

April in Starnberg

by Clive La Pensée

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Once upon a time, many years ago, there were no tea machines but instead tea ladies, who pushed a trolley of tea and biscuits through the corridors and rooms of nearly every business. They were an even better gossip conduit than a queue at a tea machine – and you were allowed to smoke in the office. There was no internet or mobile phones and telephone directories were a font of useful information. How quaint? And boys and girls still managed to get off with each other. Maybe in some ways it was simpler.

Harold Southall sat bathed in sweat beneath his writing desk. He had watched in disbelief as his new, jumbo pack of paper clips, slipped over the table edge. He groaned as he heard them raining onto the carpet by his feet. No big deal, he'd told himself, except when you are six foot four and have a bad back. He could have asked his girl Friday to retrieve them, but he preferred not to. It wasn't her job, and he had his pride. Now, because of kindness and pride, he was in hiding, and hiding as never in a game, for this was no game. This was life, or what was left of it for someone with an ongoing confidence crisis barely younger than his forty years. He knew people in the office talked about him behind his back and he had made it a matter of politeness to always cough ostentatiously when approaching a group of colleagues in discussion. His present predicament was his own fault. He ought to have announced to the office, 'I have knocked my jumbo pack of paper clips onto the floor and will disappear for a few minutes to retrieve them. Please refrain from gossiping behind my back as my back is my front... so to say'. That was why he had said nothing. Speeches made him tongue-tied. It would have come out wrong and he would have looked more ridiculous.

He tried to get out the heard the clatter of the tea trolley. 'Bugger the paper clips,' he'd thought, 'Elsie will have a field day if she thinks I'm not in during tea break!'

The combination of banging his head and getting a back spasm slowed him down and Elsie had begun to hold forth before he'd even found reverse.

'How many in today Geoff?'

Elsie's Old Kent Road accent cut the air like a Howitzer.

'We're all in today Elsie' came Geoff's broad Lancashire accent back from another corner. 'Don't forget two bromides in Harold's.'

Elsie's cackle could have got her into panto. He could be in panto, too, paralysed under

his table, bald head held in his huge hairy hands. But that was typical of Harold's luck. Science can get a man on the moon but not his hair in the right place. Ears, nose, arse – there it grew in profusion.

What to do? If he stuck his head out it would halt the conversation and prevent further embarrassment, and he would finally be able to confront super-stud, caught in the act of bad mouthing him. But what good would that do? The bromide joke was as old as Geoff's years of service and only he and Elsie still laughed at it. If Harold were to confront him, Geoff's toilet humour would achieve the notoriety he sought and with it a whole new lease of life. Harold could imagine future visits to the typing pool, should he fail to manage this tricky situation correctly. 'Titter, titter. Harold overheard Geoff's bromide joke,' from behind the painted nails and sheets of fanfold. And so, having missed his opportunity to escape in good time, Harold was trapped. Nothing to do but snake his long arm out and whip the swivel chair into place for maximum cover. Elsie was not one to let a bit of smut settle. Things were set for another couple of minutes. Sure enough, she ploughed on like a barge under full sail.

'It's you who needs a bromide in your tea you dirty young bleeder. It's not Harold who's messing about with other men's wives.'

But today, with the Chief Accountant flitting back and forth through the swing doors between sales and accounts, Elsie disporting her knowledge of Geoff's private life, didn't suit him. Geoff regretted opening the banter. There was a question mark over his disappearance for more than an hour with the Chief Accountant's wife, last firm's dinner dance. He didn't want that brought up, but before he'd time to jibe the conversation round a bit, Elsie had all sheets to the wind. An awesome sight and sound!

'There's nothing wrong with Harold that the love of a good woman wouldn't cure!'

The office laughed. Harold prayed he would melt into the blue nylon pile. How long would it be until it was safe to surface? His back was killing him and now he had to listen to Elsie's pearls of wisdom. He was stuck until Geoff or Elsie left the office and he knew that without fresh prompts their turgid banter would dry up. Salvation seemed in sight. But then, just as the conversation slowed, with Harold's dignity still in place, Debbie, the office brain cell, his Girl Friday, chimed in as well.

'Are you offering yourself then Elsie?'

'That's a good one!' she shrieked. 'Me and Harold! I wouldn't mind at all. He's certainly

good looking enough.'

Harold groaned again, this time loud enough to be heard but for Elsie's bronchitic cough, which inevitably followed anything that tickled her fancy. He could see it now. *Harry 4 Elsie* in marker pen on the toilet wall. He may as well go and write it there himself. Elsie began recounting her quip, between coughs and moved through the swing doors. Once Sales had heard it, she started from the beginning before she'd got fully through the door into Accounts. Harold didn't dare contemplate what she'd make out of it in front of a fresh audience.

It normally took forty five minutes for the tea round and that, he told himself was precisely how long it would be before the whole building had enjoyed the benefit of her wisdom on a cure for Harold. Harold was excusably over pessimistic! Allowing for coughing fits, time to wipe the tears away, and the fact that larger departments received an unsolicited encore, Elsie's round took seventy-four minutes. The canteen was close to sending out a search party.

With Elsie's departure from sales, the office fell into quiet slurps of tea and dunking of biscuits and that really could have been an end to the conversation and a signal to Harold that it would soon be safe to emerge. But it wasn't to be! Super-stud wanted the last word.

'Is Harold really good looking then our Debbie?'

Harold would have got out and smacked the Clitheroe Gob straight on the nose, but for his bad back and an overwhelming curiosity to hear Debbie's answer.

'He is that,' came Debbie's voice, these days with only a hint of Shoreditch, so well could she imitate Geoff's Lancashire accent. She dropped back into East End.

'All the girls in Typing think it's a waste, him not being interested in women. There's a few of us wouldn't mind showing him a good time. Julie wanted to. As good as asked him out. I mean she was more his age. You know what happened?'

'He ran off without answering.'

Harold could detect the self-satisfied sneer in Geoff's voice. He'd reaffirmed that despite Harold's charm and good looks, Geoff the super-stud's rule of the male roost would not be threatened. Now he could let the matter rest. So, Harold sat there under the desk, telling himself for the thousandth time that he was not too slow. He'd wanted to thank Julie and accept her invitation. The problem was that 'thank you' begins with a th and th were his problem. Every stammerer has his own way of coping with his bogey letters or syllables. Harold tried to turn sentences round to make sure they didn't begin with a th. Thereafter he was in control. The

problem was, Julie took him by surprise and in the heat of the moment he'd not been able to conjure up another more manageable beginning. Ludicrous though it now seemed, he'd gone for *That's very kind of you*, and jammed up as if he'd stuck with a more usual *thank you*. He'd tried to win time by lighting a cigarette, but found they were in his desk drawer. Julie, bless her, had foreseen the possible need for a smoke in the conversation and had bought some, even though she didn't smoke. It hadn't helped. Harold had been unable to get the cellophane from the packet. He'd stood there, hands trembling, palms perspiring until in abject misery he'd dropped the cigarettes on the floor and fled. He'd always meant to go back or phone in a quieter moment and explain, but never found the opportunity and the longer he left it the more difficult it became, the greater the nervous tension and the worse his stammer. A day became a week, a week was a month and before he knew, half a year had passed and Julie had left. His office credibility was zero and he hadn't had the articulation to dig himself out of his ever-deepening hole.

That had been a year ago, and still it haunted him at night and in quiet moments of honest self-analysis. He thought his *maleur* had been forgotten - off the gossip agenda at work, but not so. Even Debbie, his staunchest ally, could still dish it up. With this crushing realisation, he eased himself back onto his chair, praying his back wouldn't seize again. By the time the manoeuvre had been completed he was a complete wreck, bathed in sweat, crippled by the fear that straightening his back might lead to another agony bout and ready to acknowledge that he'd spend most of the next two weeks pulling himself out of a debilitating bout of depression. Debbie looked up.

'Hi Harold! Where did you come from?'

Harold grunted, reached in breast pocket for a cigarette, realised he'd run out, reached into his top drawer and felt the cellophane wrapping beneath his fingers.

'Déjà vu?' he thought. He'd never manage to wrestle it from the packet, not in the state he was in, but he was gasping. What was to do? He fumbled without determination in the drawer. Debbie knew the signs. She moved from her seat. Geoff didn't look up from his copy of the Sun, so she leant over Harold and pretended to study a paper on his desk. What she actually did was reach inside his desk drawer, ease the cigarettes from his fingers, remove the wrapping and take him out a king size cork tip. He could have kissed her.

'Bless you,' he whispered.

'No problem,' she whispered. 'Can you light it?'

‘Probably not,’ he whispered.

‘Good - then maybe it’s time to give up.’

Despite her lecture, she relented and felt in his drawer a second time and found the lighter, then slammed the drawer to cover the sound of the ignition.

‘You’re an angel,’ he whispered.

‘I know,’ she whispered. And then in a murmur, ‘Were you under the table just now?’

He hesitated and then in a murmur, ‘Yes.’

‘Shit!’ She took a cigarette out for herself and then put it back. Harold would never give up if she started again. As if he had read her thoughts, he extinguished the cigarette and dropped it, the new packet and the lighter in his bin.

‘It doesn’t matter.’ Harold’s reply sounded tired. ‘A new start. No more worrying about what people think and no more smokes.’

‘It does matter. We’re such toe rags.’ A deep sigh carried through the silent room. The momentary glances over the tops of the newspapers reminded Debbie to whisper again. ‘I’m sorry. That shouldn’t have happened.’

She pulled up another chair and sat down beside him and laid her hand on his arm.

‘How awful for you, and to think...’ Debbie chose not to remind him that she had been part of the discussions. But even at the risk of embarrassing Debbie further, Harold had to ask.

‘Did you mean what you said?’

Debbie paused to consider her answer. She remembered so well what she had said. Only honesty would do. She twinkled at him from the side.

‘You mean when I said you were good looking?’ Harold nodded. ‘Of course I did.’

