

"Get out of my house, you bitch. You're trespassing. Get out or I'll fucking kill you..."

Amanda stands in his way and gets hit instead. Having hit his girlfriend he keeps on pummelling her as if he meant to.

We rush to pull him off. Jules gets there first.

"Kit. ...Stop it, please. ...I love you," begs Amanda.

"Love?" he shrieks. "All those stupid love songs you write. I know who they're for."

"They're for you, Kit. I promise," she sobs.

Kit twists out of Jules' grasp, punches me on the nose and storms off. As the door slams shut, all the candles go out. I'm in the dark. My nose hurts.

Pippin manages to relight one. Jason mumbles something about clearing up his tools and slopes off. Pippin waddles after him pregnantly. Zecky, Moodri and Ross, looking embarrassed, file out after them. I realise I've trod in a tub of ice-cream.

"Well I'm not staying here," says Beatrice. "Jules? Take me to a hotel."

“Hang on a second,” he replies. “This is a serious situation. We can’t just walk out.”

“Please don’t go,” says Amanda. “I’ve got you a bed ready. I’ll show you.”

Jules coaxes Beatrice.

“Please.”

They go.

“I’m going to kip here, by the stove,” says Colin.

That leaves Rachel and me.

“Let’s have a scout about,” she suggests, picking up a candle.

Rachel’s good in adversity. I’ve no idea what we’re scouting for, but she finds it. A dry patch in the living room and a rug for a blanket.

We cuddle to keep warm. Cuddle and kiss and rub our legs together. A door clicks. Amanda passes through. Seeing us, she gives a little frightened look and disappears. I can hear her clearing up in the kitchen.

Rachel rolls on top of me. It’s the first night of our marriage.

Rachel's bouncing around on top of me, as if we're making love. As if, having ripped off my clothes, we'll be inflamed by marital passion. I'm freezing, on a hard stone floor under a stinky old rug. Rachel can bump and grind all she likes, my willy is too cold to come out to play.

A door clicks. Rachel rolls off me. Amanda passes through again, this time with a candle, and without looking.

Amanda is the first person I ever made love with. I won't let myself think about it. She's with Kit now. That was her choice. Or was it because I didn't turn up for the gig, and she thought I didn't care? Anyway, can't be helped now.

Her footsteps die away. Rain pelting down. No other sound.

You could live up here in this wilderness and forget the time, the date, the year. I was born on June the third, 1950. I'll be 50 in the year 2000, if I live that long. I'm nineteen. Must've had a birthday this year. I think I was just working in the office.

Freezing. Want to snuggle up to Rachel but don't want her to start all that sexy stuff again. I'm all upset. Could put my clothes back on, but it might seem like I'm rejecting her. After all, we're married.

Saturday, thirteenth of July 1969. The day I got married. I wonder how I'll remember it when I'm older. I'll be somewhere else, looking back.

I'm desperate for the loo. But where is it? How will I find it in the dark? Got to do something. Get my clothes on. Where are they?

Here. Okay, just get them on. Hang on. Perhaps I should just tiptoe through the kitchen and go to the loo outside. Wouldn't want my clothes to get wet. No point wearing clothes.

But what if someone saw me naked? Anyway, it wouldn't be very nice for them to wake up in the morning and find my turds just outside the back door.

Can't wait. Find loo. Clothes on quick. Don't know if I'm shaking with cold, or the pressure of holding it in. Find the door Amanda went through. Find the knob. Feel my way along a corridor. Feel doors, but which?

Flickering light under the door at the end. Either someone's up and they'll direct me, or they keep a light on in the loo. That would be sensible.

Knock to be polite. Wait. Knock again. Can't wait.

Wow! Hundreds of paintings all round the walls, lit by candles. Kit sitting at an easel, painting, ignoring me.

"Wow!" I say. "It's Aladdin's cave!"

Landscapes of moorlands and hills. Portraits of friends and people I don't know, all of them with piercing, helpless eyes.

"Oh Kit. I don't mind that you hit me. Nothing changes anything. I really love you. You don't have to love me back. I'm not asking anything from you. I'm just telling you. Do you remember when you came to my house, when we were twelve? I was supposed to meet you at the bus-stop where the train used to cross the road. I thought you'd be late but when I arrived, you'd been there for ages on your own, playing some game between the railway lines. Did you have a scooter?"

"Skates."

"Skates! Yes! We went skating. Anyway. I knew then, that you were special to me. So anyway, sorry I interrupted you. I need the loo."

He leaps from his chair and points to a door halfway down the hall on the left.

"Thanks," I say.

He throws his arms about me and grips me tighter than I've ever been gripped. I grip him just as tightly.

He holds his door open until I'm in the loo. Clothes off and bum on seat in one desperate movement. There's a bath beside me and rain is beating into it. Window's open. No, there's no window. No toilet paper. Find a bit of newspaper. Just want to lie down now.

Stumble back along the corridor and cuddle up beside Rachel. Please let me sleep and, when I wake, everything will be alright. Like Mummy says, tomorrow is another day...

"Andy! We're leaving! Andy! Wake up!"

"Colin?"

"Wake up Andy. We're leaving."

"When?"

"Now. Get your gear on. I'll meet you at the car."

"Oh. Right."

Rachel's not beside me. It's light. Is it late? Still raining though. Where are my clothes? I'm wearing them. Sandals? Okay. Where's the car? Out through the kitchen. No-one in the kitchen. Run out through the rain. Jules is in the driving seat and Beatrice is beside him.

"Where's Rachel?" I ask.

"Get in!" barks Jules.

I get in the back. Colin gets in the other side. Jules starts the engine.

"Where's Rachel?" I ask Colin.

"Coming."

Jules turns the car round. Rachel gets in Colin's side. I'm not beside her. Car lurches down the track, skids out onto the road and Jules puts his foot down.

I can still speak to Rachel. We're not supposed to be married, but we are together. Just lean forward and speak across Colin.

"Hi Rachel. Did you have a nice sleep?"

She doesn't reply. Doesn't even look at me. Cross with me.

"Rachel?"

Jules swerves round a corner. My teeth smash into the back of Beatrice's seat. Excruciating. No-one seems to notice my agony.

"I think I've broken my front teeth. They're wobbling!"

Colin notices.

"Better sit back," he suggests.

I sit back. We're going so fast, the car is rattling.

"Why are we leaving so fast?" I ask.

No-one answers. But I want to know.

"I know there was an argument last night, but I thought..."

Colin leans and murmurs in my ear.

"When Beatrice woke up, Kit was standing above her with a knife."

What does it mean? Was he going to kill her? Or was he just...? I want to ask, but there's a terrible feeling in the air. We're going so fast and I'm frightened.

"If Kit were happy...But he's not!" blurts Jules, his voice all upset.

"Oh do stop it!" snarls Beatrice.

"I mean, you could understand some wretched artist going down the tubes because he couldn't sell his work. But that's why we set up Amazing Arts. We've made him successful for fuck's sake!"

"He's psychotic. You've said so yourself. He needs professional help. It's Amanda you should be concerned for. You should have got her to leave."

"I know. I tried. She wouldn't come. What was I going to do? Abduct her?"

Bells of Dumfries ring out, eight o'clock as we squeal through.

"Well I can't rely on the Centre of Creation, that's for sure," Colin mutters bitterly.

"I mean, I haven't spent the last three months building a shop to sell that pile of garbage. Those belts! I almost pissed myself! No. I'll advertise. I'll sell stuff sale or return. Import trinkets from abroad. There must be companies. I'll ask Lovely Rita. Hey, Jules? You know Athena Reproductions? Do they only have their own shops or could I get a concession?"

"Just shut the fuck up," growls Jules.

Silence. I want to be beside Rachel. I want to sort it out. Have to do it when we get home. It's funny. Time can just stop. It can stop in the middle of the night when you're cold and can't sleep. It can stop when you're hurtling along and the scenery is like wallpaper. If I were playing it on the violin, there would be a very fast rhythm and, above it, a very slow tune...

...The engine's stopped.

"Andy's asleep."

"Wake him up."

"Andy? We're here."

My eyes blink open, but my head's like a huge pillow. Colin needs me to get out. Fumble for the handle and almost fall out. Hold onto the side of the car and try to get my bearings. Mr Small in his white coat, rushing out of the shop towards us. How come his shop's open? It's Sunday isn't it?

"Into the shop. Quick. Follow me."

The sign says closed. We file in. He locks the door.

"There's been a fire," he says. "Your friend has been badly burnt."

"Who?" asks Jules, gobsmacked.

"Roy Carmichael."

Roy.

"What happened?" asks Rachel.

"As far as we can make out, he was wiring in the lights. Lord knows what he did."

"Where is he?" I ask, panic rising.

Jules interrupts.

"How do you know all this?"

"His girlfriend told the police."

"Who?"

Mr Small checks a scrap of paper.

"Lorraine," I tell Jules.

"That's it, Lorraine Phelps," Mr Small confirms.

"Is she hurt?" I ask.

He shakes his head.

"She got out. Mr Carmichael tried to extinguish the fire. Stupid boy."

Mr Small is upset.

"Where's Roy?" I ask. "Is he alright? Will he...?"

"He's in intensive care. Middlesex Hospital. Just up the road. Lucky it was so close, I suppose."

"When did it happen?" asks Rachel.

"Last night."

"You weren't here then."

"I was called."

Rachel's looking a bit green. I put my arm around her.

"How bad is the damage?" asks Jules.

"Pretty bad. One room and the rafters above."

