

THE HOLY MERE

The heavy wood and glass doors swished shut behind me and the smell of fear was all around. A neon indicator board summoned number 36 and number 36 lifted himself from the silent polished bench and made his way to join the queue at the next window. I made my way to the ticket machine to pull out my number. It was 196.

‘God! It’ll take frigging hours,’ I said to no one in particular at the queue at the window.

‘It always does,’ you said. I really hadn’t expected a reply. It was a voice I felt I knew so I looked up. Number 36 was smiling at me. You say I smiled weakly back at you. I don’t remember. I only remember the polish on the benches. I could smell it. I walked away toward the polished benches.

‘You don’t recognise me, do you?’ I heard. It was the familiar voice again. I turned and looked at 36 one more time but said nothing. I just wasn’t in the mood to be chatted up.

‘I spent six years of my life in almost touching distance of you, stuck gum in your hair more than once, and now you don’t recognise me.’

Then I knew you and broke into a huge grin.

‘Manfred!’ I beamed and reached out my hand to shake yours. Why do we shake hands when we’re embarrassed or shy?

‘What are you doing here?’ I remember giggling. That was a stupid question. What would you be doing in an employment exchange? ‘How are you?’ I tried instead.

‘As well as can be expected on a cold autumn Thursday, after two hours queuing to receive the state pittance that is supposed to keep me from starving.’

‘The money is not too bad.’ I stopped, put up my hand to shield us from eye-droppers and whispered, ‘provided you don’t let on you’re living at home.’

Living at home? Who was I fooling? The money’s awful no matter where you live. I remember looking down self-consciously at my scuffed shoes and threadbare jeans. It was just lucky that tatty jeans were in fashion for my reality was a boring penniless eternity in an overcrowded four roomed flat.

'I'm not living at home. I've got my own flat now,' you bragged. God how I was impressed. My envy must have been obvious. Your clothes were in good condition and you stood there tall, blond, preening yourself in front of me; and a place of your own. I heaved a silent sigh that came from very deep down inside. You must have heard it! And then out the blue you asked, 'want to move in with me and share the rent?'

It was more as a joke than anything. It had to be. That was obvious to me from the start. It was the sort of saucy comment with which one tries to cheer up a slow-moving dole queue and show off a little to a pretty girl, but it changed my life. At that moment 196 flashed on the indicator board.

'My God! Wonders never cease,' and I ran to a window some way from yours. You lost me from sight as my queue speeded up a little and I'll bet you thought no more about me. Can't blame you. You had your paymaster to convince. One has to have priorities in that hell hole. No! You definitely didn't think of me again. That's why you were so surprised to find me leaning against the pillar by the exit. You had intended to walk past me with only a nod of farewell. No way! I fixed you with a stare. You tried to avoid it. Your discomfort was obvious. If only you'd kept walking. But you didn't. Even though you didn't let our eyes meet, you faltered. My look was obviously intended to arrest your attention. It worked. You stopped dead in your tracks my little bragger, didn't you? 'Well let's look at the flat then. Have you time now?' I asked. Bluff was called. You had no more intended to share your flat with a girl from your school class, who you'd ever only spoken about four words to throughout your school career, than you'd intended moving back to your mother's.

'Slow down Ute! Are you serious?'

I laughed an embarrassed laugh. How could I have been so stupid as to proposition you like this. What a fool I felt, and in my foolishness, was an understandable anger and I let you have it.

'Oh, that's nice isn't it? Weren't you serious? Are you scared of your own courage? I should have known.'

You were speechless at the venom I could spit. I'd learnt a few things since you'd last seen me. Anger, genuine all-consuming anger, the sort that can take you over body and soul was one of them. That's what I'd learnt. I turned and started to move away but then decided to have one more go.

‘Well just do me one favour. Show me your flat, make me some coffee and I promise I’ll leave in time to catch the last bus.’ My face twisted. I was close to tears and I hadn’t cried in years. I begged. I grovelled. I was prepared to commit murder so long as I didn’t have to go home again immediately.

‘Listen! I’ll go mad if I don’t talk to someone, if I don’t do something different, just anything. Please Manfred!’ I paused. My defences were down. Out with the truth I thought. Why bother to hide from it.

‘Just those few words in there meant so much to me. Perhaps you don’t know what loneliness is but I’m ready for the canal.’

And you? You stupid shit - stood there, open mouthed and gormless as always when initiative is needed. You must have known what was to be done. I had to take your arm and lead you through those awful glass panelled doors. They were huge, always made me feel so scared as I approached them, down the steps and onto the street outside. And I, innocent as ever, assumed you would at some point take matters in hand. But you were pissing yourself. Scared as a rabbit when it hears the saucepan lid rattle, scared of this girl and her impetuous behaviour but my determination to spend that grey autumn day differently to the never-ending cigarettes and television of the last two months since I lost my job in the carpet factory, seemed to leave you little room for manoeuvre. Your arm started to guide me gently. I think you were more surprised than I was at your own tenderness. Through the leafy hedged, golden treed suburb. Why do they wrap our misery in beauty? They must know how it hurts to walk through leafy lanes we can never be a part of. We only ever visited that part of town on the days when we are summoned to seek an interview or pick up our money order. It was a smart area of one or two-family apartment houses, seated pompously in large gardens bordering onto the north side of the canal. They always looked warm and inviting. ‘Happy families,’ oozes from them. Two cars and double garages. Try getting a flat when you have two kids and prams!

We reached the canal and were climbing the steep steps of the foot-bridge as two endlessly long barges crossed in opposite directions beneath us, both proudly proclaiming their allegiance to some international chemical company. Big business always assumes we should be pleased for

them, proud of them. Odd sentiment. In that moment I saw them as a metaphor for being shafted, in both directions, at the same time.

You'd changed by then too. Perhaps you felt the stone in your stomach shift uncomfortably. The Thursday stone I call it. The one we always carry with us in case we forget how awful life really is. No point in even thinking about smiling because if you do, the Thursday stone will shift to remind you you've nothing to smile about. You'd put on a brave display in the exchange. No one wants to own up to how serious things are, but the grey of the day and the unsuccessful interview was leaving its mark on your disposition, too. We stopped and looked at the barges.

'How do you get a job? How did they get their jobs on the barges? Where do they go to ask? How do I find out if there is a job; do you know what I mean?'

I knew what you meant. And how different was your tone now, to the happy go lucky lad who had chatted me up. Your defences were down, too.

'Let's not talk about work,' I said and I pressed my hip so hard into your thigh that if we hadn't both had hold of the parapet we may have fallen over. I know now that it wasn't a fair cop. Cupid didn't fire any arrows. There was no romance. We were both so starved of a kind voice we'd have fallen for anything that was warm and didn't shout or threaten us. Both of us were captured by the sudden experience of bodily contact after so many months of deprivation. Infatuation I suppose we'd have to call it but it was really deprivation. Deprivation of self-respect and spiritual warmth; the unique moment of first touching each other, sublimated all other cares. So overpowering did this moment become, that we stood motionless, just holding each and other listening to the complaints and shouts of the barge men and all the sudden reverse revving and complaining chugs of those massive diesels. Two flat steel sheaths inching past each other, the water between them squirted up in fountains to then slop over the low-slung sides of each barge, only to race to points of lowest exit and rivulet in a thousand ways back into the canal. I couldn't help thinking it erotic. I was so after your warmth it was quite a turn on. My heart was racing. It was that bad I felt sure you must notice, too. Even more, I was aware that the massive burden of loneliness had fallen from me - just like that. Two hundred yards, that's all it took. Two minutes with your arm round me to make me happy. Why oh why, isn't the whole world happy when it takes so little? That grinding pessimism and boredom, the eternal inadequacy I'd felt since I can

remember, had disappeared in the space of minutes. Had love such power? One would then surely never dare abuse it! Would one?

You can't have guessed or believed I could be thinking of love. I was pretty surprised myself. I kept telling myself that I was being softer than a Mr. Whippy. But I didn't dare fight it too hard. I'd been the victim of quite different thoughts when standing on that bridge a few hours before and suddenly being on my Manfred's arm had evaporated every trace of depression. I'd have been scared of me too. You might have viewed the coming hours with more positiveness had you been sure what to do with that intense feeling coming from inside me. But how could you have known what to do when I didn't know myself what I wanted. I was young and inexperienced then, too. A whole three months younger than now. You had always been the quiet, honest and diligent lad, but like me you could never remember doing anything to the complete satisfaction of anyone. The only step you had ever taken entirely on your own initiative was to move from your Mum's flat to join your friend Uli, in his apartment. Then again it was more your mother's boyfriend than you who made you move.

The barges passed. It was me who broke the silence.

'Do you have the flat on your own?'

'Only for the last few weeks. Uli was busted for having a joint. Two years he got for nine grams. Ridiculous! They said he'd been dealing.'

'That's awful! So you do need a new flatmate.' I felt you tense. 'Don't worry. I'll keep my promise and leave tonight.'

Then it was your turn to unpack.

'Truth is Ute, I may as well leave with you. The money in my pocket will just pay what I owe in rent and then there's nothing to live on. Uli used to do the shop lifting. I'm useless at it.'

'How long have you got to pay?' I asked. I was desperate. Uli's flat was all that was between me and the canal.

'Until tomorrow. Then it's the bailiffs.'

'Shit!'

'Exactly. When is a joke not a joke?' you ask.

'In a dole queue. Nobody makes jokes in a dole queue. That's why I waited outside for you.'

'Did you think I was serious about you moving in?'

‘I wasn't thinking at all. I was desperate. I only know there is no smoke without fire in a dole queue.’

And I was certain that if you were that deep in the smelly stuff with the bailiffs due the next day, you needed my presence, my moral support as much as I needed yours, just I was being more honest with myself. Girls always are.

Once off the bridge the area gets more shabby. We crossed the road and wound our way through a passage at the side of the barracks. Behind the barracks was a small concrete box, six stories high with those mean square windows and the occasional balcony. An estate agent's hoarding advertised some vacant flats ‘in Atrium style’. I never did find out what that meant. I remember noticing that the entrance and the hallway were clean and well repaired but that seemed merely to make our feet echo more menacingly in the barren stone stairway. At the top of the third flight you had to finally let go my arm to get your key out and then you headed for a brown plastic fake wood-grain door in a dark corner of the landing. You found yourself fighting hard to control a hand threatening to tremble but there was no turning back. Turning back from what? To what? I was right. Ridiculous but what else? What's lost? You had no conception how I imagined the next few hours but if they helped you forget your brother's arrest and your mounting money problems you had nothing to lose. How insignificant each other's presence had made it all seem? One of the women whose always selling papers outside the job centre had once told me that making love and making children are our only real source of strength. Suddenly I knew what she had meant.

‘Here we are,’ you'd announced with much less enthusiasm than I'd expected.

I walked into the small square hallway meant for hanging coats, found no hook on the wall so I kept it on and walked the three paces through to the bedsit.

‘Nice!’ I tried to sound warm, although the furniture was sparse and tatty; two dining chairs, one table, a single bed and a portable television on the floor with a chrome loop arcing above it like a halo. A transistor radio lay on the bed. A large window made the room pleasantly light, but with another two dark doors in addition to that I'd come through, it still felt very claustrophobic.

‘I spend very little time here apart from to sleep,’ you apologised, ‘it's too cold and I dare not switch the heating on and with no easy chairs and only the bed to sit on I get pretty fed up to tell you the truth. Still, no one bugs me.’

‘How did you manage when your brother was here?’ I already decided I wanted to stay and tried to get a picture of how it would work.

‘I slept on the floor and Uli had the bed.’ You paused. ‘I’ll go back onto the floor if you really mean.’ Again, the hesitation. ‘If you decide to stay.’

You must have felt foolish offering to sleep on the floor in your own flat. Why should you have offered me anything. I was suddenly sure the whole idea was destined to disaster and the Thursday stone was shifting again. I was near to panic. This had to work!

‘If I stay - if you don’t mind me staying,’ I was almost whispering, ‘we’ll share the bed Manfred. We’ll have to get the sex thing out the way you know. I can’t go into the bathroom every time I want to change my blouse.’

I looked you straight in the eyes for the first time.