‘Geoff’s right though. I can’t pull a woman,’ Harold said without the slightest injection of self-pity.

‘It’s your bloody stammer, isn’t it?’ Debbie decided to go straight to the heart of the matter. ‘It hardly notices!’

Harold threw himself back in his chair, regretted it, waited for the pain to ease and then for the first time in his acquaintance with Debbie, decided to explain.

‘It’s only T H at the beginning of a word or worse, the start of a sentence. I carried it all through school and University, and I mean carried it. The college production was to be Macbeth and I auditioned for the title role.’

‘You've got guts. Macbeth with a T H stammer.’

‘Right! But it's not at the beginning and I figured if I got the part of Macbeth I'd never have to say it.’

Debbie giggled.

‘Smart move Harry. I'm impressed. Did you get the part?’

‘They asked me to start reading at Act 1 scene 3, line 113. I can still remember it all. I stood there, brim full of confidence, thumbing through my newly purchased performing edition. I found line 113.’ He fell back into a whisper. ‘It starts Glamis and’

Harold jammed up as he tried to force a T H past his lips. Debbie couldn't help. Harold was paralysed. He tried a deep breath, a lung full of fresh air sometimes did it and it sometimes led to hyperventilation. Nothing! Debbie couldn't stand the suspense. She pushed a note pad and pencil in front of him and he scribbled *Glamis and Thane of Condor*. They dissolved into suppressed giggles.

‘You do have some crap luck Harry.’

‘Don't I know?’

‘So how come you're so good at modern languages?’

‘It's called fate. If I'd been born anything but English, my mother wouldn't have sat me on her knee teaching me that unpronounceable th. You know there are dialects that avoid it by changing into a v or f. Four thousand words in the English language containing a th and around a thousand have it at the beginning. If I'd been born French or German I could have led armies across Europe. No T Hs in any other European language, perhaps in no other language for all I know. Danish maybe. It must have been imported into England by some marauding Viking without a TH-stammer.’

‘You don't stammer in French.’

‘Never.’

‘So why don't you work in France, marry a French woman?’

Harold looked puzzled. ‘Surely coping with a speech impediment is easier than living among foreigners.’

‘I never considered that.’

‘So, when you phone abroad for the company you have no problems?’

‘None.’

‘I’d wondered about that. Or when you go on holiday?’

‘Bliss, unless I get a smart Alec waiter who insists on speaking English. But then only if he stresses me. I never stammer with you do I?’

Debbie changed the subject. She feared this could be another attempt to get closer to her. In the past, they had always ended in disaster for him and frustration for her. Best avoided.

‘And the locals? Don’t you fraternize with them?’

‘You mean, do I chat up the talent?’

‘Yes.’

‘I’m not that sort of guy,’ came the frank but sad reply. ‘I can’t shake off forty years of crisis driven life just by changing languages. It goes a bit deeper than that.’

He watched her brow furrow, studied the face and liked what he saw. She wasn’t beautiful, but so full of that indefinable charm, lively, working-class people often have. He imagined those dextrous fingers and hands, that had reached in his drawer, peeled off the cellophane from his life line, caressing him, reaching into his draws, unpeeling his shirt from his still firm rugby player’s torso that had only ever felt a woman’s touch in his dreams. He tried to reproach himself for thinking of Debbie like that. She was his truest friend, just coming out of a messy divorce and worthy of better from him. She seemed suddenly tense. Something was afoot.

‘I’ve an idea.’

‘Help!’ Harold’s answer was charged with sarcasm. His repressed sexual attraction to her often reared its ugly head in this way.

‘And my idea tickles me.’

Debbie smiled a smile so full of mischief that Harold replied without thinking.

‘No! Whatever you’re plotting, the answer is no!’

‘Don’t be so negative! You start your holiday tomorrow don’t you?’

‘You know I do.’

‘Where are you going?’

‘I’m painting Mum’s house.’

‘For a fortnight?’

‘I suppose so.’ Harold sighed. ‘I might have a nervous breakdown first and then I’ll need longer.’

Debbie leaned to her right and groped in a bookshelf until she found a tatty telephone

directory. She threw it on Harold's table and found Travel Agents in the Yellow Pages.

‘Get on the phone. Book a holiday for two, separate rooms anywhere you like. I'm coming with you.’

Debbie stood up and walked towards the swing doors. Her movements said, ‘no further discussion!’ Harold understood that message, but still called after her.

‘Just a minute.’ He ignored the startled looks from behind the lowered newspapers. ‘What do you mean? Book for two! I'm not made of money.’

‘Course you are. Don't be such a tight arse,’ she said with full East End emphasis and without looking back at Harold.

‘I'll not get anything this late. You're being ridiculous.’ Harold threw the phone book in a long lazy parabola into the waste bin. Debbie heard it land, turned to face Harold, hands on hips and was not perturbed.

‘Now fetch it out again. You've the whole of France and Germany to choose from. They are your speciality Eurogobs. There's bound to be a cancellation or something free in early April. It's not high season yet,’ and then turning one last time at the swing doors to Accounts she called back, ‘I'll have my bags packed by the door. Come past with a taxi. I want some style.’

Harold froze. The whole office was in stunned silence. He could see Geoff to his right, threatening a burst blood vessel from curiosity. The Chief Accountant pushed the swing doors half open, pulled his half glasses to the very end of his nose and peered painfully the length and breadth of Marketing. Harold pulled his glasses onto the end of his nose, which was longer than the chubby flab the Chief Accountant had dividing his face, looked up and down the office and called out in his most solemn voice, ‘let's get some work done shall we?’ and then nodded deferentially at the Chief Accountant, who smiled weakly and left.

Harold ran the scene through his mind a hundred times that night. Was Debbie in earnest or was this a wicked wind up? He wanted to go away with such a pretty and vivacious girl but, the idea was preposterous. People don't do things like that. On the other hand, she had specified separate rooms, which made it clear she was prepared to lend him her company in return for a holiday she could not afford, but no hanky panky. That was fair, ethical and did no harm. He was single; she too. But that mischievous look in her eyes? She was up to something. She wouldn't hurt or embarrass him. She treated him with respect and kindness and never became over-

familiar or tried to take advantage of her friendship with her boss, a friendship which, until that morning had remained hidden from their colleagues, and had always been platonic and confined to tea breaks.

By four o'clock in the morning he had convinced himself he'd done it all wrong - yet again. He should have booked something and taken a chance on her motives. By eight o'clock he was a nervous wreck. When would the airline staff arrive and get rid of that awful voice on the answer machine? Half an hour later he got through. Yes, there were two places on the 15.00 flight to Munich and she was able to provide an agency number for hotel rooms. By nine he had two rooms, bed and breakfast, for a fortnight at the Strand Hotel in Berg near Starnberg, but not before having to arrange a huge raise to his credit card limit.

He phoned Debbie. No answer. He tried at five minute intervals until 9.50 by, which time he had run out of cigarettes. This had not been the day to quit smoking, but he had to do it. No woman wants a man stinking of stale smoke. After a ten-minute break, while he sprinted to the corner shop, not for more cigarettes, but for extra-strong mints, he tried again. This time she answered.

'Th Th Th Thank God Debbie. I've been trying all morning to reach you.'

'I'm not usually up yet on a Saturday. I've been out shopping. Me and my bucket mouth yesterday. I'd nothing to go away in.'

'You were serious then?'

'Oh my God Harry! Don't do this to me! I've just doubled my overdraft to get myself presentable to go away with you. You have got something haven't you?'

He leapt for joy. His mother was laying up breakfast but stopped dead in her tracks and let her top set follow her bottom jaw. She'd never seen her Harold like this before.

'Yes! Of course. I just wanted to tell you I'll be past at twelve. We'll grab some lunch at Heathrow.'

'Where are we going?'

'You'll find out!' he sang into the receiver and then put it down.

Debbie was distracted for the rest of the morning. She'd never expected a misanthropic forty-year-old behaving like a teenager in his first flush of love. She wondered about the outcome. What a disaster if he were to fall in love with her? It was too late to worry about that.

Twelve o'clock came and went but no Harold appeared. Debbie's mother came round to receive instructions on feeding the cat and wasn't pleased to learn of Debbie's holiday plan? She was suspicious.

'How come you just happened to have booked your holiday the same fortnight as this feller?' she enquired in candid cockney.

'Chance,' she lied.

She'd sneaked into the accounts department at lunch time, knowing they always went to the pub on Fridays, and had found the employee holiday sheet conveniently left on the side table. It took her about five minutes to find the holiday dates pages and move her holiday forward three weeks. It meant some crossings out and the wrath of the anally retentive chief clerk would descend upon the department, but she would deny everything. Her mendacity had a down-side. She had no holiday money to go away on, there would be hell to pay from payroll when she came back and that would not be solvable by denying all knowledge. But provided payroll had thrown the original hand written date list away, it wouldn't matter if they could smell a dozen rats. There'd be little they could do. Harry would get it in the neck from the chief supervisor, via Head of Accounts for not signing holiday forms in line with department policy and he'd be furious of course, but that was a fortnight away, and provided the holiday was the success she planned, he would calm down. Her mother though, was cannier than any City department.

'You said you was going away next month.' The old lady let her voice rise and fall like a wailing siren.

'I swopped with a friend to do her a favour.'

'Lying cow!' came the gruff response. 'Now tell me what it's really all about.'

'This feller, well it's actually Harry, my boss...'

'Is it now? I knew there was some hanky panky in the wind. Just remember, it's the girl what brings it home. Mark my words!'

'There'll be nothing like that. We've got separate rooms.'

There was an armour piercing shriek.

'Oh perlease,' she laboured on, 'you've not two pence to rub together so I assume he's paying and if he don't get his leg over he'll be looking for a rebate and bloody well deserve one too, in my book.'

Debbie ignored this motion for male justice and was cross at the assumption that she

couldn't pay her way.