"We better have a look," says Jules, moving to the door.

"You can't, I'm afraid. The police have shut the whole floor off until it's been inspected. Could be unsafe."

"How long will that be? I mean, we've got a business to run."

Mr Small turns on Jules.

"You want to get your priorities right!" he snaps.

No-one moves.

"Ttt! Kids!" he mutters, unlocking the shop door.

"I hope your friend is alright," he says, a look of worry flitting across his crumpled face. "Cheerful chap. He'll pull through."

We file out.

"Are you driving back to Mum and Dad's?" Jules asks his sister.

Rachel turns her back on him.

"Aren't we going to visit Roy?" I ask.

"No point in us all trooping down there. Actually, Beatrice and I have to get back to the magazine. Hey, Rachel, can I borrow your car? - If you're not coming. I promise I'll get it back to you. Colin? Do you want a lift?"

"Er, no, it's only Covent Garden. I'll leg it. See you guys."

Suddenly everyone's gone except Rachel and me. She starts walking. But the hospital's the other way.

"The hospital's the other way."

She doesn't stop. I catch up with her.

"Sorry about last night. It was our wedding night. I love you. Honestly. It just happened all wrong."

We walk.

"Would you like to travel across the Pacific?" she asks.

"Yes."

"We could fly to Singapore and catch a boat from there."

"It sounds wonderful."

"It is. The sea is as full of islands, as there are stars in the sky. From Singapore we can go to Sumatra, Borneo, the Philippines, the Solomans, New Hebrides, Fiji, Tonga, Tahiti, Pitcairn, and the Galapagos Islands, all the way to South America.

"Wow!"

"Shall we do it?"

"Yes!"

"Really Andy?"

"Yes. Not now of course."

"Why?"

"Well the office has just burnt down."

She's not listening. She's quickened her step.

"I mean, I think your idea is great and I want to do it. But I can't just leave Amazing Arts in its darkest hour, and Roy in hospital and go gallivanting across a whole pile of islands, can I? I mean, be reasonable, Rachel. I mean, why don't you stop walking away from me and face me for a change!"

She faces me.

"I want to be on my own for a while!" she announces and stomps off across the road into some public gardens.

I dodge a motor scooter and follow her.

"Please Rachel, please..."

"Why can't you respect my wishes?" she barks.

A man sitting on a bench hears her. I'm embarrassed publicly.

"We're married now. I love you. I can't just let you keep leaving me."

"Do you mean that, now we're married, you own me and I can't do what I want?"

"No! No, I don't mean that..."

"Well, what I want is some time on my own."

"Like half an hour or something?"

"Yes. Half an hour."

"Oh. Okay. So, if I go away and come back in half an hour, you'll be here, will you?"

"Yes."

"Right. Well, I'll hang about over there then."

"No. Either you go away or I go away."

"I'll go. It'll be fine. Okay? Back in half an hour!"

What am I going to do? I should visit Roy. But what if I get there and he needs me and by the time I get back to the gardens, Rachel's gone? Can't chance it. Oh this is ridiculous. Run back and tell her. Make her see reason.

She's got something in her hands. What is it? Seeing me, she shoves her hands behind her back.

"What have you got there?" I demand.

"Nothing."

"Show me."

She won't. I grab hold of her and try to force her hands apart. She twists out of my grasp. Slowly she brings her hands round and shows me. Nothing.

"I'm sorry Rachel. I thought you might have a knife or something. I got it into my head that you were planning to top yourself."

"What if I was?"

"Rachel. Please."

"When are you going to stop treating me like Jules' little sister and realise that I'm a human being? When are you going to give me some space? We agreed that I could be alone for a while. Is that too much to ask?"

I walk away. Can't have Rachel thinking I don't think she's equal. The man on the bench is still there. He looks like a dodgy character. Can't say that though. I don't

want to leave the gardens, but I'll have to. Just walk around the area. Use the time to think. Plan things.

"Excuse me, have you got the time, please?" I ask.

Posh lady. Looks petrified at the sight of my Balinese cloak.

"Four thirty-five," she says and passes on quickly.

Four thirty-five. So, back in the gardens by five past five. Five past five. Shouldn't be hard to remember. Two fives. Not five twos!

Okay. So what's the plan? Either Goodge Street is habitable, in which case, everything's fine. Or we're looking for new offices. Maybe we could move in with the magazine. Or we could move above Colin's shop. Good to be in Covent Garden, above Freak's Kitchen.

Yes. I could interest Colin in running Amazing Arts and, once it was set up, Rachel and I could get away to all those islands. So that when we got back, the business would be tickety-boo.

Yes. That's good. I can hear Dad telling me "You've got a good head on those shoulders of your Andy, when you choose to use it."

What would Dad do if Mum was unhappy? She is unhappy. She's always unhappy. Hang on. Where am I? What's the time?

"What's the time?"

Man crosses the road.

"What?" he asks.

"Time."

"No idea mate. Some time after five I should think."

"Thanks."

After five? He can't be right. But it could've been fifteen minutes. And if I've been walking away, it'll take fifteen minute to get back. Where am I? Street name. There. Montague Place. Means nothing. Just go back the way I've come. Run.

What if she says she's decided she doesn't want me anymore? What'll I say to make things alright? There are the railings. Over the road and into the gardens. Where is she? Look around. She's not here. But she promised. I don't know where to look, which direction to turn in, what to do...

"She ran off," says the man on the bench.

I charge over to him, snorting like a bull, trying to catch my breath.

"What?"

"Asked me for directions to the Middlesex Hospital and ran off," the man confirms.

"Middlesex! I get it. Thanks!"

Middlesex Hospital. She's gone to see Roy. Down this street. Run. If I miss her at the Middlesex, I'll have to go to her parents' place. And if she's not there, then what? This is my one chance.

Down Goodge Street, past our burnt offices on the left. Middlesex on the right. In through the doors and collapse at the desk, wheezing.

"Roy Carmichael. Where?"

"Carmichael, Roy. Yes. Burns Unit."

Signs everywhere. Burns Unit. Down there.

"Excuse me. You can't visit. Come back!"

Run. Let her call the alarm. Burns Unit. Here. Through the swing doors. A nurse.

"Roy Carmichael. Where is he?" I ask.

The nurse smiles at me, warmly. But I haven't got time for niceties.

"Where is he?"

"Calm down."

She's young and matronly.

"Are you asthmatic?" she asks.

I nod. Her sympathetic smile calms me down. She leads me to a curtain, which she opens. We're looking through a window into a small room. There's an almost naked figure spread-eagled on a bed. His face is smeared with thick white cream. His hands are also smeared, and covered in clear plastic bags. It's Roy.

"You can't actually go in. Risk of infection," the nurse explains. "But you're not to worry. He was lucky. His burns are not deep. His girlfriend has been in all day, bless her."

"His girlfriend."

"Lorraine. Do you know her?"

"Yes. Yes. Oh good. So he's alright then. Listen, you haven't seen another girl have you? Blond with green tips?"

"No."

"Are you sure?"

Stupid. Of course she's sure. Where then?

"Thanks anyway," I say, going.

Why aren't nurses the most famous people in the world? They should be.

How do you get out of this hospital? Old lady wheeling herself along the corridor. Ask her.

"How do you get out of this hospital?"

"You get well!" she answers, and then cackles like a mad thing.

Here's the entrance. Sun's going down. I'll never find Rachel now. Give up. Just go home. Crawl up in bed.

So Roy's alright. That's good. And Lorraine is going to look after him. Thank goodness for the good women in the world.

Nearly there. Get my key ready. Oh shit. I can't go in. It's burnt.

"Andy!"

Rachel running towards me. She's been waiting outside the house. Run towards her. We fall into each other's arms. Oh God, thank God, oh God. I'll never laugh again at those scenes in films where lovers run towards each other. Oh God.

"Oh Rachel. What happened? Why weren't you in the gardens? The man said you went to the hospital."

"I did."

"Why? You didn't go to visit Roy."

"No."

"Then why?"

"Promise you won't tell anyone?"

"I promise."

"I took a load of pills."

"I knew you had something in your hands."

"The moment I'd swallowed them, I realised I didn't want to die, so I ran to the hospital and they put me on a stomach pump. I said it was an accident but they knew."

The thought that Rachel could be dead. Can't bear it. Hug and hug her. She asked me if I'd travel across the Pacific with her. I've got to make a decision. It's either Rachel or Amazing Arts. I can't do both. I'm married to Rachel. My first loyalty must be to her.

"I'll go to the Pacific with you, Rachel."

"Will you? Really? Now?"

She's overjoyed. If this is what it takes to make her happy, it's fine.

"Yes. But how do we get there? I haven't got any money."

"I've thought of that. All we have to do, Andy, is tell our parents that we're married and we want to go on a honeymoon."

"Really? Might work with your parents. ...I've already borrowed two grand from mine."

"Where is it?"

I point at the flat high above.

"Burnt."

“Never mind. They’ll forgive you. They’ll just be happy that you’re married.”

“I doubt it.”

“I’ve never met your parents. Let’s visit them now. Here’s a taxi. Taxi!”

Taxi pulls up.

“I haven’t got any cash on me,” I admit.

“It’s fine,” she assures me, patting her handbag. “Jump in!”

The sight of my parents' house fills me with confusion. What will Rachel think? Mum and Dad's place looks like it's made of balsawood compared to the Marsden-Hunt's gothic fortress in Kensington, or their open-plan emporium on Hayling Island, with its miles of patios and pools.