‘I’d like to stay. We’ll make love soon; perhaps not tonight but soon. I promise. I can’t go home; I’ll help with the rent and cleaning. Manfred! I’ll go mad if I go home. Please let me stay. I’ll make it work.’

‘Yes; stay.’

Manfred without emotion. The most awful sound I’d ever heard.

‘What’s the problem? Do you have a steady girlfriend or something?’ This would have surprised me. Manfred, the wimp of the class in those days? You weren’t very wimpy any more. That I readily admitted to myself so my heart sank as I realised how naive I’d been not to allow for the presence of another girl in my calculation.

‘No! It’s nothing like that,’ you reassured me. ‘There is no one. It’ll be all right.’

I could hardly speak. I could hear my own crushed and wavering voice.

‘That was a pretty unusual proposition you made to me in the dole queue. I knew you were only joking of course, but the idea did appeal to me. Perhaps you really just don’t fancy me. Just give it a try for a few weeks. I’ll go if it doesn’t work. I promise.’

That was my last try. I told myself there’d be no more grovelling.

‘I said it will be all right!’

You were beginning to sound short but I couldn’t let go until I knew what was wrong even at the risk of ruining everything.

‘Are you worried about sleeping with me? Do you think I’m the village bike or something?’

You’re dead wrong. You’ll be the first Manfred. I promise you.’

You started blushing. I could sense it was going to be all right. The stone was gone. Beads of sweat were breaking out on your forehead and upper lip although it was quite chilly in the room. You were speechless. It was left to me to rescue you from your own embarrassment.

‘What about some coffee?’ What would human relationships be without small talk? ‘Shall I make it?’

‘No, no. I’m going,’ and you headed off through one of the available doors. As I stood alone musing on all that had happened an idea struck me that brought a smile to my lips. I headed towards the kitchen, but then stopped because I decided there was no point in asking you. Perhaps you were as inexperienced as me?

‘Manny!’ I’d never called you that before. Don’t know what came over me. ‘I’m just going down to the supermarket for some cigarettes,’ I called at the door that was ajar. I was gone before you could answer. I bet you stopped making the coffee, or at least only made one cup. You must have assumed it was a cheap excuse for me to do a runner. I bet you never expected to see me again. But I wasn’t having second thoughts. Far from it.

Five minutes later I was ringing the doorbell. You’d called down through the intercom, ‘who is it?’ That’s when I guessed you thought I’d gone for good.

‘Me you dope. Who do you think. Open up! This weighs a ton.’

You pressed the lock release and stepped outside the flat onto the landing. You must have heard my heavy footsteps in the stairway; too heavy for a pack of cigarettes. I was fairly panting by the time I was back on your landing but it was all nervousness and excitement. You let me back into the flat without saying another word and I started emptying the contents of a carrier bag onto the bed. Your face was a picture. A two-litre bottle of Italian red wine. God! It tasted foul I remember. Bread, cheese and another small paper bag which I kept in my hand as I headed towards the third door I assumed to be for the bathroom. I still don’t think you’d guessed.

‘What about the coffee?’

‘Stuff the coffee. Just find some glasses.’

‘You must have spent half your dole money on this lot.’

‘At least!’ and then quietly to myself, ‘there are some things a girl has to celebrate.’

I stripped off quickly and washed under my arms and between my legs with a bar of heavily scented soap which had also been another spontaneous purchase along with the wine. I really wasn’t sure what to do. I remember viewing my underwear with dismay. ‘Not quite what I’d

imagined,' I'd thought. I sprayed that awful cheap perfume at my neck, underarms and pubic hair and dressed again except for my bra. I made a mental note to draw the curtains, not out of any feelings of modesty, but because I didn't want poverty, the state of my draws to be more precise, to spoil this one moment of happiness.

My caution was totally unnecessary. Two hours later you weren't focusing on what I was wearing, but on what I wasn't. Do you remember that final struggle with the tight denim? What a sexless material denim is? Our legs in a hurry, sent the empty wine bottle rolling across the floor. Just one of many imperfections that first time but it didn't seem to trouble either of us.

It was the highest of emotional experiences in a drab boring world and that is not an exaggeration, but was rapidly tarnished for me when I realised that in our inexperience we had run up an additional and unnecessary laundry bill. Not even our combined incomes allowed for that. The following days were spent mainly in the flat and mainly screwing the hell out of each other. We soon decided to dispense with the wine as a non-essential expense and found living on love relatively cheap. We spent nothing on beer, and little on cigarettes, for I only left the flat on one occasion to return briefly home to collect some clothes and tell my Mum what had happened. I pretended we'd been an item for months. She knew I was lying. I'd not been out the house in months.

She nodded her consent with a lump in her throat. I could tell she felt she had failed me. I left for the last time.

On the way from the bus station to the flat I had stopped at a small store to purchase a nylon tiger-skin rug which could be washed and dried quickly. An attempt to economise on bed linen had become necessary. I had a vague, unrealistic vision of the rest of my life with you under, on or in me. My second piece of naivety was to think that only other people become pregnant. The honey-moon ended the day my doctor referred me to that women's self-help group. It was miles away and in the city.

I'd never been more than ten miles from home. He said they'd organise and fund an abortion. It sounded so easy and I hadn't the guts to tell him I'd never been more than ten miles from home. He wouldn't have understood. Your reaction wasn't much better. It was the first time I realised how little you were able to cope with a crisis but then the crises were coming so thick and fast

you were barely able to concentrate on my words when I returned from a rare shopping expedition.

'I think I'm pregnant Manny.' I paused and waited for a response. You passed a letter you were holding to me.

'I know we're being evicted,' were your quiet words. I didn't bother to read the letter. I didn't believe anyone would evict us.

'Why? We've paid the rent.' Surely it was as simple as that. But no.

'The flat's in Uli's name. He's breaking the contract by sub-letting and anyway he's inside. We've got a week to get out.'

'Shit!'

'What now?'

'The doctor has made me an appointment with a women's group to get an abortion.' I paused. 'For next week.'

'You mean you know you're pregnant.'

Your voice was so uncomfortably hard.

'Of course I know.'

'So why go mealy mouth around the subject.'

I couldn't believe it. You were shouting now, red in the face, your nerves disintegrating with every sentence.

'I think I'm pregnant,' you mimicked and mocked me. 'How can you be so fucking stupid woman?'

'It takes two Manfred,' I sobbed. My tears incited your anger. You had a victim to vent your emotions on.

'It was your job to take care of that side of things,' you screamed and kicked the coffee table full of newly purchased cups, across the tiny room. What was left for you to do? In your abject shame at your unreasonable behaviour, you ran out the flat fleeing the broken crockery and your responsibilities by slamming a door or two. I'd seen it all before. I'd seen all the men in my family do it whenever a crisis loomed. And I'd always been amazed at the stoic way the women stooped to pick up the pieces of china and now I'd gone and got myself in exactly the same fix. You were right! How could I have been so stupid?

While I got an abortion, you looked for a flat. I phoned my mother after your outburst to tell her what had happened. I had hoped for advice, but she seemed fairly satisfied. I could imagine her telling the story over the garden fence.

‘He didn't hit her and he came back for her. Sounds a thoroughly nice lad.’

It was the last straw. The lack of work and sympathy for our predicament in our home town made me decide to go along with your suggestion and try our luck elsewhere and the trip for the abortion seemed an ideal opportunity. We had tried pleading with the owners of the apartment but were told the rented accommodation market was not ‘profitable,’ enough to risk letting to someone with a criminal record.

Even my cunning lie about being Uli's wife didn't impress that round contentedness of the estate agent. What a way to earn money? All he did was look after the flats on behalf of the insurance company and coined it in. Mind, he had to have the stomach for it and not everyone is that bigger bastard. No moral obligation is great enough to move such people to jeopardise their profit margins merely to put a roof over two people's heads. I thought playing the pregnancy card would soften his attitude. Naive fool girl. It had the opposite effect.

The move to the city went well enough except we had to sleep rough one night before we found a flat that was available for immediate let. We were virtually destitute by the time we moved in and to make matters worse we could no longer do everything by foot. The flat was small and comfortable but on the outskirts of the town so bus fares to the city centre soon became a major item of expenditure. Signing on again was a financial disaster. We could no longer use our parent's addresses so although we went at separate times to sign on, the computer soon picked up that we were co-habiting and reduced our benefit payments. The financial burden of the move, followed by one of those totally indifferent announcements through the post, informing us our support was to be reduced, brought the ceiling metaphorically down on our heads. The big-city honeymoon was over, too.

Weeks of severest financial deprivation followed causing bitter rows, abuse and acrimony. ‘It had all been your idea,’ was your litany, but even if you couldn't deny that ‘it took two to tango,’ yours was the moral high ground. We didn't touch one another for weeks, but slugged it out in our own private, verbal hell. Hour upon hour for days on end we shared one room, a bathroom and kitchen. It was winter, bitterly cold, too cold to take a walk with hardly a stitch of decent clothing left between us. The local snack-bar was warm at least, but the owner was becoming

touchy about the amount we spent. The library was a bus ride away. Three doors there had been and I had chosen the one that led to love.

Even now I have no regrets. No one could take those first few weeks away. They were mine, in life's bank forever, but I was considering taking my next benefit money for the train fare home. Not that I could exactly expect a welcome. There were another two unemployed, consuming the final pennies. I was diverted from this idea when a letter from the employment exchange arrived, 'inviting,' me to attend an interview for a temporary post as a nanny. The situation was difficult. The pay offered was so low that coupled with the fares involved, we would be worse off than before. The letter implied though, that failure to attend could jeopardise unemployment benefit. I first should attend a health authority clinic for a check-up and X-ray as a clean bill of health was a pre-requisite for the position. This fresh adversity actually brought us closer together again. We could just manage to put together the fare to the clinic, which would however leave us with nothing to eat. That was a problem which could be solved in a local supermarket with very lax security, but you had another bomb-shell to drop.

'I've been thinking.' Always a dangerous start to a conversation Manfred.

'Fine!' I couldn't help but be cool.

'We've got to do something about things haven't we?'

'Yes.'

'Well there's this advert I found in a mag and I think we ought to consider it.'

'Doing what?' I'm sure my tone was not encouraging. Merely realistic.

'Don't be like that,' you pleaded.

'If it was advertised in a magazine it's going to cost money so where am I supposed to get my enthusiasm from?'

'I'll borrow it; from me Mam.'

'She will be pleased. How much?'

'Five hundred for starter.'

'She could probably scrape it together, so what's it all for and will it allow us to pay her back?'

You produced the advert which had been carefully cut out and obviously well preserved. It was for a correspondence course leading to a diploma of the Institute of Alternative Medicine. I read it carefully and tried to stay serious. It was so ridiculous, but you were so intense, and then again

we weren't exactly overloaded with other means of earning a living, so I managed to soften my voice.

‘You do it.’

‘We could study together and both sit the exam. It wouldn't cost twice as much.’

I was touched by your optimism rather the way a proud mother tries not to discourage the more fanciful ambitions of an imaginative child. But I'd given up, killed my child. We'd never even considered or talked about letting it live so you became my child. Perhaps that's what men really want, how they really like it.

The sums of money involved were really outside our reach and it was probably a con anyway. It was a two-bit company offering a diploma in alternative medicine. Please! Where did you get your optimism? What planet were we on? But it did provide a focal point for our dreams and as such pulled us back together. In the meantime, we decided I should go through the motions of applying for the nanny's job and you wrote off for more details on your course.

The trip to the clinic certainly broke up the boredom. I found myself sitting in the high-ceilinged waiting-room of the City Health Office. It was good that most of the people with me were either unemployed or about to start a new position, for only the destitute and unemployed haven't the energy to rebel from sheer bloody frustration. The sterile highly polished lady behind the sterile highly polished wooden desk at the end of the hall instructed each newcomer to take a numbered ticket from a dispenser and wait for their number to be called. Although I used the word ‘call,’ there was in fact no acoustical signal at all. The current number to be dealt with was as usual being displayed on an electronic board which meant the twenty or so people present had to spend all their time gazing at the board lest they miss their turn. When my number did come up my enquiry was dealt with in another office where it was decided under which category I should be placed. That done I received another ticket with a new number on and was sent back to the main waiting room to study the same board but watch for a different number. Because the input of numbers on the board was controlled by several different departments and a new input automatically removed the previous one for eternity, I didn't even dare move to go to the toilet because I hadn't brought a friend along to keep my place.