'He's in a fix. He's a nervous wreck. He needs a holiday with someone he can trust and talk to. He wouldn't go on his own. He couldn't handle it. Even Elsie said...'

'That lying old scrubber! Don't you go quoting her in my 'ouse. If you're taking her advice this is definitely going to end in tears and I suppose I'll be the one to stand here with a shovel and brush to sweep up the pieces.'

Debbie leapt forward and kissed her mother's wrinkled cheek. She found the old woman irresistible when she mixed her metaphors.

'Get off!' she protested, and then carried on in full flow. 'What else are mothers for? Where is he anyway? Thought you said he was coming for you at twelve? It's five and twenty past already. He's stood you up. At least he's got some sense.'

She paused to draw a deep breath and Debbie went on the offensive.

'This isn't your house though.'

'Course it's not my bloody house. It's your effing house. What are you talking about? And by the way, when you had the flu and I came and did your washing you hadn't neither decent nighty nor pair of knickers to your name. There was no elastic in your bra, not that that's a problem. You've got no tits anyway, so what are you going to wear in this smart hotel.'

'I went out early down the market and got a few things.'

'Oh did you now? I thought you was boracic.'

'I am. Can you sub me for the cat food?'

'Oh my gawd! Ain't you got no shame girl?'

Just as Ivy was drawing breath for a new onslaught, the doorbell rang. Debbie heaved a sigh of relief, but then realised her mother was likely to start on Harold. In her moment of horror Debbie hesitated and despite her mother being as wide as she was tall and having bad legs, she was to the front door in an instant, dragged it open and started.

'Now you look after my Deborah. D'ye hear me. Or you'll have me to answer to. She's all I've got!'

She shook her fist in Harold's bewildered face several feet above her and he in turn went as red as a beetroot. But his old-fashioned way of answering disarmed Ivy, who couldn't work out they were talking at cross purposes.

'I assure you Mrs. P. I will take the greatest care of Debbie but Germany is quite a safe

country you know. You have no need to be alarmed.'

Ivy turned with a look of incomprehension to her daughter.

'You're both barmy,' she said to Debbie in a soft, resigned voice. She reached for her handbag, took her purse out, crushed a week's wages into Debbie's hand, and hugging her said, 'have a good time. Do take care. Don't know what I'd do...' Her voice trailed away and a tear formed in the corner of her eye.

She felt Debbie's embarrassment and so added, 'What's the matter? Too old now to take a bit of holiday money off your Mum?'

'No Mum. I'm not. Thanks and bless you.'

She grabbed her bags and Harold as she flew down the hallway. Ivy stood shaking her head as her daughter skipped down the steps with an older man and nearly fell over his bags on the path outside.

'Where's the taxi?' was Debbie's first question, in a tone which didn't conceal her disappointment.

'Sorry Debbie. A bus has been struck by lightning on Hammersmith flyover. There's nothing moving westwards. The cab company recommended the tube. I'll make it up to you.'

'Don't be daft,' and she took his arm in a tight grip, which slowed their progress to the nearby underground station. A distant rumble of thunder and the first huge splats of rain hitting the pavement, forced them to rationalize their arrangement.

Harold could feel the tension in Debbie's grip. Harold was worried by the unknown dimensions. What were her motives, intentions, expectations? Harold was into new territory. In an honest moment, he would have owned up to doubts about the whole undertaking. She suffered from the downside of living alone – that much he knew. He didn't live alone, but that made him feel more vulnerable. She had experience and he couldn't deny that living with his mother had its problem times and holidays were one of them. They were nearly as bad as being ill on one's own. So the thought of fourteen days without having to worry where the human contact was coming from outweighed misgivings about a holiday companion.

As the British Airways hostess served them their first gin and tonics, Debbie plucked up courage to again ask where they were bound.

'Berg,' was Harold's terse reply.

‘Where's that?’

‘Near Starnberg.’

‘Go on. You're enjoying my ignorance, aren't you?’ Harold smiled and squeezed her hand, became embarrassed at so much forthrightness and withdrew it quickly.

‘Your ignorance helps cover mine,’ he mumbled. ‘Starnberg is a town on the Starnberger Lake which is south of Munich.’

‘Well that's identified the country. What else do you know about the place?’

‘I have only a vague idea about what it's like.’

Debbie took his arm and tried to push him through his embarrassment threshold, and tell her what it was that attracted him to Starnberg.

‘Was it all you could get?’

‘Not at all. I was amazed how much choice there was.’

‘So why Starnberg?’ she persisted.

‘The airline offered Munich and the hotel agency Starnberg among others and Starnberg was the only one I recognised; came across it once, long ago in a poem as a matter of fact, so I chose that one.’

‘Because of a poem?’

The amazement in her voice was lost on Harold. His forehead furrowed above his squinting eyes as he tested his infallible recall. The linguist's memory was not found wanting as it clawed through the forgotten folds holding data on his A-level English class. And then in clear booming voice that silenced the rows in front and behind,

‘Summer surprised us, coming over the Starnberger See

With a shower of rain; we stopped in the colonnade,

And went on in the sunlight, into the Hofgarten,

And drank coffee, and talked for an hour.’

Debbie squeezed his arm harder than she'd intended.

‘Harry! Stop!’ she whispered. ‘Everyone's looking at you.’

‘I'm so sorry! I didn't want to embarrass you. It just came into my head and normally when...’

He stopped. She sensed a real piece of Harry about to surface, the parts no one ever got to know and understand. She regretted the interruption. What did it matter if the row in front or

behind looked at them?

‘Go on Harry,’ she urged. She wanted to take his hand again but felt that would have been presumptuous and perhaps misunderstood.

‘I was so thrilled to have someone to share it with. I’m sorry.’

‘I shouldn’t have interrupted you. Did you make it up?’

‘Good Lord no. It’s part of a much longer poem.’

They fell silent for a while. Debbie was first to speak.

‘Don’t think I’ve ever read a poem. I suppose we must have had some read to us at school. Can’t say as I remember. Will you tell it me all this holiday?’

‘I don’t know it that well,’ came his reply, much gruffer than he’d intended. Then he turned the tables.

‘What had you up your sleeve, with that sudden impulsive suggestion of a holiday together? Not to forget that impish grin as you threw the Yellow Pages.’

There was a strange silence. She offered no more than a rain check.

‘I will tell you Harry, just not now. Not here with everyone listening.’

Harold glanced round, but no one was eavesdropping on their conversation. He let the matter drop and resolved not to ask again. If he was the object of some greater plan of Debbie’s, he would wait until he could guess, or she felt like telling him.

Debbie was not used to this style. She lived in an extended family in the East End and now had her own small terraced house, a stone’s throw from her twenty closest relatives. Consequently, she was used to people who wore their emotions on their sleeves with pride and Harold’s disciplined aloofness, was difficult to measure. How could he be uninterested? She was bursting to tell him, but didn’t know how. She just needed a little prodding to open the floodgates of her emotions, whatever they were - truth was that she hadn’t made up her mind what her motives were.

She concluded that Harold didn’t have a clue about women. Women didn’t want to be secretive. They wanted to be interesting. She’d have to teach him the difference.

Harold’s knowledge of women wasn’t going to serve him with Debbie. He felt that something was troubling her and so when the hostess wheeled a trolley by, he tried to force her

to choose a bottle of perfume. He couldn't understand her look of horror and allowed himself to be out manoeuvred by the skilful hostess, who recommended a brand. He handed over an obscene sum for the little bottle and received littler change. The hostess trundled triumphantly. Debbie was incensed.

'Don't ever do that again Harry!'

He gave her the bottle.

'What?' he asked artlessly.

'Buy something that expensive for me.' She knew she was being too hard on him. It wasn't his fault he still thought in clichés. Most women wanted a man like that. She softened the situation. 'Leastways, not without my permission.' She leant over and pecked his cheek. He was appeased but still confused.

Harold owed his restraint to his boring upbringing in suburban South London. When he'd been at school, all the books still had Surrey County Council on them and although Carshalton had long since belonged to Greater London, its inhabitants didn't see themselves as Londoners, not the way Debbie's folks in Shoreditch did. His boys' school didn't have a motto over the entrance but if it had, Harry was sure it would have read, 'Show no Emotion – Show no Fear!'. He had been brought up to believe that the stiff upper lip was a man's most valuable asset. If no one knew what you were thinking, then you were less vulnerable. He had since learned what a burden this attitude was, and a barrier it was to finding the right partner for life, but was unable to break free of the corset.

Harold lived with his mother and sister. He had the decent income. They would struggle without him. They were quiet, polite people with none of the gay openness of the East End, fifteen miles away. Their accent had all its consonants in place. It was considered coarse to drop them the way Ivy did and only a stranger detected the brash open vowel sounds so typical of the Home Counties. The inhabitants of Surrey would have been shocked to be told their English wasn't accent free. Harold's mum thought Carshalton was the centre of the universe and couldn't remember the last time she had gone up to town. Harold had to go up to the City every day for work. That was excusable. But why he chose to go to Chelsea to watch football every Saturday was beyond the old lady's comprehension. Sutton United was only ten minutes on the bus. His decision to go away for a holiday confused her. And then his nervous behaviour on the phone

was most worrying. Firstly, the airline desk, at least three dozen times or so it seemed, although she hadn't been counting, and then the hotel agency, through which he'd booked two single rooms, but not before he'd sworn, used a word that had never been used in her house, because his credit card limit couldn't stand for a fortnight in that posh hotel. The sums of money Harold had then organized to pay for it all were horrific and as if that were not enough, she lost count of how many times he'd tried to phone this mysterious friend. Why all the haste? And he'd always been at such pains to avoid mentioning any names or gender. The evidence screamed out that a woman must be on the horizon somewhere, but Harold's Mum never considered the notion. Harold was so happy at home and such a confirmed bachelor. Harold's sister guessed something was afoot. She said nothing. She knew how insecure her brother was. Any comment, no matter how well intended, might jeopardise this germinating friendship. She'd find out soon enough.