Rachel pays the taxi driver. A curtain flutters in the living room. Dad's face peers out. He's heard the humming of the cab. I wave. He gives a look of happy surprise and the curtain falls back into place.

I can hear him in the hall as we walk up the path.

"Dorothy! It's Andy!"

Dad unlocks all the latches, chains and bolts. It takes forever. What do they have that's worth stealing, apart from an airing cupboard full of toilet rolls, bought in panic when there was a strike? I smile at Rachel, embarrassed.

The door opens. Mum is coming down the stairs.

"I thought you meant he was on the phone!" she says, crossly.

Seeing Rachel beside me, Mum transforms. She and Dad smile like Cheshire cats and welcome us in. Grin on my face too, giving me face-ache.

"This is Rachel," I mumble.

Mum immediately shakes Rachel's hand.

"I've heard so much about you," gushes Rachel.

I haven't told her anything about them. Are we here to play some merry, polite game? It won't work. When we say we're married, they'll hit the roof.

Dad welcomes us into the little plastic lounge, clean and bright, nowhere to hide.

"Pull that couch forward Rachel, would you?" asks Mum. "Only it'll melt on the radiator otherwise. That's it. And the other side."

"Excuse us, you two," says Dad, beaming at Rachel. "There's just one more figure that I can't account for, Dorothy. Twenty-seven pounds on February the ninth. What was it?"

"Not now, Cyril!" Mum exclaims, as if she's never met such a fool in her life. "And for goodness sake switch off that damn television set."

She's disguising her annoyance with that sweet, singy-songy, I'm-a-nice-person voice she reserves for guests.

Dad reaches out and takes Rachel's hand in his.

"It isn't that I put television before you," he explains. "But this is the Liverpool-Manchester match. Perhaps if I just turn the volume down..."

"Turn it off!" hisses Mum, a crack appearing in the facade. "And leave Rachel alone. She doesn't want to be mauled by you. Now. Tea? Coffee? Little biscuits?"

Dad yawns and stretches back in his chair.

"So. How goes it?"

"Yes, tell us everything," says Mum, disappearing into the kitchen.

"Amazing Arts solvent yet?" asks Dad.

"No, it's burnt down," I reply.

He can't go mad in front of Rachel, but he doesn't even react. Just nods, ruefully and rubs the stubble on his chin.

"What do you intend to do?" he asks.

"Well, there's a lot to tell you but perhaps Mum ought to hear."

"Oh. Yes. So how was the journey here?"

"We came in a taxi."

"That must have been pretty expensive."

"It's alright. Rachel paid."

Mum appears with a tray of tea and eight digestive biscuits on a plate, each with half a glacé cherry stuck on top. Special.

"How is your business doing?" she asks me.

"It's burnt down," says Dad.

"Don't be ridiculous Cyril! ...Biscuit Rachel?"

"It has burnt down, Mum."

Mum is aghast. She sits down and braces herself.

"When? Was anyone hurt?"

"Last night. We weren't there. Only one person was hurt. Roy. You know him Mum. Roy Carmichael. He was Head Boy."

"Yes. Working class lad. Nice manners though."

"Was he burned?" asks Dad, quietly.

"Yes. He's in hospital. I've seen him. The nurse says it isn't too bad."

"But what about your business, your belongings, your violin, my father's clock?"

Mum is winding herself up into a panic of hysterical anxiety.

"I don't know. The police have sealed the place off. Listen, Mum, Dad. We're here for a reason. There's something we've got to tell you."

Silence, but for the ticking of the thermostat.

"I know we should have told you before, but yesterday Rachel and I got married."

No gap. No moment of apprehension. Mum and Dad rise as one, twirl and embrace us with tears of joy. Dad and Rachel. Mum and me. Mum and Rachel. Dad and me. Like a courtly dance.

Mum whips Rachel upstairs to search out her mother's wedding ring. Dad and I turn on the box and catch the end of the match.

I'm outside my body, looking on. My body knows how to react, how to be pleasant and helpful, without consulting me. It embraces Rachel and shares the joy of her new wedding ring. It rattles on about the state of English football with Dad. It helps Mum to get the supper made, while my mouth praises Colin's remarkable determination to make his shop a big commercial success.

"Let's hope he doesn't become too much of a capitalist!" quips Mum cheerily, secretly hoping that he does.

The only blip is Dad pouring a tub of cream all over the salad.

"I distinctly heard you say, dress the salad," he insists.

"I didn't say pour on half a pint of cream!"

"You handed me the tub and told me to dress the salad. I thought it was salad cream."

"It is now," I venture.

"What should I do with it?" asks Rachel, trying to defuse the situation.

"It'll have to go in the bin!" shrieks Mum.

"Why don't we put it out in the garden?" asks Dad.

Silence. Mum stares at him.

"In the garden Cyril?" she repeats quietly, with tremendous control. "Might I ask why?"

Dad shuffles uneasily.

"For the birds?"

Rachel collapses in silent mirth. Mum likes this. Mum would have loved a daughter. She starts laughing too and makes us Welsh rarebit instead. Dad opens a bottle of wine and I realise the need to get very drunk, very quickly. Now I am not only out of my body, I am also out of my mind.

Vaguely aware of sitting down to eat. Vaguely aware of sitting on the sofa, as Rachel and Mum pore over an atlas, conjuring up exotic islands in the Pacific.

"How did you two first meet?" Rachel asks, currying favour.

"O-ho-ho!" says Mum, as if it's a naughty secret. "We met at Teacher's Training College after the war. Cyril was always flirting with the lasses and horsing about with the lads. It was during a debate, when he gave his views on social justice, that I sat up. Of course I didn't know he was a Jew and couldn't even change a lightbulb!"

"We had a different system in Austria."

"You've been in this country for over twenty years, Cyril! - He tries to screw them in. Until they break. Every time."

"How did you come to live in England?" Rachel asks.

"All the Jews had to try to escape. My brother Freddy was the first in our family," says Dad, with a lump in his throat.

My eyes spring with tears. I would've had an uncle, if Freddy hadn't died.

"He joined the Zionists. My mother got out next, then me. Finally my father."

"Wasn't he caught?" I ask, slurring my words and feeling as if I'm about to loll sideways on the sofa.

"No, it wasn't like that. In any case..."

He doesn't want to talk about it.

"...I joined the British Army, Pioneer Corps. After the war we were given the choice, whether to go back to Austria, or to become a naturalised British citizen."

"It must be hard, being a different person, in a different life," Rachel observes.

"It makes no difference," says Mum, jokily. "He'd be a great big baby in any life!"

"Aren't we all 'great big babies', in a way?" muses Dad, disarmingly.

"You speak for yourself," says Mum. "I'm not a great big baby."

She is. Will Rachel and I end up being like them? Or some other uneasy compromise?

Vaguely aware of a kerfuffle and Rachel kneeling beside me, explaining that I'm drunk and that Mum and Dad are fixing up a bed for us.

Good.

Rachel's parents, Sonia and Ralph, are still in the process of moving in. We climb over packing cases in the dark baronial hall.

HOW COME THEY'RE STILL UNPACKING? AT THE MAG LAUNCH PARTY, THE PLACE WAS FURNISHED, WASN'T IT?

Rachel yells "Mum? Dad?"

I can hear a piano being tuned and, looking through a doorway, see Sonia reflected in a large ornate mirror. At the same time, Ralph comes trundling down the stairs and heads straight towards me.

"You! I've been meaning to ask you. What's your name? Kit or Andy?"

"Andy."

"Well someone around here's lying. Anyway, I could do with a hand getting these upstairs."

"Actually Dad," purrs Rachel, "we've got something to tell you."

"Righteeho. Fire away. Andy, grab that packing case. It goes third floor front. No, not that one. Next to it."

I stared at the huge square case. Nothing for a huge bloke like Ralph, who has spent his life lifting great lumps of stone. I want to help but...

"Come on. Look lively!" he cries throwing a crate on his shoulder.

Find myself struggling up the stairs behind him.

"You know why she wants this bloody place?"

"Who? Sonia?" I wheeze.

"To impress her arty friends. It isn't as if we don't have a bloody great big house in Hayling already. She's got her own studio. Well, you've seen it. But no. She's got to have a place in London, where she can hold court. It's going to bankrupt me. I mean, she does alright with her piano. The recordings are a dead loss. The concert tours make a bit, but it doesn't pay the rent, if you know what I mean. What with the bloody Labour Party and their bloody taxes, I'm going to have to all but triple my business, just to keep afloat. Dump it down there lad. What's this?"

I drop the case where he says and lean on it, huffing and puffing. Ralph discovers crates, which have been delivered to the wrong room.

"Bloody removal men. They're labelled 'third floor back', clear as day. Help me shift them next door. Bloody house."

I need to buy time to get my breath back.

"Why did you buy it?"

He stares down at me, a dark look in his eye.

"Sonia dragged me to this auction. Just to look. Well, it was so bloody boring, I nodded off. When I woke up, I found she'd bought this huge bloody house. Come on!"

Ralph lurches out with a couple of crates. I stagger after him with one. The idea of him waking up to find he's bought a house makes me giggle to myself. The thought that Sonia has dared to buy it...

The edge of the crate catches on the door-frame. I lose my grip. It smashes to the floor and splinters open. Shit.

"You bloody fool!" barks Ralph. "Why don't you look where you're going?"

"S-s-sorry," I splutter.

He runs over and rummages through the contents.