You can imagine what effect this had on those waiting there. Instead of showing solidarity, they soon resorted to tricks in order to jump the queue. By the time I reached stage two I was going cross-eyed waiting for my second number to come up. Then two smart, but casually dressed

young women walked right out the front and started scrutinising the waiting room. As their eyes reached me, they nudged each other, seemed to agree on something and moved through the rows toward me. I thought it must have been a mistake so I got my eyes glued back on that screen but couldn't remember the last number. Had it changed? How often? My pulse started racing. I wanted to cry. So mesmerised was I and in such panic that I was first became aware of the two girls again when they sat down either side of me and started chatting.

'Been here long?' asked the tall one in tight jeans and high heeled boots. I was obviously startled by their sudden presence. They laughed at me. God, I was embarrassed. I felt tatty next to them. It wasn't just clothes either. I hadn't had a decent wash in days.

'Probably not. I mean it seems an eternity but you have to use different time scales in here. Long? No! I haven't started measuring in days yet.'

The girls giggled their understanding. Their laughter was much friendlier this time. I was so pleased to hear a friendly voice in this slough of despond and the chance to talk with another being after weeks of isolation in a one roomed flat with a depressive boy-friend, that I forgot the indicator board and literally vacuumed these strains of friendship out the air.

'What's your name?'

'Ute.'

'Here for a job check-up?' asked the other, who was dressed only in the most expensive labels. Everything about her was pulled loosely around to produce a carefree scruffy look. Everything was however most exactly placed to produce the exact and desired measure of scruffiness, with no margin for error. I remember how impressed and envious I was.

'Yes. Do you think I'll have to wait much longer?'

I suddenly remembered the sin and error of taking my eyes from the indicator board.

'Oh my God. Did 132 come up?'

'Sorry love. Wasn't watching.' The correctly casual one seemed to lose interest as soon as the board was mentioned, and promptly carried on her story as if my dilemma were a thing of total insignificance. She just started telling a yarn as if there weren't a trouble on the horizon.

'The first time I signed on they gave me one new form to fill in on each visit. Third time back I asked for all of them in one go so that I could fill them in at one sitting and save on bus fares. It was only then they told me they'd pay my fairs. Did I have the tickets? But we don't have as bad a time as the foreign workers bless their souls. I know this building backwards. It has four stories

with about 16 rooms on each floor. I'll give you just one guess which is the only room with no number nor label on the door. That's right! The alien registration, where all the poor bastards who can't speak the language have to go first.'

I was genuinely horrified. I tried to imagine what that would mean for us if I had to go back three, maybe four times.

'Oh, I really couldn't afford to come back again.'

I must have sounded desperate. She tried to cheer me up.

'Like I said, they sometimes help with the fares, that is if you know to ask. Do you want the job?'

'Not really. It's so badly paid it's not worth it, but I'll have to go through the motions.'

There was a moment's pause then the tall booted one came to the point.

'Do you want us to sort something out for you quickly? No numbers. Be out in the time it takes to walk to the door. Good wages for a girl like you who presents herself well.'

'What would I be doing? Cleaning probably but I wouldn't mind if I didn't have to declare it.'

My reply showed that I hadn't grasped the situation. The girls laughed and the measuredly scruffy one muttered between a grin, 'Chimney sweeping may be.' The penny still didn't drop. I was completely taken in.

We all stood up to go and I was that pained by my state of dress compared to the smooth elegance of my companions I could have wept. I felt shabby, dirty and inadequate stood beside them. I remember nervously trying to brush some shape into my skirt. At that moment, my attention was arrested by the sound of my name. It took what seemed like an eternity for me to realise a nurse had come from a side room and was calling me across the expanse of waiting heads.

'Yes! that's me,' I called back and involuntarily moved through the rows in the direction of the nurse with the two girls in close tow. The nurse was about to become tetchy but as she saw me from up close, I caught sight of myself in a mirror behind her. My exhausted black ringed eyes, eyes with the vacant indifference of someone who hasn't slept or eaten properly for days, softened her.

'You really must pay attention to the board Ms. Willer. You nearly missed your turn.'

'She won't need her turn now. We're fixing her up with the firm.'

It was the voice of one of the girls coming from over my shoulder. I turned in confusion and said, 'yes. I'll just explain and I'll be with you.'

The nurse hesitated and then decided to intercept the events.

'We don't like people wasting clinic time. You've come for a medical, we're expecting you so now you'll have one.'

She looked across defiantly at the girls and mustered a withering look that comes with years of work as a public servant.

'They can wait out here if they like. Personally, I'd prefer them to leave the building. You,' turning to me and pointing at the door, 'in there, roll your sleeves up!'

A loud and suddenly coarse voice followed me through the doorway. It was the scruffy one making a last effort.

'You're not going to do what that old cow tells you?'

But I was. The in-built obedience to one's elders was still alive in me then, especially in the disciplining atmosphere of that austere building.

'I'll not be long,' I called back and then realised that I didn't wish to be identified with their abusive tone. The nurse realised this and walked slowly and with a measured stride back through the door to confront the two girls.

'You'll leave now or I'll have you arrested.'

'She wants to join,' the scruffy one said through some noisy orthodontics with her chewing gum, 'and it's a free world,' she added and blew a large and loud bubble. I was thunderstruck.

'We don't force anyone you know,' the booted girl added. 'We don't have to. Your friends over at employment do that for us.'

'Supply us with the labour and sometimes the work as well,' the other twinkled charmingly. The nurse calmly walked to a wall phone some distance away but after a few steps I heard the girls chorus, 'OK! We're going,' and they skipped across the waiting room giggling to each other.

Little was said back in the treatment room, but when we went through to a further chamber for a blood sample to be taken the nurse asked, 'Did you really want to go with those girls?'

'They offered me work,' I said with complete honesty. 'I need some work. You can see that.'

'Yes, but not that. That sort of thing is a recipe for disaster.'

I was confused. We were living the disaster and they offered me work. How much worse could things get?

‘A bit of cleaning? It’s not much, but we really are in trouble with our money.’

‘What are you talking about girl?’ She took both my wrists in her hand and felt them as if she were taking my pulse twice. Her cold look straight into my eyes was impossible to evade but equally impossible to withstand. Finally, I had to look away out into a courtyard below. I remember fixing my eyes on some trees. The nurse could see my distress without a tear needing to be shed. She led me still by the two hands past a row of chairs and through a door with a red lamp above it and warnings about restricted entry. The red lamp and the sign were like a parable.

‘Oh my God. Aren’t I stupid?’

‘More than is normally allowed around here.’

The huge yellow apparatus towered above the two of us.

‘Take your blouse and bra off.’

There was a pause while she busied herself adjusting the apparatus. I stood in the twilight of the room half-naked, waiting to be told to stand against the screen. I felt I had to try to explain.

‘I only came for a health check for a nanny’s job. I know I don’t really want the job and I’m not trying too hard to get it but that’s not against the law. Please don’t tell them at the exchange I said that, or that you saw me talking to those girls. I think they’re looking for excuses to take our benefit from us.’

She ignored me.

‘Stand there.’

I heard a heavy door shut followed by the whir of the machine. The nurse re-appeared and I immediately noticed the self-satisfied look on her face.

‘Put it down to experience. You’re lucky. You’ve been saved this time. It’s a bit of a one-way ticket once the clinic records show you here for regular check-ups.’

She hissed the last word as if it would burn her teeth.

‘Your other benefits would have been stopped after a couple of days and that would have been that.’

The nurse had half feared, half hoped, with a morbid desire to witness penitence, that I would burst into tears but I had disappointed her. Was I really saved after all? I was too numb to do anything. I rocked to and fro, still half naked and replied with simple disarming simplicity, ‘I didn’t realise. You won’t believe me but I didn’t realise.’ My eyes wandered to gaze again out the window. I seemed to have forgotten the presence of the nurse completely.

Everything had suddenly become irrelevant. The nurse put her hand on my shoulder and expected some response, perhaps even some gratitude but I continued my gaze.

Perhaps I had known all along, deep inside me, what the girls were about, where things had been leading but the lure of a fine blouse, a bra that still had something resembling elastic in it, the hint of an expensive perfume, had seduced me to deny the truth to myself. I only knew that I had been close to solving the growing gnawing strength sapping problem of grinding poverty and now the nurse had removed that feeling, removed it with surgical precision and replaced it with the old burdens of destitution. The Thursday stone was back but it wasn't Thursday. Worse was, for some reason she had expected me to be grateful to her.

‘Shall I go and make sure the two girls have left?’

I wanted to say no. Those girls had spoken kindly to me and understood me, the first to do so since I'd been in the women's house arranging the abortion. The abortion. This city, the city of my woes and now I had to remember the abortion. How simple life had seemed back home. At least the family were there. Useless, but there. I had of course been clutching at straws by consenting to go with the girls but I was ready to throw myself under a bus if it meant a bit of human company in a hospital ward. Anything, just not the isolation of the third floor of a concrete block, where any attempt to get out cost irreplaceable resources. And some snooty nurse criticized me for wanting money, companionship, laughter, a glass of beer, a cigarette without having to turn each coin twice before spending it.

‘Yes! Make sure they are gone.’

My voice sounded remote from my body. Was it me speaking or were appearances just being kept up? Suddenly it all welled up in me. I had to grasp whatever chance of happiness came my way. I had started down this path the day I moved in with you Manny. Now was no time to try to go back. Tears came in my eyes and the nurse sighed a sigh that said ‘at last; the error of her ways....’ I freaked. I flipped completely. I'd never ever spoken to anyone like that. I didn't speak. I screamed.

‘Piss off you stupid old bitch. You know nothing;’ I think it went, ‘understand nothing; PISS off and mind your own stupid fucking business!’

The scream erupted from within, with all the force of a life's frustration compressed into one sentence. Sod the nurse who got her kicks by picking up rotten apples to put them back in the barrel; the barrel already full of rotten apples that is and I told her as much. I dressed and fled the

room, crossed the clean marble floored waiting room with a face the colour of its bilious yellow walls, bumping into people, out; just out the suffocating air of bourgeois expectations; down the grey stone steps; the girls; where are the girls; gone! A triumph for morality?

No that would have meant suicide and I owed it to you Manny; you'd done nothing really wrong yet in my eyes; eyes sobbing the streets along; people looking but no quiet word of encouragement, no hand held out to offer just one perspective for the future. The solution was so simple everyone looked past it in that moment they looked past me and then quickly turned away for one doesn't want to interfere does one?

‘Manfred, you've turned on the wipers too early.’

He's completely lost vision of the Autobahn. Instead we have the deathly rattle of rupturing hail meeting wiper blades pushing a million dead insects in their path. Reminds me of a history lesson. The oncoming cars seem to emerge from a black wall where the colour of the sky meets the comb of trees on the distant ridge. Headlights are suspended in nothingness just above the level of the road. Manfred bought well. His ageing diesel runs noisily but sweetly. About the same as he expects and gets, from his woman. Look at the size of that steering wheel. No one has hands that big. His slim fingers hardly go around it. It's all over-dimensional knobs, buttons and braces. Will you look at that gear stick for Christ's sake? Mahogany crowned to fit only huge hands with ample meat into which it's shape can safely sink, be nestled, caressed like a baby's dummy, a cigar or a prick full of blood. What are these men on? Who knows what latent dreams and wishes are being fulfilled for a whole generation of economic miracle machos.

And the Macho to whom this luxury sledge on wheels once belonged? It made me wet myself when that silly bitch poured out her heart as to why she had to sell. All the sob stuff about her husband. I know such men from close up now. I've made a study of them woman. Too fat, too much cholesterol, too higher blood pressure, too many pep-pills, too many sedatives, too much alcohol, all drawn intimately into a corroding artery by the blue smoke of success. As his body had struggled to cope with life's ample luxuries, what better than to pound down the motorway in a dream of purchased power at one hundred miles an hour? And she sat beside him and let him do it. And I was supposed to stand there making polite conversation and pretend I cared that her old man had a heart attack at a traffic light. A student in a Renault carved him up, more from inattention than malice I don't doubt. He jumped out all self-righteous belly and braces and

chased him down a side street. There he went a crimson colour, started screaming at the student and dropped dead. It stood, dead as its owner, in her garage for years and all we had to do to get it for next to nothing was listen to her sob story. But look at your boyish face Manfred. I've not seen you look this good since that awful Thursday you chatted me up. Let's hope it doesn't end in tears. Despite its age, I have to admit your ageing diesel has that certain something that really makes us feel good when riding in it.