She wouldn't have recognized her brother, that warm Föhn April afternoon as they stepped the short distance from the plane to the arrival lounge. Debbie marvelled at the change that had come about. Harold was brimming with confidence, exchanged pleasantries with porters, customs officials and taxi drivers. He had been determined to take a cab from the airport to Starnberg, but Debbie insisted that there were better things to throw money at than at. He agreed. That was the only thing Harold showed naivety about that afternoon. It was his first lesson on how to build a relationship - one doesn't have to squander money to impress a woman like Debbie. That was a relief.

They caught a bus to Central Station and the S-Bahn to Starnberg. She found herself holding Harold's hand in the S-Bahn, only to prevent them becoming separated in the evening rush hour, she told herself. The train journey was an opportunity to re-examine her motives. She told herself again, that she was in Germany to give Harry a two week crash course in relationship building, 'how to pull,' in Shoreditch vernacular, but was disconcerted at how nice it was to hold Harry's hand. He was brill! She could no more have found Starnberg from the airport than flown the plane, yet he did it without a stutter or a bead of sweat or a map. What a champ? She had based her qualifications for instructing Harry in the ways of the world, on the regular gropings down ten foot alleys which she'd known since she was twelve. She'd lost her virginity at fourteen, married at eighteen, to the same guy mind, but not before she'd tried four others, started

divorce proceedings at twenty-one, met Harry at twenty three, thought him a wimp, yet he alone of all those she knew could manage this amazing feat of navigation and with such a sovereign air.

They arrived at Starnberg station at 5 o'clock and she let him have his way. They took a water taxi across the lake to the Strand Hotel, with its own beach down to the Starnberger Lake. They walked the short distance from the lake up to the hotel, enchanted by their unexpected surroundings. Debbie was amazed at the style. Her room overlooked the lake and had a small balcony. It was luxurious and she felt a deep sense of guilt that Harry could apparently only afford one room of that quality, but she wasn't surprised that he had settled for something more modest for himself. The prospectus lying at the check-in-desk had made her gasp at the price per night she was costing Harry. Her mother's words still rang in her ears. 'He'll be looking for a rebate if he doesn't get his leg over.'

'Harry won't be getting his leg over me!' That, she told herself, would ruin the whole exercise. She discussed things with the image in the mirror.

'No! This is a confidence building holiday. Getting laid out of sympathy or a sense of guilt, because it had cost so much, would not help his ego. I'll pull the stops out to make sure he does end up with a decent holiday flirt and it'll have to be with someone nice. He deserves it.'

She sat on the bed, more comfortable than any she had known, to contemplate the coming fortnight. In an emergency she'd be prepared to put her holiday money in to hire someone. But if it came to that, where would she start? There was the language barrier! And the Starnberger Lake did not look much like the bridge at the back of Kings Cross Station. Her heart sank. What had she got herself into? What did she know about women who'd suit a man who could recite poetry on the plane? It had all seemed so easy a day ago, in the office as she'd hatched this idea, but now the chances of realising her goal were looking gloomy.

She moved to the balcony door, wrestled with the intricacies of its locking mechanism and found herself admiring the fairy tale view of the lake, the mauve of the mountains topped by a low sun, the mirrors of the lake ripples, dancing a million ways without ever repeating a pattern. It wasn't a view to try fighting. It oozed romance, love, peace and tranquillity.

'Perhaps I should just give in, invite him to share this beautiful room and take it from the top. Or rather let him do that. I fancy him enough, but he would fall in love with me and then life

would be difficult if I can't reciprocate.'

Yes! Harry would be so offended and hurt. He would never forgive her. And what if the unrequited love were to go in the opposite direction? Suppose she fell for Harry and he wasn't interested in an uncultivated bimbo for more than a holiday flirt? But that was unthinkable. She was in control, wasn't she? She was the woman of the world. But this day had shown her how little of the world she knew. She had overspent in a big way to equip herself for this venture, but the class of clothes in the lounge of the Strand Hotel was a world away from her local Dorothy Perkins. Never mind. She had got herself a summer skirt of a barely decent length, with a very flattering décolletage and she knew she'd look stunning. She had planned to keep it for a later date, but her confidence needed a boost, so she showered, used his perfume and took it out for the first evening. She viewed herself in the mirror with great satisfaction and some misgivings.

'Why is all this so complicated? Why can't I just relax and enjoy myself? This skirt maybe great for my confidence, but what will it do for poor Harry's hormones?'

She watched to see the effect it had on Harry as she walked toward him in the lounge. She could tell he was impressed, but didn't say so. Her stomach reminded her how hungry she was and her subconscious changed the subject.

'Let's go and eat. We could go back into Starnberg. We will find something cheaper there than here in the hotel.'

She took his arm and led him down to the pier. The boat ride was fairy tale. The spring sun was now setting behind the broad mountain rim, casting a thousand colour points on the rippling water.

Starnberg held Debbie spellbound at the water's edge, soaking in the sounds and colours of a town returning home after a day's toil, with only the occasional obvious tourist lounging on the railing or enjoying the atmosphere from a waterside bar. She chose the Undosa. The staff were busy trying to cater for the numbers who wished to sit outside. As they placed the seats for one couple, another party would arrive, wanting to get at the sudden spring warmth. Debbie ate little. She was starving but so afraid of what everything cost that she decided a rumbling stomach was a small price to pay. Thus. She watched an unperturbed Harry spend money as though there were no tomorrow. But she was happy to sit watching the lights come on across the lake and drink beer from huge glasses.

On their way back to the boat, she gazed at a chip stand.

‘You are still hungry.’

‘Of course not.’

‘I’m going to buy you a sausage and chips and I’ll eat what is left,’ he told her.

She tucked in. It was fantastic. After the initial shock of chips with mayonnaise she decided it was like home, only better. And more important, a man who sensed her every need was by her side. What a contrast to the East Ender. The philosophy from Barking to the Tower was, what you didn't go out and get for yourself, you went without and a boy from Bow would have let her go hungry. ‘He is a champ,’ she thought and snuggled up to him on the boat back to Berg even though she knew that with so much come on, he would make a pass at her and would ruin her greater plan for him, but one can't always fall in love according to a plan. She had the hots for her Harry and by the time the boat had reached the hotel pier she couldn't remember what the plan was. The beer and the atmosphere made her feel sexy as hell. They struggled up the slope from the pier to the hotel, barely able to move she had entwined herself round him so tightly. And as they stood in the corridor between his door and hers she untwisted herself from him and waited for an initiative. Surely, he couldn't doubt what was to be done next but he just stood there, saying matter of fact banalities about a good night's sleep. Finally, she took the initiative and more or less forced him to kiss her but he diverted his head and it ended as a peck on the cheek. She turned and was through her door without another word. She threw her clothes at a chair, and herself on her bed and lay long, looking out over the lake, waiting for a knock on the door which didn't come.

‘So much for a mother's wisdom,’ she thought before her eyes fell shut for the night, ‘he doesn't deserve to get his leg over.’

The next day was warmer still. It was 30°C by midday and they both had packed the wrong clothing. The shops were shut, it being Sunday and so they lay beneath a huge chestnut which was just beginning to burst into that inimitable first green of the year.

‘I’ve all the wrong clothes, apart from my cozzie. Coming for a dip?’ she asked Harry over breakfast.

‘The lake must be fed by mountain rivers, and melting snow. Don’t be fooled by the air temperature.’

She gathered admiring glances from other guests, as she steadily walked into the water showing no sign of the shock from the cold. She turned to see Harold sat beneath the huge chestnut, reading. She would like to have forgiven him the fiasco of the previous evening, but how do you forgive someone who doesn't notice he's in the dog house?

'Harry,' she sired, deliberately dripping water from her long hair, down his neck.

'Oh Debbie!' he sired back, 'you're soaking my book! Be more careful will you?'

She pouted at him but he'd already lowered his eyes to his book. 'I wondered if you could remember some more of that poem you recited on the plane Harry.'

Why was she resorting to pseudo intellectual shams to gain his attention, she asked herself?

'Not now Debbie,' he mumbled. It could have been a Monday at work. He didn't even look up from his book.

She flounced off to gather more admiring glances and was so successful that by 2.25pm she was drinking coffee with a young tennis coach from Birmingham, who, as he told her, would be earning his money this summer trying to improve the backhand of middle aged wannabe tennis stars with more money than talent.

'I've not seen a tennis court in Berg anywhere?' she enquired.

'There aren't any. I've just come over for the day to get a suntan. It belongs to the image. A tennis coach without a suntan is like Caviar without Champagne to this clique.'

'Do you enjoy the work? It's such a lovely place to spend the summer.'

'Not at all. They're not paying for a tennis coach, they are paying for someone young to flatter them and the big tips come from the specials. They are usually fortyish. Husband's lost interest in them five years since, lots of makeup, zero self-confidence and desperate to be loved again. Yes. That's your stereotype tennis pupil.'

'How awful.'

'It's a living. And you? What are you doing in Starnberg in April?'

Debbie felt herself redden.

'I'm er. I'm just accompanying a friend on holiday.'

He took out a business card from a tennis club in Starnberg and after a moment's thought, gave it to her.

‘Here's where I work. There's a French lad Claude, at the same club. Why don't you and your friend come over sometime and we'll make up a foursome. Have some fun maybe before the season starts proper,’ and without waiting for a reply, disappeared back into the sun leaving Debbie to pay for the coffee. She was ashamed of herself for letting him go, still believing she would turn up with a girlfriend for a holiday flirt, but worse still was that she was here with a man in the very age group for which he was prostituting himself. It wouldn't matter though. They wouldn't meet again, unless of course, Harry became such a pain that she wouldn't feel obliged to him anymore, in which case it could be advantageous to have another string to one's bow.

Things had changed a bit for Harold too by the time Debbie had got back to the chestnut tree. He was sitting in the sun with a very red pate still quite engrossed in his book. He seemed unaware that he was no longer in the shade of the tree.