"We're okay. No breakables. Sorry I shouted. Only the removal men put a dent in Sonia's Bechstein and I'm the one who gets the stick. She won't talk to me, you know."

I don't know what to say. I look at him in wonder.

"No, I bought her a bloody great house in Kensington and she won't even speak to me. I mean, I'm the money. Sonia's family are just a bunch of gypsies. But cunning, mind you."

"That's tough."

"You know why she did it? Why she tricked me?"

"You said, er, to impress her arty friends."

"Yes, that. But there's more."

Ralph sits back on a packing case in the vast gloomy room. He is going to confide in me and there is nothing I can do about it.

"I was going to leave Sonia. A few years ago I started doing business out in California. Enough to open up an office in L.A. Roof gardens, ornamental gardens, fountains, grottos, gazebos, terraces, barbecues and the inevitable swimming pools. Very lucrative.

"It's a different life out there Andy. Laid back. Sonia thinks they're a bunch of phoneys, but you get phoneys everywhere. Anyhow I met someone. Tess. She's separated from her husband. Her children are adults. We discussed it. I mean, my kids are grown up and Sonia has her concerts and her friends. She doesn't need me anymore."

I am shocked. I'd never have imagined. But I can see how California might suit a physical man like Ralph.

"Did you tell Sonia?"

"She was fine about it. Surprised me. Of course it was all a sham. Should have realised. Next thing I know, we're at that bloody auction. I'm a bloody fool!"

He stands up, looks around, scratches his head and, about to head off downstairs, notices me gawping.

"Well she's tied up all my money in this bloody house hasn't she! I can't leave! I'll tell you this Andy. Never trust a woman. Never. Not as far as you can bloody throw her."

Footsteps up the stairs. Rachel appears.

"Oh there you are," she says and turns to me. "Andy, have you..."

"No."

"Dad? We've got something to tell you."

"Fire away."

"No. We ought to tell you and Mum together."

"Fat chance of that. Oh."

Ralph stops in his tracks, looks from Rachel to me.

"Oh. I see. Well, we better go downstairs then."

Sonia is engaged in a heated exchange with the piano tuner when she sees Rachel.

"Rachel my dear. Apparently it's going to cost two hundred and fifty pounds to repair. Can you imagine? Bloody Ralph. Not only did he allow ordinary removal men to move my piano, he didn't even oversee them. Result? They drop it."

Ralph interrupts.

"We're fully insured..."

"It's a bloody Bechstein Ralph. Trouble is, you wouldn't know a Bechstein from a heap of gravel."

"Hang on..."

"No. You hang on. I've a concert on Tuesday. How am I going to prepare for it?"

The piano tuner coughs and holds out his business card.

"We can supply a piano in the meantime, Mrs Marsden-Hunt. Not a Bechstein of course but..."

"Tonight? You can get me a piano tonight?"

"No, not tonight but first thing in the...?"

"Well how is that going to help? I've got Colin Davis due here in half an hour. How are we going to work through the Rachmaninov on this?"

She bangs out a chord on the piano. Terrible twanging. Broken strings.

"How?"

Ralph takes the business card from the exceedingly nervous piano tuner and glowers at his wife.

"I don't know and I don't care. But!" His eyes flicker from Rachel to me to Sonia. "Rachel and Andy here have something they want to tell us."

Sonia's eyes flicker from Rachel to me to Ralph.

There's a tapping sound. I turn to see the tuner tapping round some boxes with a cane. Realising that he is blind and can't find his way out, I shepherd him around obstacles to the front door.

"I can manage from here," he assures me.

I watch him tap his way down the steps and off along the street.

Back in the room, Sonia is sitting on a leather sofa, poised and smiling, Ralph beside her, for all the world like a happy couple.

"But that's wonderful my dear," she says turning her smile on me.

Ralph leaps up and shakes my hand.

"Well done!"

"Oh. Thanks Mr Marsden-Hunt."

"Think nothing of it. So. Married. You old so and so!"

He puts his arm around me and scoops me out, into the kitchen, where he rips the lid off a crate.

"Forget all that stuff I said about not trusting women," he mumbles.

"So I should trust women?"

"Yes."

"As far as I can throw them?"

"Don't go throwing Rachel about. She's my daughter. Whiskey?"

He pulls out a bottle, hands it to me and rummages around for glasses.

"No thanks. Whiskey makes me cough. Haven't touched it since a certain day when..."

"Since you lads stole my Scotch, you mean."

"Yes and Jules got expelled."

"Served him bloody well right, if you ask me. Never mind. All in the past. Take those through and ask Rachel and Sonia what they want."

When Rachel sees me, she smiles nervously and whizzes past me into the kitchen.

"Andy," says Sonia. "Congratulations."

"Thanks."

"Of course, Rachel was brought up on Hayling Island. It's a secluded world. She won all the sailing trophies. It's hard to imagine. She was queen."

I nod. She's telling me what a prize I've got.

"I feared for Rachel when she decided to give it all up and come to London. And rightly so, as it's turned out. She's not been happy."

"I know," I say, grateful for the opportunity to show that I know about Rachel's unhappiness, that I am, indeed, the solution.

"It has occurred to me that Rachel might be more like Ralph's side of the family," she confides. "Better suited to the provincial life. You, of course Andy, have your metier as a musician to pursue."

Does she mean that we aren't suited?

The doorbell rings.

"Get that for me, love."

I open the front door. A man. He smiles. It's Colin Davis.

"Are you Colin Davis?"

"Yes."

"You're famous."

Famous conductor. Famous conductor. Famous conductor.

"Is this Sonia Marsden-Hunt's house? Do I have the right address?"

I point.

"Through there, my liege."

Sonia appears in the doorway.

"Colin! Come in, do. It's all rather basic here at the moment I'm afraid. This is Andy. He's a talented musician. And Rachel. You know Rachel. They've just got married. Yes, isn't it wonderful? Other news I'm afraid is not so wonderful. Bloody removal men have bugged the Bechstein. Come through. See what you think..."

Sonia disappears with Colin. Ralph stands by, sheepish, having not been introduced.

"Great news," says Rachel. "Dad's agreed to help fund our journey."

Ralph grins, beatifically.

"Can't have you two going without a honeymoon. Mind you, you can give me a hand with these crates if you like."

"We would do Dad. But we've got things to do and it's getting late."

She gives her Dad a kiss on the cheek and opens the front door.

"Oh. Right. I see. Course you have. You two run along. I'll get this done in no time."

I shake his hand and follow Rachel out.

"Good luck!" he calls, as we scoot down the steps and into the car.

"Well at least your Dad said he'd give us some money."

"So did yours."

I'm amazed.

"Did he? So where are we going now then?"

All the way back to Goodge Street, Rachel gabbles on about phone-calls we must make to prepare our honeymoon. Charter flights, visas, maps, salt tablets, jabs against eastern diseases. I don't know whether she's excited, or just feverish. It's too hot to think and everything's moving so fast, I don't know what's going on.

Stella is on her landing, frantic and toothless, like a witch straight out of Macbeth.

"What's going on?" she croaks.

"I don't know," I reply.

"All that banging!" she says.

We listen. There is banging. Upstairs in our offices. Is Walt back, pogo-ing around the living room?

"It's not safe! They'll have the whole floor crashing down on me!"

"It'll be alright, Stella. I'll find out."

Leap upstairs two at a time, and come face to face with Lorraine.

"Lorraine. What's going on?"

She smiles an angelic, gooey smile.

"Roy's coming back tomorrow, and my brothers are repairing the damage. Isn't that nice of them?"

"Your brothers? Is that what all that banging is? I thought the place was unsafe. I thought the inspectors had to..."

"They've been. There's loads of joists and things to replace and a load of slates that blew off, but Jim and Lee know what they're doing. They're builders."

Jim is up in the rafters. Lee is filling a sack with charred wood, broken slates and other debris.

"Thanks for helping!" I call, cheerily.

"Huh!" says Lee.

"Don't thank us. We're doing it for Lorraine!" calls Jim, leaping from one joist to another.

Lorraine beams proudly.

"Christ! What's happened here?" I ask.

The office is stacked, from floor to ceiling, with stuff from the living room. The phone is ringing from somewhere underneath.

"I can't have all this here! I've got to make sense of the business. For Christ's sake, Lorraine, couldn't you have piled it in the artwork room?"

"That's where Roy's going to be. I'm making a bed up for him. He'll need peace and quiet."

"Why's he coming here?"

"I can't take him back home," says Lorraine, sadly. "Mum won't have a burnt man in the flat. Says it's unlucky."

"Well it's no good Lorraine. Rachel and I have hundreds of phone-calls to make. The office will have to be cleared and the artwork room is the only place. I'm sorry, but Roy'll have to go somewhere else!"

Lorraine bursts into tears. Lee drops his sack and marches up to me.

"You've made her cry! What's he done, Lorraine?"

"...He says Roy can't stay here..."

"What?"

"What's going on?" asks Jim, swinging down from the roof, with a large wood saw in his hand.

"He says Roy can't stay here."

"What? Listen mate!"

He grabs the front of my batik, twists it into his fist and pulls me towards him.

"Either you let Lorraine have her bloke here," he says, brandishing the saw, "or I'll cut through every beam till your roof caves in. What's it to be?"

"Don't! Don't! Stop it Jim!" cries Lorraine.

I'm too scared to speak.

"Roy can stay here," I beg.

Jim lets go.

"We'll make the phone calls somewhere else Andy. Come on," says Rachel, pulling me away towards the stairs.

"Rachel! Andy!"