But why so slow? If you slow down any more we'll stop. You can have another twenty for diesel to get us home. The storm up ahead looks ominous, but I can tell how you're savouring the drive and your new toy and want to be careful. Bless him. Says he doesn't know how much he dare ask of the motor. The other tin supermen pound past, aqua-planing, flashing their lights and shouting at their women in the absence of the attention of the man in front, behind or to the side. At least Manfred's woefully moderate speed spares him the obligation of shouting at me. My hair isn't held in place by a half kilo of lacquer, nor my folds by a pound of paste but I, just like the women of the tin supermen, have also not smiled in weeks, in fact not since we solved our money problems with a new job. My depression is not one of deathly boredom like keeping the flat spotless or worrying about the neighbours noticing the windows haven't been cleaned this week. God! What I'd give for their problems.

I haven't smiled in three weeks, nor spoken at all this Father's Day. It's no joke going to see your mother for the first time in months and try to hide you're a whore. I told him I don't want to see the family. Who cares what I want? I didn't want to take out the loans either, but nowadays I let myself be convinced more by Manfred's insistence than the logic of his arguments. 'The car will give us greater mobility and improve job prospects,' he argued and how I hate him for his indifferent acceptance of my income. And the reality? The car can't be used for my work. I'm too scared. It is too dangerous. He laughed his hollow mocking laugh, the new one he's developed since I'm earning and he's not and anyway, first the money for a driving licence has to be earned and for that I need the car to improve my income. I have to ask myself if I'm not mad. Why do I put up with his bullying. It leaves my head spinning. He talks bellicose nonsense and I'm powerless to oppose him. Upon me rests our income and the discipline of my childhood leaves him calling the shots while I sit in the corner, pale little blossom. How I hate myself for my stupidity? And yet I can do nothing against his will. This ridiculous car purchase has immediately plunged us back into penury and it's almost certain we'll have to take it off the road

tomorrow. The cashed in tax and insurance will maybe pay the next instalment on the furniture. But even if we can briefly keep the finance company at bay, if we can't sell the rust we'll have to rent a parking bay in the basement. That will cost as much as driving it. It just goes on. As soon as we have two pennies to rub together we just go crazy. Buy, buy buy. So enjoy it Manny! This is a first and last run out in our new white elephant. Let's hope you get your money's worth driving it down our street and that the envy you harvest, the victory you crave for doesn't backfire on you.

Realistically you must know you can't impress people who have got nothing. They'll all gather round and look for a rust bubble and they'll look so long until they find one, even if there isn't one and then they'll gloat. But you know all this and if that's what you want, who am I to spoil it. We always do what you want. And if they really can't even imagine a rust bubble then they'll pick on the fact it's a diesel, and it's got no power and how can you buy it when you haven't got a job? For goodness sake don't get flustered and say I'm earning it. No! You won't do that. Not even you're that stupid. I bet you're wetting yourself that I might let on. Don't worry. I'll stay tactfully demurely silent on the path and slightly to the rear of the car this Father's Day. That much a man can expect.

That much a man can expect! My only worry is if I can manage to lie convincingly enough to my mother. Mothers and their intuition. That is a wide and complex terrain better not investigated too earnestly and certainly not suited to day-dreaming, which is becoming more difficult by the minute. There is so much water on the road that we can see virtually nothing. Cars continue to overtake at high speed; they must know they are aqua-planing and squirting a fire-hose jet of water across our windscreen. Poor Manfred won't have chance to day dream in this weather. The speed everyone else is going it would be suicide to slow down too much. Just listen for the wild hooting followed by the crash and that'll be us finished.

'What was that?' I'll ask because I always ask the most stupid question in a crisis. You'll shout at me because that's the first thing you do in a crisis.

'First thing you've said in four hours and that has to be a stupid question,' you'll say. 'Some fool ran into us I should think!'

His voice will be loaded with aggression. It always is these days as if it's all my fault.

'All right. Don't get tetchy. I only asked,' I'll counter.

‘The obvious, as always,’ and he’ll stop on the hard shoulder. ‘Let’s hope the hazard lights still work. Perhaps it’s not too bad.’

He’ll turn the engine off and sit watching the rain drops pound the windscreen. I’ll lose my rag.

‘Well get out and have a look then!’

‘In this weather?’

‘Someone has to!’

‘I’ll wait until it lets up a bit. The other driver isn’t stirring.’

‘That’s right; and then he’ll drive off all because you don’t want to get wet.’

I’ll glance over my shoulder and by then we’ll have fermented a row out of nothing the way we always do these days.

‘You’re just scared of him because he’s got a new car and a smart suit. He can still be in the wrong you know.’

‘You get out and deal with him then!’

‘Like I do every day while you’re cowering in the toilet. No! This one’s yours! This damned car will be our death and ruination yet.’

‘It’s insured.’

‘It had better be!’ I’ll scream. I’ve noticed I’ve started screaming at him these days. And then the police will arrive no doubt. It will scare us both but we are still naive enough to believe we’ll get fair treatment from them so we’ll be a little bit relieved too.

‘That should stop buggerlugs behind us driving off,’ he’ll crow.

‘You bloody simpleton! The pigs are going to have a lot of time for an unemployed whatever-you-are living off his girlfriend’s money.’

There! I’ll have said it and it’ll be the last straw.

‘There you go! You have to bring it up don’t you. They won’t know unless you tell them you stupid gob-shite.’

That’s what he called me the other night and all I did was sob. He’ll not get away with it a second time.

‘You ignorant pig. How dare you talk to me like that!’

That’s what I’ll say and so help me I’ll smack him one so hard that his ear will still be ringing when the policeman reached our car. It has never come to blows between us but the tensions are so high that it’s only a matter of time. Not even a timid man willingly risks his overlordship.

There are times when a man has to take a stand - flex his shoulders, stick his chin out and straighten his tie, but this won't be of them! Not with a policeman looking on. But the policeman will take one look at Manfred and walk on to the car behind. They can spot a pair of down and outs like us in seconds.

This amazing police tactic will be sufficient even to divert us from our matrimonial squabble. In adversity we'll find unity, however briefly.

'Stop panicking. The point is I was in the right. I was driving carefully. There's two of them, look! And one is coming over to us. I'll just wind down and....'

'Driving licence please!'

'Yes of course.' Manfred will fish reverently in his new leather jacket.

'Just bought it eh? Pity about the mess it's in now.'

'Yes, he was driving too fast. Ran straight into the back of us. Probably never saw me the speed he was going.'

Another flexing of the neck muscles underlines Manfred's righteous indignation. A pimp as the pillar of society. Pathetic. They'll trip him up in a flash.

'How fast was he going?'

'I don't know! I couldn't see a thing out the back.'

'So how do you know...'

He'll maybe be interrupted by the cracked voice in his radio. The reply comes in police jargon that the car isn't stolen but belongs to Manfred Stein, known to live... but the traffic noise on the drenched surface will drown the rest of the message for all but the policeman, who, with water pouring from his hat and cape walks to the front of our car, full of dedication to duty. Despite the rivers of water on the road he'll crouch to look at the tyres, all four and ask for the key to the boot where he'll check the spare, warning triangle, first-aid kit, and then requests all the lights and indicators be put on. His colleague will join him for the kill.

'Get out please.'

'In this weather?'

'Even in this weather.'

Manfred is soaked to the skin within seconds. Fountains of spray blow across the road. The policemen ignore it. Manfred can hardly hear what they say for the tyre noise of a passing truck. He is in a forest of water, tearing him, stinging him, taking away his senses and orientation. I can

see him turning his back on the carriageway to try to get some protection and in so doing notices the other driver, window wound up, sitting in the dry. The dripping policeman will smile smugly when he finally finds the point of law on which he's going to pike us, run us through like two squealing pigs.

‘Come with us!’

As Manfred leaves the sanctity of the lee of his own car all feelings of security desert him, and like a boy who has temporarily become separated from his mother he'll follow the two caped figures to the car behind. Only now he realises it is a good twenty metres back down the motorway; parked as if the glass on the road has nothing to do with it. He finally remembers to glance at the rear of his own car but in all the spray cannot identify any damage. His foot hits some glass and as he looks down he sees that it is clear glass from a headlamp. It cannot come from his car. Someone is cheating him. He knows it and is powerless. It's the only explanation. The glass should in any case be behind the two cars. A Dutch truck carrying forty tons of flowers thunders past and they disappear from view again. I'll be wetting myself. Manfred is scared out of his life and the policemen are indifferent. They reach the other car. A dark red BMW he notices. The front is damaged but the headlamps intact, just plastic and chrome distorted. The feeling of his youth comes over him, of his school-days, when someone set him a problem which was too hard, or gave him a form to fill in which in the first instance he realised he couldn't cope with. He once put important communications about our unemployment benefit into the dustbin after only a cursory glance. As he'd opened the envelope he'd felt the familiar knot in his stomach and the can't cope depression sweep his whole body, indefinable as a symptom but an illness as debilitating as any. Within minutes of destroying the unread missive it all begins to pass and he can remain at ease until the next letter arrives. That usually takes weeks, by which time he's forgotten all about the affair, convinced that if he's sublimated the problem, others will cease to pester him with it.

The water pours down his face, the traffic noise and spray cut out all communications from the outside world and he has the desperate urge to start running away from the hard-shoulder, up the shallow embankment and away, just away, across the misty fields. The police order him to stop. He believes they may even shoot. In fact, they'll ignore him completely. We're not even worth a bullet Manfred.

They'll fill in details about date, time and visibility, huddled round the BMW window trying to keep the water off their note-books and the driver and eventually turn to the road and pass Manfred an insurance accident form.

'Check the details and sign it!' a policeman screams above the din. Manfred tries to read the hand-written entries. They pull him into their huddle so that the form won't get too wet. The driver and car details are accurate. The accident report though is difficult to read, the language complex, but it seems to say that white Mercedes smudge 301 AP swerved into the right-hand lane and braked unnecessarily.

'I don't think this is right,' he'll try with all his courage. 'I didn't swerve. I was in the slow lane all the time. I couldn't see enough to go any faster.'

'That's because your wiper-blades are defective. It's a wonder you knew where you were.'

'My car has just been tested and...'

'If you can't sign the report we'll have to take another...'

The policeman's voice disappears in a thunder of spray. The BMW driver seems to be saying something about legal insurance and solicitors but Manfred can't quite hear.

The pen moves slowly across the line, controlled by that invisible force field called angst. They tear a copy from the block which he receives along with a demand for money for one defective right-hand wiper-blade. He finds the money in his pocket and it is exchanged without further comment for a receipt. He moves off towards his car, the police close behind and as he opens his door they say something to him. Tell him to drive to the next services to buy new blades. They will follow him to prevent anyone else driving into him because of his erratic lane changes. I'll start an argument as he starts the engine.

'Christ you're soaked!' The obvious again.

As Manfred depresses the clutch, water squelches out of his shoes. Fountains spurt from the eyelets. We begin to laugh. it's the first funny event in weeks but I know my mirth will be short lived.

'Have you got the other guy's number and details?'

I'll ask him despite the fact that I know he's just been rodded and can do nothing to help himself. Manfred will fish in his pocket but by the time he extracts the paper it has become pulp. Now it's my turn to tear at his flesh. I'll not know why I do it but I'll carry on anyway.

'You'll have to get the pigs to write it again for you.'

‘They won't. We're lucky they let us of so lightly.’

‘What do you mean? Let us off!’

‘The other guy has a legal insurance. He'll run us into the ground and anyway the police believe him, not me.’

‘Jesus Christ Manfred. You've eaten their shit again haven't you? Tell them what happened.’

‘Don't scream at me! You tell them what happened if you think they'll listen.’

‘They're gone now.’ A feeble excuse to make sure I don't have to face reality.

‘No they aren't. They're following us to the next services. Want me to buy a new wiper-blade. Got fined back there.’