‘Harry. You're burning.’

No response. She sat down under the tree and decided to let the fool burn. She was a city girl thrown into a world famous beauty spot. There were enough objects of study to entertain her without needing a morose middle aged man. Nevertheless, her thoughts revolved around her fool. Perhaps he was sulking. Her ex-husband had always sulked if he felt he wasn't getting enough, but her conscience was clear on that one. She couldn't have done more last night without breaking down all conventions and Harry was one to want to bide by conventions. ‘Be patient girl,’ she told herself. ‘I have to teach him to walk before I let him run.’

As the Sunday afternoon wore on so the lush vegetation of the grassy slope down to the water filled with swimsuits cut just that little bit too small for comfort. For some reason, which even she, as a city dweller, couldn't understand, the duck turds in the grass were found to be more offensive and thus more to be avoided by the bathers, than the cigarette ends. Cigarettes! Neither of them had smoked since Shoreditch.

She shielded her eyes against the glare and gazed out over the flat motionless water. A brown skinned topless lady, topping up last summer's tan, shimmered in a heat haze rising from the distant wooded hills. She was trying to repair her Walkman but gave up and instead pulled a few grimaces into a mirror which she didn't bother to return to her handbag. Debbie found herself mimicking in her mind, Harold's poem recital of the previous day.

‘Having reaffirmed that yesterday's swollen spot

*has dried in the sun to her satisfaction,
she returns to her Walkman,
then scorns it and takes up a fashion magazine.'*

Debbie sees she can't concentrate. Her hand keeps going back to her truculent technology, but she knows she is defeated. Debbie wondered how old she was. Thirty-five maybe. Tits are OK. That's for sure. She's on her own, no wedding ring, in need of company. Harry was being a pain and she had an invitation to go play tennis. And as if that were not enough reason, her original motivation for being on holiday was to give Harry some instruction in the ways of women.

'Harry,' she drawled, but with just enough armour penetration to be sure of the effect. He looked up. 'Harry. You're burning. And that lady can't make her Walkman work.'

'Pardon. Oh yes.'

He moved into the shade. Was he the only man on the slope to be unaware of the bare bosoms not ten yards from him?

'Thank you for mentioning it. Very foolish of me to burn myself.'

'I said, that lady can't make her Walkman work.'

'Where? Oh. Shame,' was his disinterested response, and he picked up his book again.

'Well go and help her Harry!' She was becoming emphatic, even loud.

'Me? Repair it? Why? I'm not an itinerant audio technician.'

Debbie was not going to give up.

'But at work everyone brings their technical bits and pieces to you and you usually manage to fix them,' she flattered. 'Look! She's fiddling with it again. Go and help her!'

'She's got practically nothing on.'

'Well if you think that's why it won't work, just go and tell her to cover her tits and she'll have it sorted.'

Harry broke into a broad grin. He loved Debbie for her throwaway humour. But instead of moving he started thumbing for his place. Debbie was losing her calm.

'You are an infuriating shit Harry. You're not interested in me and you won't take a golden opportunity to chat her up.'

There! Now the cat was out the bag and he'd have to respond.

'I am interested in you Debbs,' he whined. 'You haven't spoken to me all afternoon!'

Now she had his full attention and was quite flustered by the emotion which had found its way into his voice. She didn't know what to say but realized that having a domestic on the beach would solve nothing. She'd already said far too much. But even if lost for words, she could still weave like a hare and her change in tack was quite masterful even by her standards.

'Entschuldigen Sie bitte.' she called down the slope at the topless one. How awful she thought her German sounded compared to Harry's. 'Mein Vater kann Ihr Kofferradio reparieren,' she continued. Harry choked.

'Debbie! Shut up!' he hissed. 'You said you only had a CSE in German. And I'm not your father!'

'I have, and you're not, and I'm well aware that a Walkman is not a Kofferradio, but it won't put her off you if she thinks I'm your daughter and Kofferradio is your opening.'

The topless woman looked up at them, obviously confused. 'Redeten Sie mit mir?' she cooed up the slope.

Harry drew breath, but while he was still considering how to regulate the matter, he heard Debbie's determined voice cut the silent hot air.

'Ich sagte, mein Vater kann so etwas reparieren.'

She wanted to tell the topless lady that she would have to do all the hard work if she wanted a date with her father, but her German only coped with structures she'd learned for her oral exam nearly ten years ago. By chance her real Father had run a small radio/TV repair shop down Commercial Road.

'Wie Suß! Danke schön,' and the topless lady gathered up her Walkman and came toward them. As an after-thought she turned and slipped a top on.

'Should work now,' Debbie muttered. 'She's done the hard bit so now you can be a hero.'

'Shut up!' he hissed back. The object of their mirth was walking over again. Debbie moved to one side and beckoned her to sit down next to Harry, who was choking and went red as the no longer topless lady knelt in front of him. A rescue craft hovered around a group of dinghies. She made out an overturned vessel. The sailors were in the water, but there was no emergency. Nevertheless, it was something to do, away from Harry.

'I'm going to watch. I'll meet back for dinner Daddy,' she sung at Harry and skipped off down the slope.

Debbie glanced often up to the chestnut tree and saw Harry in animated conversation. Finally, the Walkman was tested and Debbie gathered from their smiles it worked. But the lady didn't move. The slope was filling with bathers and the ducks were busy trying protect their territory in the rushes with squawking and hissing. She managed to controlled an urge to kick one of them. Finally, she decided that a walk along the lake would be tactful and who could be sure she wouldn't bump into her tennis coach again.

But the rest of the afternoon was uneventful and when she appeared for dinner there was no sign of either of Harry. She was furious, and jealous and that made her even more furious. She had to admit that she had never agreed where dinner was to be taken and so, after an hour's fruitless wait she walked down to the tiny wharf where the water taxis drew up and found there was one just leaving for Starnberg. She jumped aboard. Half an hour later, her pride again intact after successfully negotiating Starnberg with her schoolgirl German, she was at the tennis club, where a few players were still packing up. There was no sign of anyone resembling a coach. So on to the Undosa for a beer. It was very noisy with many more guests than the previous evening. She couldn't get a table on her own so preferred to stand, leaning against the rails. She fancied she could just make out the Strand Hotel across the lake and made herself stand and wait until all its lights were on. The bustle of the Undosa guests faded in her consciousness and she concentrated on the hills opposite, now barely discernible from the blackening sky. She imagined Harry and the topless lady. She'd be topless again by now, with Harry's hands fondling her. Debbie reminded herself that if she hadn't stipulated separate rooms, she would now be over there with Harry. Perhaps he'd been cross with her all day because of the two single occupancy surcharge that had been incurred by her foolishness. The thought of that much money being wasted on a whim made Debbie angry too. 'Let's hope he had the sense to use my room to get laid in, she whispered to herself.' It's more romantic.'

'It's the first sign of madness they say,' came a quiet but firm voice from behind her. 'Where have you left your friend?'

Debbie started out of her reverie. She recognised the voice and felt foolish enough to be caught talking to herself, but then to jump like a startled rabbit lacked cool. She turned from the lake and covered her embarrassment with anger.

'You frightened me!'

‘Sorry. I didn't realise how deep in thought you were.’ He paused. ‘So where's your friend?’ he asked again with persistence.

‘At the hotel. Not feeling well.’ She lied to him for the second time that day.

‘Too much sun I expect! This Föhn weather is a killer if you're not used to it.’

A band struck up somewhere further down the lakeside.

‘Do you like dancing?’

‘Yes, but not tonight. I have to go.’

She grabbed her cardigan from the back of a chair and fled the terrace. She headed toward the pier without thinking why. What was there in Berg, in the hotel, for her? Minutes ago she was mentally offering Harry her room, her bed even, to lose his virginity in and now she was fleeing back to that very place where she had invited another woman to displace her. Worse still was that the next boat was in an hour and the chip stall that had saved her life the previous evening was already shut. The atmosphere around the lake was just as stunning as the previous evening. Music drifted over from the Undosa, geese gaffed from the reeds and an occasional swan would glide silently from between the moored boats. Couples slung round each other so tightly that they staggered like inseparable drunks passed her without taking any note of her lonely presence on a bank under a broad sycamore. But without Harry the beauty of it all only made her realise all the more how dispirited and unhappy she was. And an hour is an eternity when you have nothing else to do but brood over your, who should be in your arms, in the bed of another woman. All the skill and machinations that had gone into getting this far and in two days she's fouled everything up because she was too proud to admit she'd fallen for a man like Harry. She wept an hour of bitter but clandestine tears.

Debbie was down early for breakfast and was convinced Harry would be down much later, with his topless lady, no longer topless she hoped, in tow. Debbie couldn't rationalise why she felt so miserable when in fact Harry's night on the tiles came about through her contrivance and as she'd spent most of the night ruminating over that little contradiction, she felt correspondingly washed up that morning. She had to own up to herself that the only explanation was that she was smitten. The impossible had happened. It was she who was the victim of unrequited love. She asked herself if the explanation as to her feelings wasn't merely that she was trapped in a strange place and missing a bit of company. But try as she may, she wasn't

convinced by that theory either. She knew herself too well. If she'd just wanted a holiday friend, she'd have snapped up the tennis coach instead of going to bed hungry.

But there came Harry! Looking very pleased with himself in a smart blue blazer, white shirt and cravat. A bit old fashioned she thought but very stylish. He carried it off well. And the smile on his face and the spring in his heels as he walked toward her table? Definitely that of a man who got laid the first-time last night. The Bastard!

'Morning Debbie. Sorry we missed you for dinner. Claudia invited me back to her flat and then I couldn't get a taxi. You got yourself something nice to eat I hope and put it on our tab. I left a message at the desk, but saw you hadn't picked it up last night by the time I came back from Claudia's.'