Jules, bounding up the stairs, like a mad goat.

"I've been trying to get hold of you all day. Where have you been? - Good Lord!"

Jules stops at the entrance to the living room. He watches Jim and Lee resume work. Looking up, he sees the sky, where the slates have fallen.

He stares, apoplectic, at the damage.

"Are you demolishing the place? What's going on?"

"What's going on, Lee?" calls Jim, mimicking Jules.

"You've got me there, James." Lee replies. "Look like lazy Irish louts to me!"

Rachel whispers in my ear.

"I'll go to a telephone kiosk at the station and start making the phone-calls," she says. "You stay here with Jules."

I'd rather go with Rachel. But I can't leave Jules, when he's just arrived.

"Are you going to tell him?" she asks.

“What?”

She taps her wedding ring.

“Oh, I don’t know.”

“Who are these guys, Andy?” asks Jules, looking as if he’s spent his life braced against a tornado.

Rachel scuttles off, down the stairs.

“Oh, they’re Lorraine’s brothers. They’re builders.”

“I mean, is this place going to be functional, or not?”

“Well yes, but, what with the fire, and they’ve had to stack all the stuff in the office... I know there are a couple of print jobs pending. Can’t remember what else, till I can find the diary. But we can’t move the stuff, because Roy’s going to be in the artwork room and he’s all burnt. Have you been to see him?”

“What you’re saying, is that you’re standing around, doing nothing. Nothing! For Christ’s sake, Andy! I mean, you’re a nice guy and all that, but you’re going to have to get with it! For Christ’s sake, everything’s collapsing around us!”

A heap of sooty slates clatter to the floor. Jules pulls me through, into the artwork room, and starts ranting advice at me. If he wasn’t my best friend, I’d say he’d gone bonkers.

Stare at the comfy bed Lorraine’s made up for Roy. Wonder what Roy’ll look like? Back tomorrow, she said. Will his hands and face have healed? What if he looks frightening and I have to talk to him?

“Are you listening to me?”

“Yes Jules.”

“What then?”

“What?”

“I’m saying we must focus our energies. - Less sentimental. - More opportunistic. - Less bourgeois. - More charismatic. - Alive to the moment! ...I mean, fuck the print jobs. Fuck Amazing Arts. Fuck the magazine!”

“Are you stopping the magazine? What about Beatrice?”

“She’s fucked off.”

“Just from the magazine, or... Isn’t she with you anymore?”

“She’s fucked off!”

“Oh.”

“The point is, we’ve got to build some capital. That’s why all our enterprises are fucked. Cash-flow! So that’s the first thing. Get some cash. Do you understand, Andy?”

I understand that, if Amazing Arts is washed up, it's okay for Rachel and me to go off together. But I can't tell Jules now. Wrong timing. Everything's turned to shit and Beatrice has left him. He's desperate.

"Video!" he announces. "That's the new medium. That's what we should be into. Are you with me?"

"Yes. Video..."

"The point is, are we actually going to do something with our lives, actually achieve something? Or rot in mediocrity!"

"Well, when you put it like that... But there are other things going on at the moment, Jules. I don't know what to say..."

"You don't need to say anything. It's simple. I'll go back to Kensington and wind up the magazine. You get this place done up. By that time, we'll know what we're doing, and we'll have two prestigious addresses to work from. Got it?"

"Yes. Clear up. Right."

He's happy. He believes himself. I follow him onto the landing. He turns and shakes my hand.

"First thing we'll do, is import American comics. Fabulous Furry Freak Brothers. Robert Crumb. That'll give us some capital to buy the video equipment. Then we can set up the company. I've already got the title. International Arts Media. I.A.M. – 'I AM!' Good title, huh?"

I nod. I've always thought Jules is artistic, like his mum. But maybe he's a businessman, like his dad. As he's going, he pokes his head in through the living room door.

"Keep up the good work lads!"

"Righteeho!" mimics Lee.

"He should be bleeding Prime Minister," retorts Jim from above.

I don't think Jules heard. I should have told him about our marriage. Could catch up with him. No, not now. Tidy up, he said.

Turn to face the wall of furniture in the office. Where's it gone? Lorraine smiles sweetly. She's been clearing it up.

"Is that better?" she asks.

Still got furniture all round the sides, but I can get to the desk and the phone.

"Oh thanks Lorraine. I'm sorry."

"Cup of tea?"

I nod. Sit at the desk. Stacks of unpaid invoices. Lists of print jobs, publishers. What am I supposed to do? Phone them all up? What should I say? Can't get my

head round it. Jules said fuck Amazing Arts. Perhaps I should just tip the lot into a rubbish bag. Phone's ringing.

"Amazing Arts, can I help you?"

"Andy?"

"Rachel! Where are you?"

"What do you say to flying out on Thursday, Andy? It's just that, this travel agent here, can get us two flights to Singapore on Thursday for eighty pounds each."

"Oh. But what about visas, and didn't you say we need inoculations...?"

"We're getting the jabs tomorrow and, apparently, it's easier to get visas for Indonesia, once we're in Singapore. I think we should snap up these tickets. What do you say, darling?"

"Oh. Yes. I suppose."

"Marvellous. Back soon!"

Christ! In a few days, I'm going to be on the other side of the world. It's going to happen. We'll be on a plane. When we get out, it'll be hot. Then we'll be on a boat going from island to island, meeting the natives. Will they cut our heads off, or worship us like a king and queen? Phone's ringing.

"Hallo?"

No reply. Muffled sounds.

"Hallo? Anybody there? I know there's someone. I can hear your breathing. Who is it?"

Tiny wavering voice.

"Who?"

"...Amanda..."

"Amanda? Is something wrong?"

"Kit..."

She splutters.

"What?"

"He's hung himself."

"Kit?"

"I went into his studio and he was hanging from the beam. Oh Andy..."

"Amanda. Listen. Are you sure he's dead? You must call an ambulance."

"They're here now. And the police. Oh Andy it's my fault. I couldn't handle him. I didn't. I didn't love him!"

She collapses, sobbing.

"Amanda!"

I can hear voices, people moving about. What must it be like?

"...Andy?"

"Yes?"

"...I didn't love him Andy. ...Wasn't that terrible of me?"

"What? ...I can't take it in."

"He was so lovely last night. Made us all a meal. Drew a picture of me."

"He planned it?"

"Oh. Do you think...?"

"Well, ...did he leave a message?"

"I haven't looked."

"No. Of course not. Listen, I'll come straight up. I'll catch a train, I'll..."

"No. No point. The police are contacting Kit's parents. They'll take charge."

"But what about you?"

"I'll be alright. Zecky, Moodri and the others are here. Should I phone Jules?"

"I'll phone him."

"Thanks. ...I'd better go."

"Will you promise to phone me if you need me? I'll do anything..."

Line's already dead. Oh my God. Can't take it in. Kit is dead. What if I hadn't answered the phone? What if we could jump back in time, just a moment. Yes. It'd be alright. Oh my God oh my God oh my God oh my God oh my God...

Phone ringing. Pick it up automatically.

"Hallo?"

"Andy? It's Gracie. Amanda's sister."

"Yes. Hi."

"Have you heard?"

"Yes."

"Listen Andy. I've got to go up to Scotland to support Mandy. I need you to fill in on a Bell Family gig. - It's a benefit, but it's important. - Will you, Andy?"

I don't want to do a gig. I can't. But I told Amanda I'd do anything. So I must...

"When is it Gracie?"

"Wednesday. Please Andy. Clive will pick you up at six o'clock. - It's just a half-hour set. There's supposed to be some jam session at the end, but you don't need to bother with that. Please Andy. - Will you?"

"Yes."

"Fab. I'd better go. Clive'll pick you up."

"Yes."

Where's my fiddle? Maybe it got burnt. Oh I can't believe it. I couldn't hang myself. Could I? I can see this room with all the paintings. No. Don't look. I'm

supposed to ring Jules. He'll be beside himself. Tell him gently. Make sure he's sitting down.

"...Jules?"

"Yes?"

"It's Kit."

"I recognise your voice Andy!"

"No, I mean, it's about Kit. ...Er, are you sitting down Jules?"

"I'm in the middle of doing something. What are you on about?"

"Kit. He hung himself. Amanda just rang. Jules? ...Are you there ...Jules?"

"...You know, I thought he was suicidal when we were up there. Do you have his parents' number?"

"It's alright. They've been called. We met them. Do you remember? At that party? The woman who accused us of breaking her chess set. That was his stepmother. And his tall, stooping dad. Not good parents perhaps, but can you imagine them receiving the news? ...A constable coming to their door and telling them that Kit..."

"Hang on Andy. I've just had an idea. Speak to you later."

If I had a son, and a policeman came to the door and told me. ...I wouldn't want to live. Oh...

Someone coming up the stairs. Pull yourself together.

"Andy! I've got them!"

Rachel is waving tickets at me.

"It's an eighteen hour flight! I've ordered light-weight luggage from Lilywhites and jabs tomorrow at two. Are you alright?"

Can't speak.

"You're not going off the idea are you? I know you must think it's a substitute for me, instead of taking Graham's job in Martinique. Anything to get out to sea. But we're going together Andy. It'll be wonderful."

"Yeah."

"I'm famished. Let's eat out."

"Need to lie down."

"Oh."

Stumble into the artwork room and flop on the bed. Rachel in the doorway.

"Is it alright, Andy? The honeymoon? Do you think we've made a mistake?"