I'll peer at the windscreen.

‘What's wrong with those?’

‘Not a lot. But there is one streak on your side where the blade is damaged. See?’

‘Is that it?’

‘I think so.’

‘Right! I'll get the bastards, see if I don't!’

‘Oh, they'll take a lot of notice of you waddling up to them still dressed like a whore; high heels, arse swinging like a pendulum. Thirty seconds in that weather and you'll look like you've been down a coal mine.’

If only he could utter those words to clear the air but the knot builds in his throat, just as it forms in mine. The knot that stops us talking sensibly. The only way we can get air past it is to scream at each other. He only gets his own way when I can't be bothered to argue any more. It doesn't matter how offended by me he feels, how much his male pride is injured, offended and injured sometimes enough to tighten his throat as though he were being strangled, still he can't tell me what I'm doing to him; not even his impotence gets through to me any more. I can see he sometimes wants to scream his frustration into the night but no sound can pass his lips. He doesn't have to tell me what I'm doing to him. I know!

Yes. I can see myself spitting fire and brimstone as I charge across the services car park towards the fat pink pigs who have just destroyed my Manny. Like an angry dragon going for the kill I'll be. They'll be proper men though. They'll simply laugh till their sides hurt then call me a whore. Why can't I see what I've become, see that the rest of Germany is dressed somewhat differently

for Ascension Day, for Father's Day. I shudder to think what my mother, never mind my mother, his mother is going to say when we get home. Home! What is home? Where is it? Back there?

It's never felt like it. Yes Ute. You tell the pigs to give Manny his twenty back. They'll listen to you all right. But I wouldn't mix it with them too seriously my little one. Not until we know that bloke isn't going to make an official complaint about getting bitten this morning. And that's to be my fault too. Henri was only supposed to scare the jerk. I don't know anything about dogs. He just went mad. Perhaps that's why we got him so cheap.

Serves him right the filthy bastard. Fancy wanting that.

I didn't turn a hair until he was bitten and then I felt sorry for him. Told Manny off! I can't believe the change in me in the last few weeks. Hard as nails. Perhaps it's my real nature. Just as well you find out now as later.

Yes, you tell the pigs Ute. Their ears won't stop ringing for the rest of the day if you get going. And then they'll laugh at me.

Why is he stopping so suddenly? Can't see a thing. Christ! We're on the hard shoulder. Nearly hit that car!

'Manfred! Watch what you're doing.'

'Sorry. I was dreaming a bit.'

'So was I, but we can't both do it at the same time and you happen to be driving. We can't afford to smash this thing up. It would cost a jump just to get it towed off the motorway.'

'At least.'

Silence again. The traffic is moving forward again and although it's hardly raining, the road is still awash and we can't see a thing.

'What were you dreaming about?'

'Funny really. I was wondering what would happen if we got smashed up the arse by one of those silly sods driving too fast and I nearly smashed into someone myself.'

Deja vu! We're communicating in our silence. Seems to work better than when we talk to each other. How odd? We share our day dreams. I wonder if his ending was such a disaster as mine.

'What would happen?'

'We'd sort it out somehow. It would be a bit of a nightmare tangling with someone with a legal insurance when you can't afford one yourself. We'd end up borrowing more money from more sharks because I haven't a steady job. If you're a student like the lads downstairs you get to sit in

a nice warm room or study in the library. I have to study in the bathroom, sitting on the pot, books in the shower, dog round my feet, trying to read an expensive correspondence course while my little whore shines her heels in my bed. The noise they make is something quite distracting.'

'Oh how unfortunate for you. At least you can read a book to take your mind off them.'

It never occurred to either of us before how matter of fact our discussion has become. Our voices are so without emotion that we could have been discussing who's turn it was to make the coffee.

'That's the exception though. Most are finished in minutes. I don't know how you do it.'

Conversation over. 'Finished in minutes.' But thoughts run on in bitter recriminations. Your day dreams. My day dreams. My nightmare more like it. You don't know how I do it! I don't know how I do it! I suppose it was just so awful when we had no money. I wonder if you remember that time when we had nothing and ten days to wait and you just tramped from one place to another trying to find a job. Of course, you'll remember. It's probably only a month or so ago. You ruined all your good clothes working on the lump. It cost nearly more in dry cleaning than you earned, but we bought ourselves a snack, first square meal we'd had in three days. The next day you tried the bureau and they'd only offer you work with the tramps. You couldn't get any cash from them so you went to collect the food and tried to bring half home for me but they wouldn't lend you anything to carry it in. You found an old milk carton in a bin at the back and washed it out but it split on the bus home so the driver put you off and you had to walk five kilometres after a day ditching. You should have eaten all of it; save wasting it on the floor of a bus but you said it was such muck no one could have eaten a whole helping. The tramps tried to feed it to the hostel cat as a joke, but he turned it down too, but how I loved you that night caring for me like that and wanting to share everything. I could have cried. I think I did, but it happened less than two months ago even if it seems half an eternity. I loved you so much and I was determined to get my Manny a meal that night so I went and told that leery bastard in the caff, that if he gave me two take-aways he could come up after and give me a seeing to. Well I didn't put it quite like that. I'd no courage then but he got the message. It was the last night we ever made love Manfred.

A good meal and a good screw but you were so tired you fell asleep straight after. I watched a bit of TV and then spot on 12.30 he came up. Rang the bell. I opened it like a fool and he was there.

I tried to put him off but he told me he'd get us thrown out the flat if I didn't. Perhaps he could have done and perhaps not. How is one to know? We were in no position to take chances. What means 'we'? In that moment when I really needed you, you slept poor Manny, so tired, couldn't know, and that fat greasy old bastard took me down into the garage and screwed me in the back of his car.

Perhaps that's why I didn't want you to buy a car. Is there any part of human activity that isn't controlled by the motor car? And the things he said Manny. 'Here comes a sausage with sauce', and he stunk of cheap fat and beer mixed with his awful after-shave. I thought I'd die but I didn't. Sounds too stupid to say that but it's the only way to describe it. Death is the obvious solution to an experience like that and when it doesn't come you feel cheated, and then he gave me a fifty when he was finished and told me I could pick up a chicken and chips any time because he'd enjoy looking after a girl like me. Fifty! It was a fortune.

We could have lived like kings for a day but I didn't want you to find out so I kept sneaking out and buying small things so you wouldn't notice or ask any questions for I couldn't have lied to you, but when I came back with a bottle of wine and some cigs the next night you seemed to know something was wrong. And then the money ran out and I couldn't face nothingness again, with you out all the time looking for work and me alone in that cold bare flat. I went back to the caff. You never knew I don't think. Two take-aways.

I was a bit earlier that evening and there wasn't much work on. His waitress hadn't arrived. He took me into the kitchen. Leg-trembler up against the chip fryer. It was barely warm and I remember my backside sticking to the grime. Two take-aways but no cash. I realised what a mug I was being. He said his wife had smelt my perfume in their car and given him hell so I wasn't to come down again. That was it.

'Could I do some waitressing?' I asked. Asked? Pled! Whatever. No! He wouldn't employ whores in his joint. Might be bad for business. I think his wife knew it was me and didn't trust him. That's why all his waitresses are over fifty, but for the present one that is. She knows how to handle him. A little job like that would have just kept us out of trouble, on the straight and narrow like. As it was we had no money, no food, and five days to go. I shouldn't have spent the fifty on the things I did.

Sounds a lot does fifty. It is. I only bought us a few things to cheer us up and then there were only ten and the phone bill hadn't been looked at. We had hardly used the phone. Maybe for a couple of jobs. Anyway, I was suddenly shopping with ten in my purse, turning things over, taking only the cheapest of everything. We had no soap and our clothes stank. I found a split box in the supermarket and managed to get a couple of handfuls into my handbag. I took my purse out to pay for the other things and it was covered in soap powder. The Turkish girl on the check-out guessed immediately. I was sure she would report me. They get a bonus for catching thieves. She just looked straight ahead and murmured, 'I always keep a broken box down there.' You see! They have family; strong as iron. Family! How that gives them strength. Mind you, the next time I went in, the soap box was gone and so was she but they'll survive. Fancy sacking a girl for keeping the paupers of the parish clean. Make millions and begrudge a cup of soap.

I hadn't the courage to steal. You always do that. I felt so weak and finished. I couldn't do anything and you needed money for your correspondence.

What a mess? You always think you've hit rock bottom and something must turn up until you get up the next day and you realise it's got worse after all. It hadn't been pleasant but that fifty and twice burgers and chips had been the easiest money we'd ever earned. It hadn't been very dignified either. One shouldn't laugh but he was far too fat to do it in a car. I didn't know where to put my leg and got cramp. Oh Manny! I couldn't share that with you then. I was too ashamed. I still can't talk to you about it now, although you know all that's happened since. But he fell off. Simply slid onto the floor and was stuck. The front seat seemed to click as he went down. The back of the seat moved somehow and then wouldn't shift any more. The back doors wouldn't open from the inside so there we were. Him on his knees on the floor and me fallen on top of him. He told me to climb over into the front and try and release the seat but I was half naked and didn't want to until I got my jeans back. Silly I know but there it was. Trouble was, he was kneeling on my clothes and I couldn't get them out so I had to lean right over on top of him, force my hand down past his fat arse and try to pull them out.

They wouldn't shift no matter how I pulled. I ripped a nail badly. Do you remember putting a plaster on it for me and me pretending I couldn't recall doing it?

He just stayed down there, trapped on the floor, bellowing like a stuck pig that I was all the bitches in Christendom. I got worried; I mean really worried. I thought, supposing my arm gets

stuck? Well it didn't; nor did he have a heart attack for that matter else we'd have been there till morning when someone called the fire brigade. So, I climbed over into the front.

'Pull the lever; the lever,' he kept shouting.

'Which one?' said I and pulled and pushed everything in sight and when the windows started going up and down he freaked. I swear to God I thought he was going to burst something.

'And if he dies,' I thought, 'I'll have to make a run for it starkers as I am.'

I laugh now but then! Ever try finding a seat lever naked in a dark but public garage? In the end, I couldn't stand his yelling so I got out the car and tried the back door from the outside. 'It's the wrong door, you crazy cow. I'm not crawling out backwards to show the world my arse.'

That was honestly no time to worry about personal dignity. The world, or at least our two neighbours, were already looking at my backside. Unbeknown to us they were down there still tinkering on that old motor of theirs. They'd seen and heard everything, but when I swung the door open to reveal that gross pair of buttocks wriggling out backwards on all fours, they couldn't contain themselves. Oh, Manny they creased up, hooted, flashed their lights and cheered. Him, the daft sod, runs over all belly and buttocks and starts banging on the roof of their old motor and shouting at them to keep their stupid mouths shut. They got out and tried to restrain him so he tried to pick a fight with them, him still naked and them helpless with laughter, so you know what he did, to restore his dignity? Banned them from his chippy. I was into my jeans by then, but even though I was ready to die of shame, I had to laugh with them. That's why I thought I'd never go back to him again. He finally came to his senses and came back over to get dressed and that was when he gave me the fifty. Probably only did it to cover his own ridiculousness; prove in some way that if he bought me he could also afford to look an idiot; so long as he paid the piper he could demand we all play his tune. But he couldn't buy my thoughts. Mind you, it worked of course. He knew it would. Even though I found him and the situation revolting, it was me I despised... and still do. I took the money so I was the whore and he the gentleman who could afford me. But despite all my conscience, it had been amazingly easy so when the money ran out I went back to the employment to see if those two girls were still hanging around. Sophie and... I never did find out the other girl's name. They were there all right. Still propositioning anything that looked both hungry and pretty. They saw me from the distance coming toward them and I saw them smile at each other.

'We thought you'd be back.'

‘It’s not how you think.’

‘No! It’s just that you’ve no money and you can earn a lot more in a few minutes our way than in a week cleaning.’

‘If I could get a week’s cleaning I might find out!’ I said.

‘Listen to us! This is really easy money. Most of them don’t even screw you. A bit of fiddling about, a quick rub on your thigh and they’re done. You’re a hundred richer. Come with us now and we’ll introduce you to some of the other girls. They’re great fun and really good company and they’ll know what you’ve been through.’

‘Well no,’ I said. ‘I’d want to operate from home while my boyfriend is out.’