'So, they did it in her flat!' Debbie could have screamed. She was even more cross, but also relieved. Her main point of anguish in the night had been the thought of them bonking just across the corridor from her! At least she now knew that she had imagined every squelch and slurp of their lovemaking. Harry sat down and poured some coffee while she sat there boiling. The trouble was, she knew her feelings to be purest green jealousy. She had kicked him into Claudia's bed and now wanted to take scalps.

Better to say nothing than be unreasonable, she thought. Why be unreasonable? He gets Claudia, I have a flirt with the tennis coach. We get back to London and then I can reassess the situation. What would I want with an old man anyway?

It didn't work. The lump was forming in her throat no matter what yarns she spun herself. She buttered a roll but couldn't eat it. She wanted to scream at him that she was the one he should be bedding and she couldn't say a word, utter one complaint. Everything was going according to plan. It wasn't Harry's fault that the plan was Saturday's plan and this was Monday and it was no longer the one she wanted to work to. She would have to own up to the fact that she was well and truly love sick and the only thing to do was fight and win her man back again. The first step though was always to define and learn about the enemy.

'I suppose you got her Walkman going again then?'

'Yes, yes. She'd bought new batteries and put them in the wrong way.'

'Cheap trick to gain a bit of male attention at the lakeside I suppose. We all do it. Play the weak and helpless woman.'

Debbie could feel her claws sharpening and flexing. She was already cross with herself

for having revealed her emotions. No man liked a jealous woman. She had thrown her first husband out because the idiot always invented some feller she was supposed to be having it away with. She just couldn't stand the scenes and now here she was behaving like a spoilt teenager. There was one difference though. She knew Harry was having it away with another last night. Harry studied the hard lines around Debbie's normally so soft and beautiful mouth. He was confused by his holiday companion, but that was nothing new. Two days on holiday with Debbie had already confirmed his worse fears. He understood nothing of women. But he couldn't help thinking there was just a hint of jealousy in Debbie's last remark. It made no sense at all. She had thrust him into a situation that had ended in a very pleasant evening. And now he should feel guilty about it? As always, his solution was to side step the issue. 'We don't want any trouble,' he would have said at work, and Debbie could almost hear him say it on the terrace overlooking the Starnberger Lake. She wanted to shout to the breakfasters, 'what a wimp?' No! This was the wrong man. A good old fashioned bull and a cow would have cleared the air. She'd have found chance to say, 'I love you,' and they could have slipped upstairs. But no. He didn't want any trouble so the air stayed charged with emotions that were the wrong sort. She forced her buttered roll down, washed it from her dry throat with lots of coffee and wanted to ignore him. But her tongue was not to be ruled by her head.

'I think I'll have a game of tennis today,' and she stood up so violently that her chair fell over backwards as she flounced off down to the reeds, where the spring time antics of the ducks were accompanied by deafening squawks. 'Is there anyone in the world apart from me not getting any?' she asked herself. 'Even the ducks get to..... well at least it rhymes.'

Harry followed her a short time later. He tried to put his arm around her at the water's edge but she shook him off and still he pretended to ignore her unreasonable behaviour.

'Cost me a hell of a tip for the waiter who recovered your chair from under the next table,' he murmured.

'Sorry,' she murmured back, full of genuine contrition. What was she thinking of? How dare she behave like this? Her mother would have taken her to the ladies and slapped her silly face, old as she was, and she'd have deserved it!

'Never mind,' Harry murmured. 'I thought we ought to go into Starnberg and buy some cooler clothing. The weather forecast is for the Föhn to last some days yet. Would you help me choose something?'

‘To impress Claudia with?’

She paused, told herself again how unreasonable she was being. Jealousy would never win him back! The trouble was she kept forgetting which plan she was working too. Coach was off the agenda she reminded herself and so she took the sting back out of her voice.

‘Of course, Harry. There’s a boat leaving in half an hour. I’ll just grab a cardigan and my bag. Wait for me here.’

They spent a dreamy, happy morning in Starnberg, wandering from one boutique to another, Harry trying out the most outrageous things and both of them laughing as they’d never done before. Debbie had forgotten Claudia and the tennis coach. She heard that familiar voice.

‘You’ll learn what a tiny world it is when you are staying in a small lakeside town like Starnberg,’ and there was her tennis coach looking at her over a rail of exquisitely trendy shirts she’d just been encouraging Harry to try on. She was too embarrassed and speechless to reply.

‘So why did you run off like that last night?’

‘I’m sorry. It was rude of me. I felt very unhappy and then made matters even worse by treating you so unkindly.’

‘It didn’t matter. I was a bit surprised but got over it. So what are you looking for in a men’s boutique?’

Debbie had been waiting for that question and was flustered before it came. She reminded herself that the current plan was to get Harry back, but his young sporty presence had her vacillating again. Why should she let Harold’s presence upset her friendship with her tennis coach? After all, she may not be able to win Harry back. Supposing his feet were in concrete under Claudia’s table. She might still need coach. But the problem was what to say. She couldn’t keep up the pretence of being Harry’s daughter. That would end in disaster. Lies always do. So why not the truth?

‘My friend, well, he’s actually my boss, is buying some clothes.’

‘I see,’ came the knowing reply and a huge twinkle. ‘You have to humour the purse strings too. No wonder you shot off like a scalded cat last night. You were tempted by an adventure but thought you’d better play the system. I didn’t know how similar we are.’

His laugh infuriated Debbie. It was a knowing laugh of a man who’d realised how naive he had been. It was a jaundiced, almost resigned laugh that said, ‘that’s just the way women are. I

should have known better than to have thought otherwise.'

'I think you've got hold of the wrong end of the stick about me,' she mumbled, but at that moment Harold reappeared from the changing cabin wearing a sinfully expensive and very flattering cotton suit. He didn't realise that Debbie was talking to the man over by the shirt rail, so called out, 'do you like it Debbs?' Coach's face was a picture.

'I think I've got you right. I did think a girl with your looks could have pulled something more her own age, with a bit more panache, but who am I to criticise?'

He replaced the shirt he'd been holding and made toward the door. Debbie could see everything collapsing around her. She lost Harry, through her own stupidity and vanity and now her holiday flirt had her down as a good time girl keeping her aging boss happy on holiday with a few home comforts.

'Wait!' she called after him. 'I want to explain.'

If Debbie's luck had been in that day, the tennis coach would have kept walking, but he had nothing to lose, so he turned round and walked back to where she was standing. Harold looked dumbfounded and seemed to be trying to say something but instead he was going redder and redder in the face. He started fumbling in his pockets for a cigarette but realised he wasn't wearing his suit, nor were there any in his blazer, for he hadn't smoked now for two days. Worse though was still to come. If Debbie thought she was going to dig herself out of her hole and keep all options open, she had misjudged the precariousness of her position. It was the coach, with a hint of a sneer on his face, who started Debbie on a downward spiral into her own personal Slough of Despond.

'Now then Debbs,' he mimicked, 'let's hear this yarn.' Debbie started with a sigh, drew breath again and stopped. She was lost for words.

'You see... How can I put it. Harry and I are just sharing a holiday. I mean we're not an item.... not in that sense.'

'Who pays the bills?' came coach's brusque enquiry. Harold finally released air.

'I I I d d do,' came the tortured words. Debbie turned on Harold. She knew she was venting her frustration and disappointment on the innocent party but she couldn't help herself.

'Yes Harry! You pay the fucking bills all right, but you've fixed yourself up, feet very under Claudia's table....' She reached in her bag, withdrew a tiny glass bottle and sent it hurtling across the shop at Harry, who caught it with the consummate ease of a regular Sunday cricketer.

Coach applauded his dexterity but there seemed to be a hint of sarcasm even in that.

‘Here’s one bill you didn’t have to pay for me,’ she screamed. Coach didn’t hide his glee. He couldn’t resist fanning the flames.

‘Oh dear Debbs. Blown out by a Grandad. A bit infra dig.’

‘Oh for God’s sake!’ she shouted. The shop turned to see what the commotion by the shirts was.

‘It’s not like that!’ She was interrupted again, but this time by Harry, who was lucid again, but for his TH s.

‘What is it like? I th.th.think I’d like to know too. And who, incidentally, is your friend?’

‘He’s not my friend.’

‘So why are all th.th.the explanations necessary?’

Coach was enjoying himself, his head going from left to right and back left again, as the verbal rally between Debbie and Harold took its course. Debbie was mortified. The man she loved, standing in front of a shop full of people, hissing through his teeth like a demented steam engine every time he hit a TH and her casual flirt was mocking her like a big brother. And now was the moment her big brother chose to intervene, perhaps with the best of intentions, hoping maybe to make Debbie consider how ridiculous she looked with her aging sugar daddy. Perhaps it was straightforward maliciousness. He looked straight at Harry, eyeball to eyeball.

‘Do you have any idea how middle class and middle aged you look in that suit?’

The quiet precision of his voice revealed a man of great experience of the world of human relationships. It was painful to witness such an uneven match between two suitors. Harold gasped. He was mortified and his face showed the pain. Debbie glanced at the suit, which she had found rather becoming, but saw only Harold’s gormless expression. Why didn’t he stick up for himself? Coach continued in his quiet suave voice.

‘Come Debbie.’ He held out his arm. ‘Let’s go and have a coffee.’

Why she took his arm she never knew, but in that subjective moment of indecision, she succumbed to the persuasion of youth and once she had taken the bronzed, muscle bound tennis arm, there was no way she could think of that would let her go back. As they got outside in the bright sunlight, coach decided to consolidate his position and seek approbation from his prize.

‘You’re well rid of him Debbie. How on earth did you ever get caught up with that buffoon?’

His next sentence was lost in a squealing of brakes and hissing hydraulics as a bus drew up alongside them and emptied itself of travellers. The door was about to close again. Debbie saw her chance. She freed herself from coach's arm and now it was his turn to experience the discomfort of a detached steel cold glare. He felt himself wilting, just as Harry had done.