She hovers for a while, then tiptoes away. I rush to the door, slam it shut and fall flat on the bed. Kit's paintings are all around the walls. Ram my head under the pillow so no-one will hear.

"Chemist?"

"Where?"

"On the list, Andy. What's left?"

"Oh. Chemist. Yes."

"There's one."

I stride after Rachel, dripping with sweat. Bright, boiling day and I'm carrying a haversack full of stuff for our expedition.

Cooler in the shop. With our back-packs on, it feels as if we're already away. Got to be efficient though, like Rachel. Trouble is, she's got everything sussed. I'm just hanging about while she buys things.

I should be thinking about Amazing Arts. Jules wants the office up and running ready for the new business, whatever it is. I won't be around. But he doesn't know that. I should get the office up and running. It's the least I can do. Then, when I'll tell him about us going away, at least he'll see that I'm loyal and, when we get back from the honeymoon, I could help him again.

"Come on."

"Oh. Are we done?"

Trail after Rachel.

Trouble is, I don't know if the office can be up and running by Thursday. It depends on how long Jim and Lee are going to take to fix it. I'll ask them.

"Would you mind going into the cubicle and removing your clothes, Mr Parvin?"

"What?"

Rachel giggles.

"The nurse wants you to get your togs off Andy," she says.

"Oh. Am I ill?"

"You've got to have an injection in your bum."

"Oh. Righteeho. In here?"

What if Lorraine's brothers say it'll take weeks? - I know, I'll ask Lorraine to run Amazing Arts while I'm away. She'll be there anyway, looking after Roy. Brilliant!

"Bend over."

Aweeeeeoooooweeee ...Fucking bugger fuck fuck. Blimey. Needle must be as long as a sword. Has it gone right through? Is it sticking out my front? Daren't look.

"That's all Mr Parvin. You can stand up now."

"Thank you Nurse."

Wonder if Lorraine'll go for it. Co-opt and inspire her! - Tell her she'll be working alongside Jules in a brilliant new venture. - Tell Jules how hardworking and efficient she is.

"Are you alright Andy?"

We're at Goodge Street. Oh I see, I've got the key. Unlock the door. Let Rachel in first.

"You seem quiet Andy. Is it about Kit?"

"No! ...Just planning things. Being efficient. Shall we go up?"

She thinks I'm upset, because I couldn't stop crying after I told her.

"Hi Lorraine! How are Jim and Lee doing? When do they reckon they'll be done by? Actually, I've been meaning to ask you..."

"Sssh! He's back."

With a gooey smile, Lorraine leads us through the office, half-opens the door to the artwork room, and lets us poke our heads in. Roy is on the bed, his hands and face covered in white cream. He gives us a weak little wave.

"How are you?" he croaks. "Alright?"

The telephone rings. Lorraine hurriedly blows Roy a kiss, clicks the door shut and lifts the receiver.

"We're not going to be able to sleep here tonight," Rachel murmurs. "We'll go to Kensington."

I agree.

"It's for you," says Lorraine, handing me the phone.

"Andy?" screams a voice down the line.

"Yes?"

You've got to stop him! ...Andy?"

"Who is this?"

"Gracie."

"Oh. Where are you?"

"I'm up at the farm. Jules has told the press about Kit, and they're up here, nosing about, taking pictures."

"Who?"

"Reporters, photographers. Mr and Mrs Hogarth are out of their minds. Amanda is beside herself. Has Jules really got exclusive rights to Kit's work?"

"I don't know."

"Well apparently he has and he's a fucking exploitative bastard! You tell him! And tell him to get these fucking vultures out of here!"

The line goes dead. Rachel and Lorraine are hovering. They want to know what the call was about.

Phone rings again.

"Hallo? Gracie?"

"I have a person to person call from the West Indies for a Rachel Marsden-Hunt. Is she available?"

"Rachel? Yes. Hang on..."

Pass the receiver.

"She's very upset," says Lorraine.

"Rachel?" I ask.

Rachel looks happy enough to me. Positively glowing. Wonder who it is.

"Gracie."

"Gracie. Oh. Yes, she's upset."

"I know. She's been ringing all afternoon. Apparently there's these reporters up there. Jules did it, she says. Apparently he told them that a hippie genius had just topped himself. Gracie says Jules owns the rights to Kit's work, and is out to make a killing. What a bread-head!"

"I'm sure he isn't, Lorraine. Jules isn't like that. Actually I've been meaning to ask you. You know that Rachel and I are off on our honeymoon? Well Jules wants these offices up and running as soon as possible, and I was wondering whether you'd like to run things here. Would you? I mean, you'll be here looking after Roy anyway. You'd be working alongside Jules on a brilliant new venture."

"Would I get paid?"

"I'm sure, once things are up and running..."

"I'm not doing it, if I don't get paid. I've got Roy and me to think of."

"Oh? So Jules is a bread-head, but you'll only do things for money!"

Lorraine stomps off, cross. Rachel is still on the phone.

"Yes, Graham, right across the Pacific."

Graham? Is he still on the scene?

"Now you tell me! ...Look, we're leaving in twelve hours. ...Someone called Andy."

Tell him we're married!

"Yes, right across the Pacific. Twelve hours. Yes, alright, I'll think about it!"

What?

"Well, you can phone the Kensington number if you wish, but the answer's no. ...Bye."

Rachel turns to me, her smile reassuring.

"We'd better make a move."

“Okay.”

I hover, wanting to know what it’s about. But she brushes past Lorraine in the doorway, and heads off, down the stairs.

“...See you Lorraine. Sorry I got cross. I didn’t mean it. It’s just things are moving so fast, it’s hard to be efficient. I know you’re just thinking about Roy. But I don’t want to let Jules down.”

“I’ll think about it,” says Lorraine.

“Bye Lorraine!” Rachel calls, tugging me.

“Where to now?” I ask, alert.

“Kensington.”

Jules is at Kensington. I’ll have to tell him. Think of a plan.

Feels late. What's the time? Swathes of billowing gauze in Rachel's big old Victorian bedroom, but no clock. And no Rachel. Where is she?

Don't worry. It isn't like before, when she used to run away. We're married and off on an adventure. So hot and sticky, don't want to get my batik on. Can't go wobbling about the Marsden-Hunt mansion starkers. My batik came from Bali, and that's where we're going.

"Oh. Hallo. You haven't seen Rachel, have you?"

Ralph is carrying a large metal rod from one room to another. He stops and peers at me as if trying to work out who I am.

"She's gone canoeing," he announces and strides off.

Canoeing? Don't panic. Try downstairs. If she's gone canoeing, I can't hang around this house. I'm a stranger here.

Voices in the kitchen. Rachel at a big old kitchen table with a tissue in her hand. She's crying. Her mother sees me and swoops into the doorway, cutting out my sight of Rachel.

"It's alright Andy," Sonia assures me. "I'll handle this. Actually, Jules was up here earlier. He was looking for you."

"Oh, do you think he's in the basement?"

"I'm sure he is."

"So, will you tell Rachel that I'm down there?"

"I'll tell her."

Oh well. Better go and see Jules then. In a way it's good. Good that Sonia acknowledges Rachel's moods and is dealing with them. As Rachel's husband, I feel supported.

Big blobs of rain outside. It doesn't matter if it rains in the tropics. The sun just comes out, and dries your clothes. What am I going to say to Jules?

"Jules?"

"In here!"

Jules is sitting back with his feet up on the desk, reading a newspaper and cackling to himself. He thrusts the paper in my face.

"Can you believe it?"

The headline reads: "Rebel Without Applause."

"They've copied my press release exactly, word for word. Even the title - look."

He points to a typed page on his desk. "Rebel Without Applause. The Life and Death of a Young British Genius."

"But this is the one that kills me," says Jules pulling out another paper.

It's a picture of me. I'm on the front page.

Jules roars.

"I sent them pictures of Kit, but they're so fucking lazy, they just used that pic of you from the colour supp."

I don't know what to think. Is it good or is it bad? It's a picture of me.

"That's bad."

"It doesn't matter. The point is, we're back in business. We've got galleries phoning up, wanting to mount exhibitions of his work. We've got publishers begging for a biography. Just like that!"

He snaps his fingers.

"One day to the next! Isn't it obscene?"

"Yes. I'm wondering if it's right. Gracie was very upset about the reporters on the farm."

"Gracie? Who's she?"

"She's Amanda's sister."

"Well what the fuck has she got to do with Kit? Listen. Kit was a great artist. Do you think we should just let his work rot? Chuck it on the fire? For Christ's sake, it's why we set up Amazing Arts in the first place. To get Kit recognised. It's what he wanted, needed. I mean, all he could do was paint. Useless at life. If he'd had some recognition, he wouldn't have done himself in."

"Gracie says you're just out to make a mint from Kit's paintings."

"What? Is that what she thinks?"

Footsteps. Rachel looking bedraggled. Gives me a little smile and stands beside me.

"Do you think I'm in it for the money, Andy?" asks Jules pointedly. "Is that what you think?"

"I don't know. I don't know what to think. It just doesn't suit me."

"What doesn't suit you?"

I gulp.

"Everything. Everything doesn't suit me. All the business stuff. It makes my head go bonkers."

"Yeah, I know."

Does it drive him mad too? Or does he just know my weakness?

"So I can't do it anymore."

"So what...? So, you're leaving?"

"Actually, there's something we've been meaning to tell you."

“What?”

Jules looks from me to Rachel. I gulp.

“We’re married.”

Try to smile. Jules’ skull-like face fills with fury and his eyes dart madly.