Their attitude cooled. What an understatement. I thought one of them was going to take a swing at me.

‘You’ve got some nerve coming here to pick our brains so you can go it alone. And the rest. Piss off you bitch!’

She got up, walked off, never looked at me again and started studying the job lists. The other one laughed though.

‘You must have really upset her. I’ve never seen her look for a job before.’

She saw the worried look on my face and tried to calm me a little.

‘Ignore her! It’s just an act to make you do it her way. But listen. If you work from home you must have your boyfriend in the flat or the punters will pay you, screw you, give you a good hiding and then rob the flat. If your boyfriend can’t handle himself then he’ll have to buy a dog and make it a big bastard at that, tell him, or you’re liver.

Put an ad in some of the papers. Read them first. Some you have to dress it up a bit or they won’t print it but others... well you can put it in straight, with just a telephone number. No address. You can turn the phone off, whenever it doesn’t suit you, although you rarely will. You’ll take all the trade you can get once you get started. I’ll give you my number. If it goes wrong you can always change your mind and come in with us. You’ll make more in the long run. Here’s twenty for your first ad. Should get you going.’

She gave me the note after writing her address and telephone number on it.

‘Pay me back next week. Come around to my flat.’

She leant over and kissed me. A bit more intense than I’d expected. That strange electricity I’d felt with you on the bridge that day. Then she got up and joined her friend.

Sophie. What a girl. I really liked her. Do you remember how I told you what I was going to do? I went to the kiosk first and thumbed through all the mags to find one that took that kind of ad. I found a local newspaper that seemed OK and went round to their offices. The girl at the reception desk asked me what I wanted. I said I wanted to place a small ad.

‘Yes,’ she said, ‘I do that at the desk here. Have you written it out?’

‘No. Not yet.’

‘Dictate it if you like. I’ll help you straighten it out and take out any unnecessary words.’

My heart sank. She was so nice. She just didn’t equate to what I was about. I couldn’t stand there in the office with people listening and tell her I was starting up as a whore. I tried to tell her to give me a form to take away but she was totally unaware of my predicament and didn’t cotton on.

‘Have you a heading?’

‘If I could just have the form please.’

‘It must be in within the next half hour if it’s to make tomorrow’s edition.’

‘Yes! It should go in as soon as possible.’

‘Well try and be as quick as you can. There’s a few ad pages from yesterday pinned up over there if they can give you some ideas.’

I decided on the ‘Personal,’ column and just copied one that was already in from yesterday. I still remember it.

‘Young good-looking tender blond seeks custom. Tel.....’ I took it back to the desk heart pounding and in a right sweat. ‘What did it matter,’ I kept telling myself. ‘Who is this girl who makes me so embarrassed?’ She was me; the person I wanted to be. I was ashamed in front of myself. I kept telling myself one gets used to everything so I gave her the form and the twenty. She read it and never turned a hair. One gets used to everything. She was used to double meaning ads. Most natural thing in the world. Recent virgin sells body. Come on all you fat dirty smelly old men. Line up and defile me. I’ll point my soles at the ceiling and welcome aboard while the desk girl can’t even manage surprise, never mind shock.

‘That’s fine.... er.. fifteen twenty-three, please.’

All I could think about as she counted the change back into my hand was that 15.23 doesn’t divide by very much, and certainly not by eight. A curiosity of value added tax perhaps.

What do you think Manny? Twelve bitter schoolgirl years taught me I can’t add up to anyone else’s satisfaction so I learned not to argue with people who say things with determination or

expensive slacks and sit behind polished desks. My only worry was that it didn't come to more than the twenty I had. A crazy time to start thinking of school or prime numbers. What a ridiculous tease the brain can be?

I'm going to wear quality like that one day. I don't care how, but this bloody land, this shitting job market with all its fat suited men prattling about their economic performance, must afford me just one pair of trousers that I can stroke with pride every time I open the wardrobe. What wardrobe? A plastic cabin with a zip front is all we have and I suppose it'll do for our cheap synthetics, but we'll arrive one day. I promise.

The landscape is changing now. It's beginning to look like home. The farmers round our way have money like straw in autumn but when they've had a few drinks they've got minds like cesspits. A girl in decent clothes is merely a higher class of screw. Just a qualitative difference, that's all. Some of the men are all right I suppose. They can all look so self-righteous in their black Sunday suits but after a few beers when church is out women are dirt. How those men view their own daughters once they have reached puberty doesn't bear inspection. If they assumed that other men's minds worked as their own it explains why they try to lock their own girls up. What amazes, is how such ugly bastards can find themselves so irresistible. Fat bellied fools who certainly haven't seen their own parts in thirty years without the aid of a mirror.

Well the ad was in the paper and I still had some money in my pocket - definitely something I hadn't bargained for, and I still had the task of telling you what I was about to do. First though, I needed to celebrate my freedom from financial anxiety. My feet led me to the nearest café for a cup of good coffee and a nice piece of cake. The change would just cover it.

Should I have treated myself? Others spend that on a lottery ticket or a magazine. My counsel advised caution. Keep it. You need two-fifty for the bus and some capital to set up the business. I was nearly out of contraceptive cream. I hope it is as safe as the ads say. You can't steal anything that is on prescription so I have to use what you can steal for me.

I skipped the café idea and showed a profit on the day. Big deal.

I kept telling myself that I would get used to it – to the reproving looks. What do they know about being broke? Doctors, dentists, lawyers, teachers, subject specialists, professionals. Subject idiots I call them. No matter. I shall soon be a professional woman too. I should have asked the

girls this morning where to go. I mustn't forget when I return the twenty. She gave me some good tips.

Oh my poor Manny. What were you going to do with a dog? Did you know anything about them? Where would you get one? Well that was to be your problem. You would have to do something for this venture. You'd done nothing thus far. I remembered I'd need a bottle of Vodka for the next day when the ad appeared so that was another expense. Never go through with it if I wasn't drunk. And I did know that you'd not be able to train a dog overnight even if you could get hold of one that quickly.

You turned up with a savage brute that made us both scared to move. Lord knows from where. You certainly didn't steal it. God! I have some absurd ideas. For two pins... it would have taken just a little encouragement from you, and I'd have gone back and taken the ad out. You never turned a hair though. I think you were past caring about me. Poverty had brought you down to that sad point where you just think about yourself. Any income. Who cared how or what? Certainly not us anymore. It made me ill all that day just thinking about it. What to do when the phone went for the first time. It's barely three weeks gone and I can't remember. I probably said the same as this morning. Why can't I remember? Have I become so desensitized by this life that within a few weeks I can't remember my first lines as a whore. I'm breaking out in a sweat just sitting here remembering it and Manfred drives on, taking me home, to my mother and sister. He really is the complete fool. She'll notice. She can tell everything about me and he just points the car and takes me home as though there's no tomorrow.

Perhaps that's the way. No tomorrow. What'll he say in our street? If they twig we can never go home again. Probably no real loss and anyway there's little point in worrying about it girl. It's the life you chose. It was certainly the easier option - in fact the only one at the time. Girls like me have done it with far less reason.

In the end, I walked home. Perhaps I wanted to save the bus fare. I remember thinking everyone must be able to see what I'd done. Walk alone. I hitched a lift part of the way. A smart young man in a new car. He probably thought I was worth a date until I got in. Then he saw, threadbare coat, rotten shoes, no make-up, unwashed hair, nails were none too clean either as I remember. I noticed how quickly he went off me and put me out as soon as possible. I couldn't make out looking as I did. No one can in this country. Once your clothes look rough you can't pull a

radish. Look at me now. Make-up from ear to ear, expensive clothes. Men look at me differently now. They treat me like an expensive whore instead of a cheap one. Just a qualitative difference. How do they treat their women, wives, sisters, daughters? Do they think of them when they ogle my arse in too tight jeans and high heels making it wave like a flag? I wondered the other day why they like women to wear tight clothes that show every curve but strap everything into place to make it look as little like a woman's body as possible. There must be a reason. Perhaps the male idea of a perfect woman is another man with big tits and a bum or maybe women can be better judged and put into convenient categories, easier subjugated to man's law if they are made hard and angular, losing all their femininity. To all other men they then become sex objects but are no longer feminine. Wiggling arses but no softness, roundness, kindness. That part of you only belongs to the man who owns you. Only he is allowed to strip away the tight body armour to reveal your own true femininity which he keeps for himself, hidden, because its very exposure would place his own ethic in question, would touch the raw nerve of his macho idiocy. He even minds a mother sharing it with her child. He dare not allow the world to judge his outlook. The softness of a woman he has to keep for himself for he knows how his sons would choose that softness and not grow in their father's likeness. Keep the women as tight tits and buttocks in tight elastic until the sons have taken his father's war colours and only then allow him to learn there is an alternative. By then it will be too late. A mother may bring up a man's son but not in her own image. How I hate you Manny and your whole cast, but you are so childlike yourself I have to feel sorry for you, mother you too, even though you've let me down so badly. I'll put it to you one day. Why not now? Spoil your game with this new toy. Not that I'd get an answer I could learn from. Everything is black and white for you. You wouldn't know what I'm talking about. Perhaps I don't either. It would be very nice to let everything hang out, be really feminine and wobbly. Manny would probably think I've turned lesbian, but I'd like to see women as they are; a fashion of female shapes, warts, fat dimples and all, but if you question established practice they think you're queer. The fuss he made because I wanted to visit Sophie in her flat to give her the twenty back. Just because I told him she kissed me the way he used to. I'll probably have to post it to her now. I asked him to come with me but that wasn't right either. All but accused me of having a secret lover, as if that mattered when I'm anybody's meat for fifty. He got more worked up over that than over my first customer.

I walked from where that lad dropped me and promptly got caught in a hail storm. Cold and wet and an unheated flat. Just the job and you, Manfred didn't even look up from your books, not a warm drink, a 'Hello. How are you?' Nothing. I thought, I'll show you. Even then it took you five minutes to look at me.

'Manny, I've put an ad in the paper.'

'Didn't know we had anything left to sell.'

'Me Manny! We're going to sell me.'

'Eh?'

'That's right. If the phone goes, let me answer it.'

Amazed silence while the penny made its slow descent through the glue of his mind.

'Just a minute. Where do I come into all this?'

'You'll have to keep out the way. Just be around in case I need you. Apparently, they get rough if a girl is on her own.'

'What do you mean? Be around! We've only got one room and the bathroom.'

'Looks like the bathroom then.'

'Thanks! And how do I keep the peace if some drunk starts breaking the place up?'

'Get a dog!'

'Get a dog? Are you completely mad?'

'Even better. Well done. Get a mad dog. Get a big mad dog. Off you go. The ad goes in tomorrow so that's how long you've got.'

'You mean you expect me to sit in the bathroom with a huge bloody Alsatian or whatever while you're screwing in the bedsit. How am I supposed to do any work?'

'Take it in with you. It'll save you getting bored. Or perhaps you could make a few alternative suggestions as to how we should eat for the next week?'

Silence. Confusion. Then response.

'Where shall I get a dog from?'

'Dog's home!'

'Is that it? Dog's home!'

'A mad dogs' home. Don't shout. There's no point. Just get it sorted out. I'm in business now and so are you. And don't slam the door!'

Too late! You did. The noise rang in my head for hours. The noise of a chapter closing on an era of my life, of life's lie.

You found a dog. To this day I know not where or how. It's a beast, an absolute brute but you seem to get on with it. You came home that night, covered in mud with that awful thing. We slept with it locked in the bathroom. We slept together for the last time like that. You had to get up and hold the dog when I needed a pee. My God. How I thought you were brave. A man who can protect me like that in order to earn money from me is really an enigma. I could never love you thereafter though, not the way I loved you that night despite the dog growling in the bathroom. I even loved you for your sense of the absurd. Henrietta you called the beast even though it's a boy. Why do I put everything in the past tense? What fate am I awaiting? Then the next morning the phone went. You answered it but the caller hung up immediately. I realised what had happened and reminded you.

'Let me take the calls in future.'

'Why?'

'It doesn't encourage them if a man's voice answers.'

You could have asked me not to go through with it. I'd expected you to. But you just shrugged your shoulders and went to walk Henrietta. You were so pale and nervous that day; jumpy as if constantly waking from a bad dream. You could have stopped me. I nearly called out 'save me,' but we were both beyond redemption.