'I've told you twice already. You've got this all wrong,' was her quiet but determined assertion, and she leapt through the closing doors of the bus, leaving the victor and the vanquished, still in a suit he hadn't paid for, speechless on the pavement outside the boutique.

Debbie never understood how she negotiated paying the bus fare or decided her destination. She only cared that the bus should shut its door and move off before either of the men in her life had chance to follow her, so she nodded to every question the driver asked and they were soon headed toward the outskirts of town, mercifully away from the bustle of Starnberg, its villas and hotels.

Soon came wooded valleys with exclusive sanatoria and old people's homes, so exclusive that the bus swept by the empty stops outside them. And then they toiled up a steep hill. Once out of the wooded valley there were intensively cultivated fields as far one could see. The first stop was in a little village. Aufkirchen she read on the sign, but no one seemed to want to alight. Other passengers looked at her and the driver turned and repeating a name. Finally, an old lady leaned across her shopping basket and told her in broken English that this was where she wanted to get off. Still too dazed to realize what she had done, what she was doing, she got off the bus in a strange little village which skirted an unknown main road, that would carry the bus toward hills she'd never heard of. And as the dust settled and the quiet returned to the village, she found herself alone on the broad pavement. A small supermarket up a distant side street pulled its shutters noisily down for a midday sleep and she was left with nothing but the larks, mocking overhead.

Her attention was arrested by a lonely tuneless bell which began ringing the worshippers into a nearby white rendered church. The churchyard was cool and shady so without considering further she pushed open the gate to the yard and walked onto the gravel path between the rows of finely kept graves. A shiny flat marble stone in the shade offered itself for her to sit on. There she rested, reflecting on what a miserable twenty-four hours she had behind her, and worse, what was still to come. How would she resolve her position? No excuses! She had steered herself into

this disaster with careful precision. She couldn't have done it better with planning.

There she was, in the middle of nowhere so it seemed, with no idea when the next bus back to town would be. But she could look on the bright side. At least she had peace from men, those complicated beasts, the one who didn't seem to want to sleep with her and the other who only wanted to bed her. She, in the middle, supposed to make some sense, some rhyme or reason out of this mess. What mess? Everything was now ordered in her life. She would have neither. The tennis coach wouldn't forgive her running off without so much as a 'shall we shan't we', a second time, and Harold could never forgive her the debacle in the boutique. No! That was unthinkable. Love him or not, she was rid of him. There only remained the details; how to terminate this awful holiday and in the long term, find another job. The whole affair was now so final in her mind, that it didn't even seem worth being sad over. Not a tear squeezed from beneath her shut eyes, and the unruly lump she'd fought with over breakfast seemed banished from her emotions. Perhaps, she had grown up. Perhaps now she could get on with her life free from the sex thing and all its complications. Perhaps.

So deep was she in thoughts of her own making, her brain doing its housekeeping, she called it, that she ignored the sudden activity behind her. The village seemed to have sprung into an ant like bustle, but a silent bustle, just people, men and women, appearing from every door, dressed in dark lounge suits or black skirts and jackets with black hats, and all swarming toward the now silent church. Debbie turned to look as the first feet passed through the gate and crunched their way along the gravel path, through the rows of tombstones and into the church. After a few silent mourners had walked by, undisturbed by her presence, she lost interest in the procession and turned back inwards, to her deepest point of feeling, and analysed it as before.

Perhaps she would have analysed herself so long until she was ready to return to the hotel, pick up her suitcase and head back for the airport. She was so determined to be finished with her fiasco that she would even have been prepared to find her way through Munich on her own. The peace and solemnity of the beautiful little churchyard, the amazing view of the lake which seemed miles beneath her, twinkling in the midday sun, had a soothing effect on her troubled soul. She realised, she had all but come to terms with her self-inflicted disaster, was ready to call it a day, at peace with herself and ready to accept the hand that had been dealt, when she was taken from her reverie by a voice familiar, but not to be placed. It was a woman's voice,

speaking good English but with a solid German accent.

‘Well what brings you to our little village church this fine day. Is Harold in Aufkirchen too?’

Debbie swung half round, looked up into the bright light, and by shielding her eyes, managed to make out the silhouette of Claudia. She looked quite different from yesterday, and it wasn't just the fact that she had some clothes on. She looked much softer and warmer and the black outfit with a deliciously expensive hat, suited her well. Her night with Harry seemed to have done her as much good as it had done him, but that was all of little consequence to Debbie now. She sprang to her feet and then felt she looked quite shabby in her short summer dress on such a solemn occasion.

‘No! Harry isn't here. I caught the bus out on my own.’

‘Is he busy then? I thought he was on holiday? How odd to let you go off on your own, and to Aufkirchen too, when he knows I live here and we told him last night, he was to bring you and introduce you to us. I shall be most cross with him, and Georg too, my husband, especially after Harold spent all evening talking of no one else but you; he's so in love with you and he's so charming, that Georg and I, and the children too, just had to meet you. And that silly joke about being his daughter. I have to chide you. That was very unkind. Poor Harry's hung up enough about his age and being a bit older than you. But I know I do talk too much, Georg is always telling me so, and I must go in now, she was a close neighbour of mine, ninety two, but you will still be here when I come out?’

She paused for a breath and Debbie found she had to answer, although all her thoughts were now down in Starnberg, with poor Harry, all alone, and she had no idea how to get back to him, to explain, and now she felt herself fighting back the tears. How foolish her behaviour had been, was established. The damage it would cause was a new problem. She felt sick. Her behaviour towards Harry had been unforgivable. She had to get Claudia into the church before the dam of tears burst. The humiliation of having to explain to Claudia what a fool she'd been, would have been too awful. But then an outrageous thought flickered through her mind. If she were still to be here, in Aufkirchen when the funeral finished, she could perhaps talk to Claudia who could then intercede on her behalf and maybe could get her Harry back for her? But no! That was unthinkable too. She deserved no such reprieve. Nor would she get one. The real world wasn't like that. But nevertheless, the glimmer of hope, which Claudia's presence gave her,

decided her to hang around until after the funeral.

‘I don't know when I shall go back,’ she whispered. ‘It depends when the next bus is.’

‘Ages. But I'll not have much time anyway. We're going on to the restaurant afterwards. It'll be a lovely body as we say here.’

Debbie looked amazed.

‘Don't look so alarmed,’ Claudia hastened to explain, ‘it's just an expression we have here for a good do after a funeral. I must fly. We'll see you both before you leave. Promise?’

Claudia hurried toward the church door, then stopped, fished in her handbag, found a small brown paper bag and walked back to Debbie.

‘Harold kept talking about a poem you liked so much and said he wanted to read it you. He said it explained so much of Well. I didn't understand what it explained to be honest, but as I work in a second-hand bookshop - we take in lots of books off students in Munich, I thought I'd look in for it, and Presto! There it was, in a junk box, just as I was leaving to come to the funeral.’

Claudia hesitated, as though she weren't quite sure what reaction she expected from Debbie, then gave her the small package. ‘Perhaps you could give this to Harold. I'm sorry it's a bit tatty, but the poem he wanted is around page fifteen.’

‘Yes. Of course I will,’ and then as an afterthought she muttered to herself, ‘assuming I still see him.’

Claudia barely caught the words and couldn't be sure what was meant, but the look in Debbie's eyes, the lines around her lips, unsettled her. She took Debbie's hand, squeezed it and then hurried once more toward the church. Debbie half sat, half collapsed in emotional exhaustion on her tombstone and stared down to the distant lake.

For a second time, Claudia didn't make it into the church. Instead, she went back through the little gate and hurried to an adjacent telephone box. She looked through the glass as she dialled. She watched Debbie return to her reverie. Something was wrong, she decided. Something a woman like Claudia could fix. Small villages have one thing in common. Everyone is a match-maker.

What a mess? All the while Debbie had been able to blame Harry for it, she had been

able to rationalize her behaviour towards him, and convince herself that she couldn't be in love with a staid old stutterer fifteen years her senior. But the realization that he was devoted to her and she, she alone had blown it, been cruel to him in front of others, left her a desolate figure sitting mortified beneath a white marbled winged angel, clutching a tatty version of T.S. Eliot's selected poems like a prayer book. A hot flush, scalding in intensity came over her as she wondered how she would ever live down her behaviour, or explain it to her mother when the inevitable interrogation came about her love life this holiday. She noticed Claudia come back through the gate, glance at her forlorn figure on the tombstone, make her way through the church yard, shake her head in wise disbelief, but this time turn into the church.

The sun moved round behind the angel, casting Debbie in new shadow. The brightness of the pages was gone so she thumbed to page fifteen, which fell open as it had done numerous times before.

'Page fifteen. The years between us.'

She started reading.

'The Waste Land. How fitting,' she mocked herself and turned the page. *'The Burial of the Dead.'* She paused, looked up from the book and let the distant lake blur before her eyes. The two titles were uncanny in their aptness.

'How lucky the old woman about to be mourned by her village. Her life was run, her lovers dealt with and dead too. Ninety two years in the bank. She had doubtless lain on her death bed, curtains drawn thinking to herself that no one could take that away from her. The Waste Land, my Waste Land. That's all I'm left with now.' She paused to wipe away an unruly tear. 'Would he have read me this to win me, with such depressing titles? Does it explain so much of him?'

She had started to read idly, like a disinterested pupil, but the titles had ripped her from her reverie and self-pity and the words took on such a poignant inner meaning to her predicament that she became quite unsettled again and her attention was now riveted to the lines. Her thumb seemed to fall naturally into the brown grooves on the bottom corners where a thousand thumbs had lain before her.

'April is the cruellest month, breeding

Lilacs out of the dead land, mixing

*Memory and desire, stirring
Dull roots with spring rain.'*
*Winter kept us warm, covering
Earth in forgetful snow, feeding
A little life with dried tubers.
Summer surprised us, coming up over the Starnbergersee
With a shower of rain.....'*

The tears began to well from under her eyelids as she read the lines that had brought her such extremes of joy, then plunged her into a depth of misery worse than the worst moments of her divorce. Her watery eyes couldn't focus on the page so her eye ran down to the next paragraph gap. She wiped at the tears and read on.