“What? What do you mean, you’re married?”

“We got married secretly, last Saturday. Before we went up to the farm.”

“Do Mum and Dad know?” he asks Rachel.

“Yes.”

“And?”

Rachel’s eyes fill with tears.

“We’re going on a honeymoon,” I admit.

“What?”

“We’re going across the Pacific. There’s all these islands.”

“Islands? Islands? Fucking typical. You know, I went to see Dad yesterday afternoon? All I needed was five measly hundred. Oh no. Not a chance. No use throwing good money after bad. All I wanted to do, was make sure the fucking artists got paid. But you turn up with some crap about crossing the Pacific. I mean, crossing the Pacific! What fucking good is that to anyone, you self-serving bastards?”

“I’m sorry, Jules,” I burble. “I didn’t think you’d take it this way...”

“You didn’t think fuck. And when’s all this going to happen, this love-boat crap?”

I look at Rachel. She looks white as a ghost.

“Tomorrow,” I admit.

Jules stares at me. I feel weak but determined not to lose face.

“It’s you, Andy. Old buddy! Isn’t it! We started Amazing Arts together. Remember? We weren’t in it to line our pockets and yet, first chance you get, you’re sucking up to my family, marrying my sister, taking my Dad’s money and fucking off to the Pacific! Do you get it? Do you realise what sort of person that makes you?”

It’s hard not to lose face. He’s off again.

“...I mean, the world is full of greedy bastards who believe that the purpose of life is their own pleasure. They’re the ones who complain if anyone does anything, who object to starving faces on a charity ad, who vote for lower taxes, who vote for themselves in everything they do.”

Hard to think. Wish he’d stop talking.

“Are you one of them, Andy? Do you think that love is like money, which you pay out and draw in as it suits you? Or don’t you even acknowledge other people, except insofar as they flatter you? Are you a rat, leaving the sinking ship? Or is it the

Rochfaucauld aphorism, that 'it isn't enough to succeed, you must also see your best friend fail'?"

"No!" I blurt.

"Yes!!" he corrects me. "It's a pity. I like your company, your personality. We can sometimes communicate on levels richer than any communication I've known. I am spiritually alone most of the time, and with you I am not. But this other side. This weak, vain... - Are you really going to bugger off, just like that? Well of course you are. You're married. It's all planned. You're off tomorrow. I don't know why you bother. You might as well stand there with your cock in your hand and your eyes shut, wanking!"

I open my mouth to speak but he turns his attention.

"Watch out for him, Rachel. When you're through competing with me, you may find that it's you who's been hurt!"

Rachel burst into tears.

"How dare you talk to Rachel like that! Come on Rachel, we're leaving!"

Guide her out quick, up the steps. I'm shaking. It's raining but I need to walk.

"Come on."

"Where?"

She wants to go inside.

"We need things for the trip don't we?"

"I'm not sure..."

"Map? Have we got the maps?"

"No."

"Well then."

I stride ahead. She joins me. Good. Bookshop at Notting Hill.

"I always admire you," says Rachel.

Good. I need admiring.

"Thanks."

"The way you always march forward with your eyes up, as if you know exactly where you're going."

"Oh, do I? Just going to the bookshop."

"I'm not so sure."

"Oh well. Never mind. I'll be 'sure' for the both of us."

"About this trip."

"Which trip? To the shop?"

She shakes her head.

"To the Pacific?"

She nods.

"But we've got the tickets. It's what you wanted. You're just nervous, like a bride before the wedding. You weren't nervous at our wedding so that's probably why you're nervous now. Once we're in the Pacific you'll be fine. Let's get the maps!"

We duck out of the rain, into the shop. I shake the water off me, splatter some books.

The book lady tuts and others frown.

"It's only water!" I say. "Where are the maps?"

Wall of maps. Africa. Asia. Here we are.

"You know the route Rachel. You choose the maps."

Time to think. Think what?

"This is all they've got," says Rachel, numbly.

"Then they'll have to do!" I say cheerfully.

Follow her over to the till. Got to make it alright. It's just one of her moods.

"You'll probably find a better selection at Foyles," says the book lady, handing Rachel change and receipt.

"Foyles!" I say, leading her out. "That's where we'll go. Shall we take the Tube?"

"No."

"Okay. But it's raining. Well anyway. I don't mind getting wet."

"I need to talk."

"What about? You were on the phone to Graham yesterday. Is that what it's about?"

"Yes."

"Oh. So is he still trying to get you out to Martinique?"

"Yes."

"So what did you say?"

"I said no."

"Good."

"But."

"But what?"

We walk on towards Queensway in the driving rain. I'm the one who's doing it. She'd rather be at her parents' place, sulking. It's just a mood. She's got so many moods, I never know where I am. I hate people with moods.

"What if we're not suited to each other?" she asks.

"How can you tell? Everyone's suited to each other, aren't they, once you get to know them?"

"What if I'm a sea person and you're a land person?"

“Blimey! That’s Beatrice! Look!”

Advert on the news stand outside Queensway Station reads ‘Kit Hogarth by Close Friend Beatrice Moore’. There’s a picture of her looking gorgeous. Wow! Rachel isn’t interested.

“For God’s sake, Rachel. It isn’t whether you’re a land person, or a sea person, or a fucking feathery sky person. It’s whether you’re a good person. Not someone who marries you and cons you into some trip and then dumps you. It’s like everything’s a mood with you. As if every time you’re about to take a step, you run away. You can’t be a good person if you’re too afraid to come out of your shell. That’s why the world isn’t good. You’ve got to be courageous!”

“And what if I’m not?” she says, as if she’s making some point.

“Well if you’re not, then you’re a fucking useless moody coward with your fingers up your crutch and your eyes shut, wanking!”

Rachel runs across the road and away, into the park. I’m not following her. She can run as far as she likes.

What do I feel like doing? No point standing about getting soaked. Follow her. But don’t let her know.

Dash across the road. Poke my head around the park gate, in case she’s hanging about, just waiting for me to take the bait.

She isn’t. Where the fuck is she? Peer across the grass to the trees. Everything’s grey and bleary in the downpour. There she is. Which way is she heading? Follow. Zigzag from tree to tree.

Shit. She heard something. Stay still. I’ve never followed anyone before. Except some woman, when I was fourteen, because of the way her bum moved.

Rachel’s off again. Am I just going to keep following her? While I can still see her, I feel as if we’re still together. But what am I going to do? I’ll tell her what’s right. I’ll make her see reason. I’ll make her!

She’s seen me.

“What do you want?” she demands, haughtily.

I stumble up to her, wheezing.

“I’m sorry Rachel. I didn’t mean it before, about you being moody. It’s just that you were feeling a bit lost so I thought, if we were married, and you said yes. So then you tried to kill yourself because you wanted to go to the Pacific, so I said yes. So I chucked in Amazing Arts, my friendship with Jules, everything. And now you’re leaving me and I’ll have nothing!”

I sink to my knees in a puddle and sob. Rachel consoles me. Good. She understands.

"Come on," she says, warmly, with her arm around me.

We walk on, up Piccadilly. She hasn't said whether the trip's on. I daren't ask. At least we're going towards Foyles.

Piccadilly Circus is almost deserted. No American tourists. Just a few wet hippies gathered around the statue of Eros.

"Let's go on this trip Rachel, you and me."

I take her into my arms, beside the statue, and hold her tight. But it's as if she's not in her body.

"Please," I ask, smiling into her face.

"I just think the timing is bad."

"What fucking 'timing'?"

"Well I may as well tell you. You're going to be hurt anyway. You know I said that Graham was one of Dad's friends? Well, it's true. But then, at Christmas, we sort of got together. It was just a fling. And he never said anything."

"He invited you to Martinique."

"I thought he was too old for me. But then, this morning, he called again. And I got angry. I said, 'I'm married and I'm fat!' And he said ...he loved me. ...He's thirty-seven. But I don't see why age should matter really, do you?"

Is she asking me if Graham's too old for her?

"But we're married."

"...I'm sorry, Andy."

She just looks at me.

"Sorry? What does your Mum say?"

"Follow my instincts."

"And what do your instincts say? Atlantic or Pacific?"

She lowers her head.

"Atlantic," she mumbles.

"So that's it?" I yell. "Well take your fucking maps...!"

She won't take them. I rip them out of the carrier and start tearing them up. They won't tear.

"Fucking maps!"

"Hey man," says a dripping hippie, cowering under the statue of Eros. "You want a joint? Chill out?"

"No I don't want a joint to chill out!" I scream.

Hope he gets caught. Where's Rachel? Fucking hell, she's gone...

Run! Which way? Every way! Run round the cinemas. All the wet hippies on Piccadilly Circus are laughing. I don't care. Maybe she's gone to Foyles. Anyway, it's somewhere to look.

What is she wearing? Think it was red. Or green. What shape? Her body shape. Her body shape. I've got to find her.

Half the people in London are in Foyles, standing out of the rain, dribbling on the books. Barge through, eyes everywhere. Impossible. Wait outside. Check everyone leaving. She's got to come out some time.

Unless she isn't in there. She could've gone to Goodge Street. Shit. That's where she'll have gone. Okay!

There's a drunk outside Tottenham Road Court Station, staring at me. He lurches up.

"This you?" he asks.

He's not letting me past.

"This you?"

I look at the newspaper. There's the picture of me as Kit.

"Yes, but..."

"You're supposed to be dead!" he shouts and punches me in the face.

I fall over backwards, into a puddle. Try to get up. Clutch my face.