'You're not going through with it?' you could have asked, even insisted.

'Any other ideas what we're to live from lover boy?' I would have replied. And that would have been too much. You would have stormed out the house leaving me with the wretched dog. Your way was better. We parted friends that day and you took the dog with you. So that left me alone, hungry and terrified, not only of the dog, but of the telephone. In fact, the telephone didn't go again that day. It was very early the next morning and we were both hungry but asleep. I don't know how. I sleep badly on an empty stomach and we hadn't eaten that day nor most of the previous one. I answered it.

'Hello! I've seen your ad. What are you like?'

A well-spoken, gentle voice of an educated man. I was totally dumbfounded.

'How do you mean?'

'What you're like! Fat, thin, tall, ugly, buxom, blond, big tits, strong thighs. What you're like!'

In my half sleep I thought it was an obscene call. I couldn't orientate myself. Then you whispered Manny. Your cards were shown. We were all our true selves in that moment you whispered. Naked, rotten, wretched, vile, destitute and oh, so hungry. You whispered, 'For Christ's sake don't let him go. Say something nice.'

'It's so late,' I stammered as though it were more indecent at 1.00 than 10.00. In truth, I still objected with every part of me, down to the deepest part of my soul to being a pawn, a piece of meat for hire between two men's desires, wants, lusts and hungers. Then through the phone, 'Can I come and see you or not? Stop wasting my time.'

'Yes. Come up.' I went to put the phone down but just caught the voice yell, 'Where to you silly bitch? What's your address?' I told him. He called me a silly bitch and I still told him. Can you imagine that? I told him where I was and in effect to come and do with me what he wanted and that after he'd called me a silly bitch.

He complained it was too far out and I'd have to drop my price. I hadn't even mentioned money nor thought of it in that moment of confusion.

'It's one hundred.'

'For Christ's sake drop the price Ute. We want to get him here. We're desperate,' but he'd rung off. Ten minutes later the bell sounded. I put our first piece of furniture, our first rug of our first love, that plastic tiger skin on the bed, and opened the door. My heart was pounding that much I thought I was going to faint. I didn't needless to say. You scurried into the bathroom like a scalded rat, more dragging Henrietta than taking him, for he'd had as much to eat as us and was becoming really mean, and as I opened the door I realised I was stone cold sober. What a thing to think of? Well he certainly wasn't sober. How he'd driven out to us was a mystery. He walked in and told me to get undressed. I asked for the money first as Sophie had told me to. He didn't know I wasn't alone in the flat so he immediately got rough. He was middle aged and commensurate with his telephone manner, had smooth hands, very lean and sinewy but with a hard, almost brutal face. His manner was different. Perhaps he had once been soft, gentle and loving but now he went to whores. Nothing about him made sense to me. He was the first and the last customer I took any real note of. I wondered what he'd been thinking in that intervening ten minutes, between the phone call and the front door. For me they had been like a drawbridge lowering leaving a castle defenceless, waiting to be run through by some crude weapon, battering ram or sword at the soft belly of life. I now know what a defeated army or civilian population

feel after they have surrendered and await that terrible last judgement; when they no longer have any purpose, bartering power or control over their own destiny but stand instead, heads bowed, waiting for that last unavoidable moment when fate's sword either rips their bowls out or pardons them. For them there is no in between anymore. Death or subjugation. For me it was both Manny. I lost your love in that moment as he pulled at my clothing and pushed me onto the bed and yet I was doing it for you. I wanted to scream for your help but then he would have left. I bit it all back and told myself that once he was finished we could be together again and plan how we would spend the money.

You'd never made love to me like that. Bright lights and rough gropings, but then it wasn't love. He took his trousers off and then his pants too and stood there a few seconds, started feeling me, with his erection pointing at me. I remember closing my eyes and then he was on top of me. None of this rubbing a bit on my thigh or whatever nonsense Sophie's friend tried to sell me. It was penetration filled with aggression and hate against a woman he didn't even know. He just had to control another destiny for a few moments in the roundabout of his daily chore and boredom and that was the moment when he was supreme, holding the body and emotions of another in his hands for I was like the beast laying its head at the feet of the slaughterhouse worker. Take me. You can do no more to pain me, to hurt me, to debase me. There is only death left, among the blood and guts and offal. I was unable to die though. I was like a wild beast unable to accept the inevitability of its end. I could only be grateful it was over quickly. Seemed a hell of a quick way to spend a that much money. I actually felt nothing. Upon reflection, the whole event seemed an irrelevance. I certainly didn't betray you. I was only aware of the warm fluid running out over the side and down over my buttock. It made me think of the grease on the chip fryer. What a thing to remember. I don't know if he smelled, if he made a noise, grunted as he came, spoke to me. Nothing. I only thought of chip fryers. He dressed quickly and I tried to call you but no sound came. I thought he would leave.

'Manny,' I finally managed but only very softly. You must have been listening and known he hadn't paid for you were out in a flash with that dog, between him and the door. Your eyes blazed like the dog's. My God were we hungry; ready to kill I think.

'The money. Now!' I heard you say.

He put his hand slowly into his pocket and then hurriedly handed the note over. You stood aside and he ran quickly through the door, called me a slag and was gone. That really hurt. Why didn't

he abuse you Manny? In my book, your part in the whole affair was far more reprehensible than mine yet you look on while your girlfriend prostitutes herself, you take the money, but I take the insults. What crime had I committed that you hadn't? OK. He did it to me, not you. That I understand, but our possession thinking makes me yours so why in this case only does an offence against property become unimportant? The only saving grace in the whole sordid incident was that it was over mercifully quickly.

'Eight minutes he was in our flat,' I said. I knew because the radio had been left running next door and they always give the time along with every traffic report. Thin walls and eight minutes and I thought I had noticed nothing but his face and voice but I must have been paying close attention to him after all.

'That much money for eight minutes,' you replied, 'let's go and eat.'

'Where? At this time?'

'There's that filling station open all night. I'll see what they've got.'

'Don't go mad Manny. We need money for another ad and bring something to drink, something decent for a change.'

'Sure!' and you were gone.

I showered and then washed and hung that stupid tiger skin on the balcony and then you were back and we stuffed ourselves on crisps and sweets and drank beer from bottles and that poor bloody dog had to share it although he probably desperately needed a good protein portion, but I knew then it was better to keep him mean.

Things became better except life's lie was dead. I knew I could never dream again. I've never dreamt since that night. I know I'm daydreaming now but that's different because it's about then, when it all finished. No! It's not that type of dreaming when we sleep and our brain sorts all the lies and deceit that we live when we're awake. It's life's dreams, the lies we tell ourselves to boost our ego, polish or protect our image, get us through the day. The dreams that convince us that what we have, what we experience in each infinitesimal and ephemeral moment of our existence, is not what life is all about; it's not it; not the reason we're here. The dreams that tell us there is more to life than what we've got and keep us believing it must get better, that one day we'll find that crock of gold beyond the rainbow. Those are the dreams that died that night. The two men in my flat killed them. I thought that time would heal and one day I'd be able to resurrect them, the castles in the sky, the unrealities which make reality worth living, bearable. Life for normal

people with jobs, families, cars, I mean proper cars, the ones they have a realistic chance of paying for, some of their dreams actually come true. They deal with realities, good things and of course along with them, life's tangles and contradictions. We have to create both with our dreams and at the moment I'm only left with the barbed wire bits upon which I hang my soul these days. Life for us, especially us women, is escaping reality into a phoney world of things we think we can cope with. It's the advertising world of clothes, drinks, cars, houses, furniture, sweets, holidays, princes, castles and sex with what we think are real men. Real men like the ones in the magazines, museum sculptures or Hollywood. Of course, we should have learnt better. The experience of seeing my first man naked should have been enough. I burst out laughing. Perhaps I should have cried. Skinny shoulders, sunken chest and flabby buttocks; they're the reality men. But not even that sight convinced me of the truth about dreams. It took that night, two heroes in my flat, one to screw me and one to collect the cash, to bring the castles crashing down. No castles anymore and it's the castles Manny that I miss so much. My lie about my life is gone and I fear it will never return. I'm like old people who suddenly realise they've spent the last chance to make something of their lives - it's past, no energy to try again. They become depressed like my Grandad when all he did was wait for death to collect him. You can't shake old people out of it. They may appear to have everything to live for, but because they know that life's lie has been destroyed by reality, the reality which will never measure up to the glossies, they begin to die from that point on and that was where I was at, that night when he climbed onto me and forced my legs apart with a knee; so aggressive, lacking in love, without care just cold sex. I was just a great big over-complex masturbating machine. Every time a man comes into our flat and takes me, every thrust, every throb of his loins rips me into a reality world with which I can't cope. I have begun to die Manny, but because I'm young and healthy I shall live many years with only reality and I can't handle that. I have realised these last weeks, why people shoot heroin or take sedatives. They know that each shot is the click of the pistol in an inevitable game of Russian Roulette which will finally relieve them of any decision about their future. So, they keep pulling the trigger.

I could stop Manny. Just go back to being your lover again and I know I would be straight back on an even keel with dreams and love and tenderness for you Manny, but I won't stop. They don't care to give us a job or an existence welfare level so I'll stay a whore, without dreams, without worth. I wonder when I'm filling in application forms for a job or for dole money or when a man

is in our flat, or when I hear politicians pontificating about the endangered economy, if they ever think of me as someone's daughter or sister or lover, if they ever see me as anything but another statistic which can soon be removed from their register for I shall soon remove myself.

'Heavens! We've left the motorway and I hadn't even noticed. Why are you looking at me like that Manny?'

'Are you all right? Your face has gone like a piece of wax.'

'Yes! Fine.'

It even sounded forced to me but it has convinced you. I don't look too good and I feel awful. Such smart cars often have a mirror behind the visor. Christ! I really look like my own ghost. A sign up ahead. What does it say?

'Holy Mere car park, 500 metres. Pull in there Manny.'

'Why?'

'Because I'm unwell!'

'We haven't time to stop and anyway you can't really get out in this rain. The storm has passed but it looks as though the weather has broken...'

'Just stop the shitting car in that car park! I pay for the heap, I put diesel in it. If I ask you to stop it then stop it!!!'

'Don't scream at me!'

'Then stop the car!! Scream!! You haven't heard me scream yet. Shall I scream for you? Perhaps screaming can still save me...'

'OK. OK. I'm stopping. Look at this car park. It's under water. There's no one here Ute, let's go on.'

'I'm getting out!'

'You can't! Christ, it's pouring. You've not even got a coat or umbrella with you.'

'Let go of me!! I'm getting out!! Let go you bastard, let go, I'm getting out!!!'

Oh, thank God! I'm out. I'm free. Slam the door Ute. That'll make it feel better. Bloody heap! Sold myself for a bloody rust bucket! There! Take that! What a piss poor crash? All my strength can only produce the decent thud of quality. I wanted to knock the wax from his ears.

'It's all yours Manny! I've given it you!'

Stupid gob-smacked look on his face. He really hurt my arm. I'll have a bruise tomorrow. Tomorrow? Am I wondering about tomorrow? A bruise? Now it really is raining again. Lovely! I'm soaked already. I must look a sight. Hair flat, make-up running away. Get rid of these stupid bloody shoes. There! Sod off chains - symbols of my bondage. Nicely poetic Ute. In the old style. Must try and maintain the train. Probably good for the soul. Look at them, floating in the puddle like a pair of damaged Chinese junks. I wish Manny would stop shouting at me. If anyone were to hear him. Not a soul here though. I'll give him something to shout about. Where's that shoe gone?

'Here Manny! Keep these for your next meal ticket!'

Direct hit!

'Scatched the car, has it? Here's something to polish it with.'

A sock! What a fool I must look standing in a puddle struggling to get my socks off. I'm going to lose my balance and fall in the puddle any moment now and God help Manny if he laughs. One last pull.

Oh, the water is so warm, warmer than the rain and he's laughing. You should have shut the window Manny. Nice shot Ute. The jeans as well? Why not?