*'What are the roots that clutch, what branches grow
Out of this stony rubbish...
A heap of broken images, where the sun beats,
And the dead tree gives no shelter, the cricket no relief,
And the dry stone no sound of water.'*

Now she recognized the lines too. He'd quoted them one day to her over one of their tea-break discussions. She remembered it well. She felt she knew him well enough and had had the courage to ask him why he was such confirmed bachelor.

'Married people are but roots that clutch, a heap of broken images,' he'd said.

'That is what he'd meant,' she reflected. 'He saw our love as something much higher than I'd envisaged. He didn't want wasted years of routine, didn't want falseness, a love of lies that would one day be shredded by the sordid labours of our tired existence. In short, he didn't want the very type of marriage I've just fled. How he made me laugh that hot day when he tore off his tie and slung it in a filing cabinet and declared it, 'the symbol of my bondage'. It had only been a gesture. That was true, but he had meant it nevertheless. Perhaps he can only express himself in gestures because he doesn't trust his stammer not to interfere. Perhaps he hadn't wanted to commit himself before he knew I was worthy of his high ideals. He had no right to test me like that. But then again I failed him and the test. Perhaps I am nothing but a root that clutches.'

She thumbed on. Page eighteen dropped out, and fluttered to her feet.

'Unreal City, Under the brown fog of winter dawn' she read as she stooped to gather it

then skipped a few pages but the repeated line captured her eye.

*'Unreal City Under the brown fog of a winter noon....
At the violet hour, when the eyes and back
Turn upward from the desk, when the human engine waits
Like a taxi throbbing waiting.'*

Is that why he wanted at all costs to ride with me in style? I asked for a taxi and he assumed it important. I've thwarted him, unintentionally destroying his silly game of poems, he's been enacting since the moment I'd told him we'd go away together. Can I dream of being with such a man? Yes!' she affirmed.

*'The typist home at teatime, clears her breakfast, lights
Her stove, and lays out food in tins.
Out of the window perilously spread
Her drying combinations touched by the sun's last rays,
On the divan are piled (at night her bed)
Stockings, slippers, camisoles, and stays.
I Tiresias, old man with wrinkled dugs
Perceive the scene, and foretold the rest
I too awaited the expected guest.*

*He, the young man carbuncular, arrives,
One of the low on whom assurance sits
As a silk hat on a Bradford millionaire.
The time is now propitious, as he guesses,
The meal is ended, she is bored and tired,
Endeavours to engage her in caresses
Which still are unreproved if undesired.
Flushed and decided, he assaults at once;
Exploring hands encounter no defence;
His vanity requires no response,
And makes a welcome of indifference.'*

She paused in her silent reading but asked out loud, 'Is that why he didn't make a pass at

me? The fear of love through indifference. The reason why so many passions fail, fall into meaningless humdrum, which in turn becomes life's most vicious war zone and I have lost him, a man of such sensitivity, maybe even destroyed him.'

Debbie was disturbed by the sound of a car door slamming, echoing off the white church walls in the afternoon heat and then down the little main village road, to be lost in the vast expanse of corn fields beyond. Then there came the squeak of the gate and the crunch of the gravel. She turned a little to see coach approaching her gravestone.

'How did you know I was here?' she asked in exasperation, furious that her last moments with Harry were to be interrupted.

'I gave Harry a lift back to the hotel. Least I could do. He looked as if he would have a fit standing there on the pavement outside that ridiculous boutique and then the owner starting to shout at him and threatening to call the police if he didn't pay for the suit instantly.'

'Did he buy it?' she interrupted him.

'He had to poor love. Cost him a packet.'

'That doesn't matter. He looked so good in it.'

She sighed and smiled in absent approval but coach chose not to notice it. He was much more interested in relating his victories of the day.

'I hung around in the hotel bar, hoping you'd return, when a message came through for Harry. I thought it would be you so I took the liberty of intercepting it. I told the reception clerk Harry was unwell and not to be disturbed. As you know, it wasn't you, but his girlfriend Claudia, who wanted Harry to come out here and pick you up. She said something about a funeral and you looking distressed, was the word she used, sitting in a churchyard in Aufkirchen. My last chance to make it with you perhaps so I didn't pass it on to Harry but came myself.'

Coach was very pleased with his deceit.

'You had a damned cheek treating Harry like that.'

'All's fair in love and war.'

'This is neither.'

You weren't tender loving care to him either!'

Debbie winced and felt so guilty she couldn't be bothered to offer a defence.

'Let me at least give you a lift back into Berg' he continued. 'With a bit of luck Harry will be packed and gone by now. We may find room for a bit of fun together after all.'

Debbie felt sick, was too drained to resist his offer. There was no point in waiting for Claudia. The whole way the awful drama of the last two days had unfolded was bad enough. One didn't have to go through the trauma of reliving it with every new telling. So she looked down at the marble to pick up her book. A line of late afternoon shadow falling from the angel highlighted some lines she couldn't help but read as she bent over to gather the loose pages.

And walked among the lowest of the dead.

Bestows one final patronizing kiss, she read.

‘Yes,’ she thought. ‘That's me and coach. I'll be walking among the lowest of the dead and a final patronizing kiss will be all the slimy shit will leave me with tomorrow.’

She was filled with revulsion for the bronzed tennis coach before her. She couldn't even remember his name but she couldn't start fishing in her handbag now for his business card. How she longed for Harry. He could put the world to right for her. Perhaps she was chasing a silly youthful pipedream of princes and castles in the sky. Perhaps reality is nothing but submitting to conquest to then be rewarded with patronizing kisses. She wanted more, but her mother would have told her that is all there is. Take it or be a lonely pauper. At least her coach had something about him, some drive and ambition to win her. As for Harry, he gave up without a fight. Ran off home like a scalded cat when confronted by empty vanity, a rake who sells his forearm by day and his foreskin by night to foolish bored old ladies whose rich husbands are screwing their secretaries or being discreetly dried out at the local sanatorium. No! Harry was a lost cause, which left he, who would make a welcome of indifference. She stood up wearily, let coach take her arm and they crunched their way across the white gravel, he keeping up a prattle of self-praise to his smart ways, and she too tired of the world, to flatter or reprove his emptiness. Through the squeaky gate they went and out onto the grey asphalt which shimmered away into the distance. She turned to try to get one last glimpse of the lake below but the view was already obscured. She felt the chapter titled ‘Harry,’ closing so bent her weary body to get in the car door which coach opened with an exaggerated flourish. He was mocking her in her position of weakness, the way he had done to Harry. An absolute bastard through and through, who would cast her off after the night was done and still she climbed into his car and let him kiss her from the driver's seat and remark that her perfume did not suit her. He talked incessantly, all the way back to Berg, unmoved by her determined silence, but she knew that by letting all this happen, she was no better than he. She let it happen and offered not the meekest resistance nor even

contemplated a strategy to get back the one she loved. And as she climbed the wide stairs of the Strand Hotel with him, and allowed him to put his arm around her and touch her breasts when their movements made it possible she ignored it and wondered if Harry had paid their bill before he'd left. She wasn't sure she could afford a room for two for the night and she had no reason to believe coach would put his hand in his pocket, yet still she pretended her images were whole and would bring her happiness. She stopped at her door and felt in her bag for the key and although it made the search difficult, he still endeavoured to engage her in more caresses. So sick was she of this empty rake that her head began to spin from his nearness and she thought she might faint and had to steady herself on the door handle. Coach felt the limpness pass through her body and stepped back in alarm, too stupid even to prepare to catch her.

A door across the corridor opened, a soft firm voice called across to her.

*'She turns and looks a moment in the glass,
Hardly aware of her departed lover;'*

Debbie cried out as she swung round and there was her departed lover. 'What an entrance,' she thought. What style?'

'Go on Harry!' she cried amid a flood of loosed emotions, spurred on by the vista of coach's jaw dropping in astonishment. Harold hesitated but Debbie recognised that moment of panic on his brow, when he feels a stammer coming on. In a flash she had the book in her hand and let it fall open to the page.

'Oh Harry!' she squealed. 'Let me be your TH s'

She drew breath, mastered her pounding heart and started.

*'Her brain allows one half formed thought to pass:
Well now that's done: and I'm glad it's over.'*

She couldn't help a triumphant smirk at coach, but the aptness of the lines was lost on him. Harry smiled a winning smile that would have melted her marble angel in Aufkirchen churchyard. The normally solid floodgates of his suburban upbringing, collapsed under the weight of his emotions.

He burst out, 'Tell me it doesn't have to be like that. It doesn't have to be a heap of broken images. I didn't want to be just exploring hands that would counter no response, out of some form of misplaced feeling of obligation. Then I realised how wrong I'd been to insist on buying the perfume. Perhaps, subconsciously, I did want to oblige you to me. I love you so much

you see.'

His voice died away, embarrassed at such honesty of emotions after forty years of suburban platitudes. He continued in a more restrained voice.

'I know I was wrong to want to own you, try to bind you to me, but I felt so insecure. Please forgive me.'

'You only had to explain that to me. There's nothing for me to forgive.' She skipped across the corridor and kissed her Harry tenderly on the cheek. 'Perhaps I'm just a silly bimbo. Too stupid and insensitive for you. But I understood the poem. I knew what you wanted to say with it.'

He felt down for her hand which still grasped the book of poems and lifted it to an angle they could both see.

'Where did you get to?' he asked. She pointed at the page. 'Let's do it together,' he whispered in her ear. She smiled and as they walked through his door they chanted in unison, between giggles over their own foolishness,

*'When lovely woman stoops to folly and
Paces about her room again, alone
She smooths her hair with automatic hand,
And puts a record on the Gramophone.'*