"Fuckin' liars!" he roars and, shaking his fist at the bucketing heavens, staggers off.

There's no blood on my hands. Maybe I'm not even cut. Feel weird though. Where am I going? Goodge Street. Yes. Run. Head splitting, lungs bursting, but run! Even if Rachel's not there, I can wash and get dry clothes.

What's going on? A fire engine. And an ambulance. Outside our door. Has Rachel jumped? Oh my Christ.

"You can't go in there!"

Take no notice. Barge through.

"I live here!" I explain.

"Someone get him! Quick!"

I'm not being got, till I find out what's happened to Rachel. Why is there water cascading down the stairs? Did she try to drown herself in the bath?

We don't have a bath. You can't drown in a shower, can you?

"Stop!"

There's a fireman above me. Two firemen coming down with a stretcher.

"Has there been a fire?" I ask.

"Someone's taken the bloody roof off, haven't they!"

"Have they? Oh, yes. Jim and Lee."

It's Stella they're carrying. She's shaking uncontrollably. Christ. Got to see if Rachel's up there.

"You're not going up, mate."

I am. What's he going to do? Drop the stretcher? Dodge past him straight into two more firemen. They're carrying Roy down. The rain has washed the cream off and his face and hands are full of crackly skin and blood. Lorraine is beside him.

"He has to go back to hospital," she tells me.

I nod and force myself to bend down and look him in the eye.

His eyes are frightening. Endless tunnels of rage. But his voice is cheerful.

"You alright?" he asks.

"I'm alright, Roy. How are you?"

"Alright. Long as I've got my Lorraine."

"Great. Listen Roy, is Rachel up there?"

"Long as I've got my Lorraine," he repeats.

Useless. Nip past them. Last flight. Water gushing down. Bloody hell. Whole floor's collapsed. Rumpus below. Someone running up the stairs after me. Have to leap from the landing across to the office. Scared. Could fall and die. Here goes. Phew. Hairy bloke rushes up the last flight and jumps across as if it were nothing.

"Where've you been Andy? We should have been there hours ago."

It's Clive. Boggle-eyed Clive. What's he on about?

"What are you on about?"

"The gig."

"You're standing in for Gracie? Remember?"

"Oh. I forgot."

"Come on!"

"Thing is, you don't know if Rachel's up here, do you?"

"There's no-one up here. They got all three out. Come on. Where's your fiddle?"

"Oh. It might have got burnt. Or drowned."

"Is that it?"

Wall of furniture. End of the fiddle case sticking out.

"Yes."

I pull it out and check the case over.

"It isn't even burned."

"Come on then. We're supposed to have been on by now."

I jump after him. Slip. Fuck. Ouch. Think I've twisted my ankle. Clive hasn't noticed. I keep up with him by hanging on to the handrail and bouncing down on one leg.

"Taxi over here!" cries Clive.

He's got a taxi waiting. Jump in.

"The Round House - Chalk Farm," he instructs the driver.

Cab roars off, flinging me back into the seat. Can't breathe. I've got asthma.

The gig's already on.

"You're too late," says a pretty, Chinese girl with a silver flute.

"What?" hisses Clive.

"We're going into the jam as soon as Ali Kazur's finished."

"We'll see about that!" barks Clive.

Others shush him. We push through. I see Ali Kazur in a spotlight on stage, bashing away at his tablas. Clive gets into a huddle with Eloise and Neil. They grab some pockmarked old hippie and start insisting they've got to do their whole set.

"No way," says the hippie.

They argue. Musicians of every shape and colour squeeze in and out with their instruments - shiny black tribesmen with hairy drums, tiny Orientals dressed as dragons with instruments that look like snakes, hulking Viking ladies with lutes.

Clive hands me my fiddle and extreme panic-terror hits me in the chest. Eloise pushes a music stand at me. A spotty bloke with long greasy hair and a Che Guevara t-shirt nicks my violin and starts messing with it.

"What are you doing?"

"Fitting a contact microphone."

"Oh. Why?"

"So you can be heard."

That's the last thing I want, the attention of hundreds of unseen people... Clive yells in my ear.

"Just one number, then straight into the jam. Right?"

Ali Kazur comes off, bowing.

"Andy!" Eloise calls.

They're already running on. Grab my music. Run into the light. Nowhere to put my music. Run off, get the stand, puff back on.

Neil's started banging on a bodhrán drum. Eloise strikes up on a squeeze-box. Clive starts his awful nasal droning. I squint at the music. When am I supposed to come in?

Others giving me urgent looks. More nasal singing. What's the time signature? What key? Nasal singing stops. Am I supposed to play in the gaps?

"Improvise!" hisses Neil.

"Go straight into the jam!" suggests Eloise.

"Get the others on!" yells bug-eyed Clive at the pockmarked hippie in the wings.

"Improvise, Andy!" insists Neil.

I play a note. My note comes screaming through the speakers. It's a wrong note. I wish the ground would swallow me up. Others crowd on stage. Ali Kazur's smiling, like there's peace on earth. Everyone's smiley and happy and I am so angry.

I learned violin to please my fucking parents. This sort of crap!

My fiddle spews out a load of pseudo-Bach into the crazy ethnic rhythms going on around me. - I notice the audience gaping.

Look at the fool, hopping about in his Balinese frock. - What do I care what you think? What makes you worth pleasing?

Always trying to please someone. Worked at Amazing Arts to please Jules. ...Thinks he's some poncing knight on a white charger, going round saving artists in distress.

Fiddle jumps into some mad, medieval jig and I go galloping across the stage like a loony.

Jules is a fucking businessman, win or lose!

And that prissy, nasty Beatrice. Slinking around, like some goddess on heat, when all that excites her is herself. 'Kit Hogarth by close friend Beatrice Moore.' - Close friend? She treated him like shit.

Fiddle finds its way into some nasty jazz groove, and I almost fall over a clutch of African warriors, banging away on bongos.

The only people I know, who know what they want, are selfish bastards!

Fiddle rushes at the audience, screaming a load of self-regarding arpeggios at them. I'm a bastard and you are all blind, grovelling innocents, bamboozled by us bastards and bound to get it wrong, because you don't know your arses from your elbows. Yes, you!

Mad John and Slow John and Walt and Rachel...

Rachel wouldn't know herself, if she met herself on the street!

Maybe she would. Maybe we've all got a destiny, and we just don't know. Maybe it's sailing for her.

What am I then? Not a businessman, not a sailor, a journalist, an artist...

Kit?

You were supposed to make it seem possible, not impossible.

But it is impossible. It's fucking impossible!

Come on, you smiley bastards. Smile at this!

Horrible loud scraping. How do you like that? I'll fucking wipe the smile off your fucking faces. What we need is anti-art, because art has become a cosy world, where people hide. A bed of roses. But it's not roses, is it...

Kit?

...No. The very cosy hidey thing is a mask of hypocrisy, so complete, people don't even know they've got it on.

Oh Kit. Your bright, excited twinkling eyes, when you were young. You saw everything too young.

What is maturity for fuck's sake? Learning that the world is wicked? What a fucking mess! And who's to blame? It's a democracy. Everyone's to blame.

Run along the front of the stage, making horrible squeaking noises.

Oh, what's the point of punishment? They don't know. I don't know.

Land on a high, trembling note. Others going apeshit around me, but it all disappears...

Look into Kit's eyes, and I'm back in the artwork room at Goodge Street. Jules, Amanda, Walt, everyone is there.

Kit is talking to Beatrice.

*"When I used to play over at your house, when we were little,
I noticed that your parents criticised everything, all the time."*

Kit struggling with the easel.

His voice, like a still, sad melody
Brahms, late Romantic, lost...

*"They put each other down and they put you down.
Greedy, self-obsessed.
And I liked you, because you weren't like that.
You had a generous spirit..."*

Did she?

*Kit sketching with pencil on canvas,
words coming out sideways.*

*"Then I noticed,
your parents' behaviour
was having an effect upon you.
When I saw you being mean,
making fun of someone or something,*

*I'd draw you a picture,
to show you a happy and benign world.
I thought, if I was good enough,
the pictures might inspire you,
and keep your heart warm."*

"...keep your heart warm."

It matters how we treat each other. It matters what we do. We can throw out God. Say everything's corrupt. But, no matter how self-sufficient we feel, it matters what we do. We're part of creation, and we've to contribute to that creation, with our lives.

It's our faith, and our duty. Kit?

Kit?

Gone.

What am I doing here?

Look around for someone to take over this spiralling solo. They're just egging me on. Fuck it. I'm done. End it. One chord, two chord. Leap in the air. Land on my twisted leg and crumple in pain. Corny cacophony of drums, and everything else, screeching to a halt.

Goodbye Kit.

Wave upon wave of applause and cheering. What's wrong with them? I don't want their fucking applause. Do I? Is it real? Or is it just another vanity, quick route to oblivion? Get off stage quick. People patting me on the back.

"Stop it!"

Just get out of here. Shit. Sonia Marsden-Hunt. Was she in the audience? She's got her arms wrapped around poor little Ali Kazur.

Shit she's seen me.

"Andy! Absolute genius! Darling! - He's married to my daughter, you know."

Dart out the way. Scan for an exit. - That's Gracie, isn't it? Isn't she in Scotland?

Gracie sees me and smiles. She points to someone beside her.

A figure in a black coat, black hat, wavy red hair, freckles...

Amanda.

Must have come straight from Kit's funeral. One look at her eyes, sends me hopping over to her, hugging her.

Oh Amanda...