I'll have to sit down for them. Sit down in this puddle? Nowhere else. Not so much a puddle, more a lake. Sit down. Just sit down. Don't even think about it. Ute in the muddy water. Who cares? What does it matter anymore? There! That's better. Splash in the muddy water like a child, feel the peat between my toes, lovely.... but I can't get the jeans off, not when they're this wet. So tight I can only just shift them when they're dry. Bastards. Try standing up again. Wobbling badly girl, but I've made it I think. Here they come. Hum a little tune the way we used to. Rain wash the peat from me, wash my troubles away. Tears of heaven cleanse me. Why so morbid? Why so clichéd? Made it!

'Here Manny! Take those for your next tart.'

'Ute get back into the car please. You're soaked. If anyone comes they'll have us both locked up how you're behaving.'

'Drive off if you're that worried. I'm not getting back into that car, not ever again Manny. This is where we part. Drive off! I'm going for a walk now. Farewell!'

'Ute please! I'm going to get angry.'

‘Stop shouting Manny! I've got to be alone now. Go home and kick the dog if that's your problem. Just make sure you feed him first for hungry worms turn. There's money in my handbag. I've got to be alone now.’

‘I'll wait for you!’

‘Please yourself.’

Alone now! Alone. Shall I strip off completely? No! Be a bit tasteless; completely starkers. Where's the path to the lake? I must find the water, Holy Water, cleanse me water. The peat is warm in the rain. No water in it despite the downpour. I wonder why. That's better. Now it's getting wetter and squelchier between my toes as I go down to the lake. No peat here, just mud and puddles. Ow! And the brambles. Brambles ripping at me. Why didn't Manny come and get me? Didn't want to get his nice new leather jacket wet I daresay. He doesn't know what is going on in me. I think he loves me, the way he loves that car I expect. Possessions. Means to an end. Gets you from A to B, gets you a meal ticket. God! I can feel the depression creeping up on me again, the way it did in the car, tears running down my cheeks, different from the rain, into my mouth with the rain water, taste the salt. The feeling went when I was playing the idiot back there by the car, but now I'm alone with just the trees and the rain it has returned, as lonely as that single moorhen on the lake. A single speck in a desert of water. Shall I swim out to it and keep it company? Then neither of us shall be lonely. Should be all right without trousers on. I'll take my blouse off too. Hang it neatly over the branch. Bra as well. My! If an artist had done it he'd have called it a sculpture. Nylon versus nature: a juxtaposition. Brrr. It's a bit cold despite the weather and very muddy. Hope Manny waits. I'm not too sure I'll be able to get back up that bank on my own. The water is so deep so quickly. Nothing to stand on. Course he'll wait. Why should he wait? Wait for a potty hysterical cow like me. Serve me right if he drove off and left me naked in the Holy Mere. I'm being pulled down by the mud, sinking in quickly. I'll have to swim now. There! Free at last. Not so free really. How shall I get out again and the weed keeps dragging me back.

This was stupid Ute. Get out now girl while you still can. If I can make that tree branch I can rest, then pull myself along it to the bank. Got it! Phew. That was close Ute. And what about the moorhen? Close! What does close mean? I got out the car determined never to get back in so I may as well let things get a lot closer and the feeling is coming on. As soon as I don't distract myself with some folly or other the feeling comes back, the feeling and the tears with the lump in

my throat so big it hurts to swallow. Wallow. Never mind getting out, just let go and swim to the ducks. No courage. Let go, let go, release the fingers and fall back into the water. Yes! I made it. Back into the water, weeds tugging me down like the serpents of hell.

It's over! All over.

What's this thing with the poetry today Ute? What were those lines?

Go cruel skeleton man.

I'm still young, you'd best go

And please don't touch me.

What a time to remember that. But it distracts me. I might be able to remember the rest. Think Ute. Think! What are those lines? The weed tires me. Won't be long.

It's over, it's over cruel skeleton man.

Soon you may have me.

How do I know that stupid bloody poem? Stupid bloody teachers taught it me I suppose. Couldn't think of anything else to plague us with that day. Probably wanted to scare the life out of us. Well it's actually about to come in handy. Something useful I learnt at school from a penguin. How does it go again? Never mind how it goes. I'm tiring fast. This is stupid. What will poor Manny do? Wait hours? Look for me? Call the police? They will drag the lake, find me, maybe rotting by then, nibbled by the fish, eyes pecked out by the moorhens. I've heard they always take the eyes first. Delicacy! I'd better go back in. Turn around. If they find me drowned, naked, Manny has half my clothes and I'm bruised where he grabbed me, they will probably do him for murder or worse. What is worse? Back to that hell in the flat? Manny in the slammer and me in the lake. That's what it's to be. Poor Manny. They will give him hell. I'll go back. Jesus Christ! Look how far I've swum already and I'm so tired. You're on your own now Manny. I tried. Never was good at long distances. Never make that. Try, at least. I wasn't much of a meal ticket anyway. All those adverts and we never got more than a few a week. I didn't sell myself well enough. Plenty phoned but few came round. They all wanted the same thing though except one. That poor old man. He said his wife had just died and he only wanted me to stroke his head like she used to. Stayed an hour or more. I wept after he had left. He was so sweet. I nearly didn't take any money. Some of the others though. Yes! I'm one fifty, slim and blond. Perhaps I was too expensive. I know I'm too tired and I shan't make it. You've bitten off more than you can chew here Ute. At least if I'm so far out they won't blame Manny. Perhaps no one would have to

blame him if he'd followed me down and stopped me making a complete and utter fool of myself but let's not deceive ourselves Ute. This is one of the few positive steps you or Manny have taken in weeks. You've decided to be done with that life. Start a new one here. Hope and pray Manny has driven off so that he too has put an end to it. This is awful. The weed is really pulling me down. Breathe slowly. Beyond a joke. Whose laughing? Don't panic. Hold your nerves fast. Five metres to go and the branch is there. I'll not be able to reach it this time. Put my feet down; must be able to stand. Made it. Who would have thought a rotten old bough could still do such service? The feeling! When I thought I wasn't going to make it, thought I was to die, the feeling was gone, at least I didn't notice it, now it returns. It's horrible. For God's sake Ute let go again. Why didn't I keep swimming out, never look back, the die was cast! Now you have to go through all that preparation again.

The rain is so beautiful on the water. A fresh pattern, a new start every second, a far as the eye can see. A new start for you too Ute, in the water. Face it, fallen Catholic girl, it's your fate so why fight it. Fight your way instead, the last few metres up the mud and slime, through the bramble thickets, to what? A fat man, his muscle tone gone, heaving on top of you, wheezing coughing, bronchitic, the mucous not shifting, pus arcing between two points in an infected lung, stale cigarette smoke in his hair, cheap after-shave, aerosol deodorant mingled with sweat, stale sweat, heart pumping, compressor struggling to maintain an erection, mankind, what are you doing here?

What are you trying to prove? Gottagetcha money's worth hot bellies sliding on sweat, knees back for heaving disillusionment, look at the light through the window, count the patterns on the ceiling will he never come or go or both or just give up and Manny sitting on the pot trying not to hear, learning his herbal remedies and salt concentrations. Little white pills for him and big red ones for me. Why doesn't he put an end to all this? Throw them out and repossess me as his own. Possessions Ute. There you go thinking in clichés again. Why ask when you know the answer? He is weak, punch drunk from life already at twenty-two. He's been knocked down once too often and can't manage to get up inside the count any more so I can be sandwiched between a nylon tiger skin and two hundred pounds of hero, followed by the high spot, a quick Curried sausage and chips on the good evenings, sausages with everything, or can I let go this branch, slip beneath the water until I have to breathe again and then feel my lungs fill. A moment, a last moment and I'll look up and see the light and change my mind. I'll change my mind all right, but

it will be too late. I'll pull and kick with all my might but the weed will hold me back, using valuable oxygen in my panic so speeding the end. Not enough air to get me back again and although I'll fight with all my strength the fight will already have been lost, energy sapped, not enough air, must breathe in, no choice anymore, muscles wrench the water down and paradise enow. It'll take them days to find me, perhaps they never will. Manny will go back home, mystified, alone, no one may notice. If the neighbours asked and he says I walked out, that would be that. No new story to them. The end of a meaningless life; no trouble, no aggravation. Some families don't enquire after a missing person for years. Be long since fish food, first the eyes; first they pick out the eyes. That stupid poem. Fancy remembering that poem now; at a time like this. Too clichéd. Girl dies in Holy Water. No! Prostitute drowns in Holy Lake singing... singing what? I don't know what it's called. Can't remember why we learnt it. No doubt they were trying to scare some morals into us girls. There was no point. We were afraid of everything anyway. She tried to make us sing it but it was far too difficult. I'll have to make up my own melody.

Go by! Go by!

Go cruel skeleton man.

I'm still young, you'd best go,

And please don't hold me.

No! That's wrong again.

And please don't touch me.

A subtle difference there.

I think I remember the second verse too.

Give me your hand you fair and gentle thing.

Yeh! That's me. Sing it to the end now Ute. Sing it? Say it? What does it matter? No one listens. It matters. It matters to me. The ultimate swan song for Ute. The duck among the moorhens; a duck I said.

Give me your hand you fair and gentle thing.

I'm a friend and don't come to punish you.

Yes death. You're a friend. You won't punish me. You'll take me as I am and resolve all my conflicts once and for all.

Suicide! The only truly independent act left to the individual. Does that not make it creative? That's why poets write about it and it's set to music. But is my poem about suicide? It's certainly about the inevitability of death. Sing it to the end Ute. How does it go? Now once right through without any pauses or mistakes. Do one thing completely right before you go. My arms feel so tired. I couldn't get myself out the water now. I feel so cold and tired. It has stopped raining but the wind is so fresh. You haven't long Ute. I think it's too late to change your mind. Too late, too tired. Life everywhere is simply a protest against life. A creative protest against life. That's how you've to see it Ute. I could have pacified the contradiction once, forgotten the pain but now that the lie is broken, there is only the end.

It's over! All over.

Wrong! Wrong!

Go by. Go by!

Go wild skeleton man.

The slime and the weed of the deep, a wild man of bones? Hardly Ute. You're struggling with your lines, with your images. But somehow it fits.

Go by! Go by!

Go cruel skeleton man!

I'm still young! please go,

And don't touch me!

If someone hears me? Who cares?

Give me your hand you fair and tender thing!

Have courage! I'm not cruel.

I do not come to punish you

You'll sleep soft and gently in my arms.

It's wrong! Something is wrong! Why won't it work? Why doesn't he come and take me? Am I like that silly bitch I knew, who not even death would have? She tried a hundred times to do herself in, but someone always found her and dragged her back and said she should be pleased and Pastor whatever he was called spent hours trying to straighten her out while we all mocked and thought she was making a fuss to draw attention to herself. Went on for years and she kept a diary all that time about why until she finally ate rat poison and went to bed too amazed to find she woke up right as rain the next day and even came to school if I remember rightly, but started

feeling poorly so she skipped off halfway through the morning. Never saw her again. Went to her quack, blue light job into hospital, took her a fortnight to die, and then her mother burnt all her diaries. That was a wicked thing to do? Such a wicked thing to do. Well I'll leave no trace and it'll be quick so get on with it Skeleton man. I'll just hum it. No one will know. I'm so tired. I've got it! NO!!! It's always the first verse. They took her body to another hospital and cut everything up or out that there was to cut up or out. Research into antidotes someone said. The fish shall have me. Funny. Someone somewhere will find a use for everything. Science, the fish, always some bastard wants what's left. Hmmm. Just let go of it all now Ute. Swim on out into the water. Yes! You're tired, so tired. Swim far out from the bank and then the decision will be made for you. The weed is pulling me again. What was that???? OH! Just a duck, I startled. What a fright it gave me. No Skeleton man. You're not bony, you're slimy. Here! Let me rest in your arms, green and soft. My legs are giving out soft and slimy it's pulling me down. Sing it Ute! Sing it as you go! It will help you. I'm scared, so scared but it's not that feeling; too late to change. Soon over now. I remember it! Just time for the second verse. Here it comes. Sing it Ute! It will divert you.

Give me your hand you fair and gentle thing!

I'm a friend and do not come to punish you.

Have courage! I am not cruel,

You shall softly sleep in my arms.

Poem by Matthias Claudius. (Death & the Maiden) Music by Franz Schubert.

