

THE BIRDWATCHER

It intrigues me that prisoners on Death Row can choose, on the eve of their demise, whatever takes their fancy to eat. And it makes me wince a little to think that their meal is still inside them when they are executed, just as a black hole - the source and site of annihilation - contains all matter it has taken unto itself and imprisoned. It intrigues me that their autonomic body function of digestion still operates blindly even though the mind knows that there is no point. The mind has no influence over many areas of the body - which is paradoxical, it being the most advanced, creative, destructive and powerful entity therein, and as far as we know, in the whole universe, with the possible exception of One.

It is the free will of the mind which has led to the internment and will soon lead to the interment of the murderer. Yet the mind cannot instruct the body to die; it cannot hold the breath for long, stop the heart, prevent digestion or excretion, halt or conceive disease, prevent pregnancy or initiate abortion. But it can write a book, plan a murder or a suicide, over/under-indulge in food and drink and organise the muscles, which have no say in the matter, to execute those plans. In some ways the mind is like the king on a chessboard - a vital part of the strategy but physically weak and ineffectual.

In quiet I contemplate all the other unaware yet essential constituents of the body politic. There are the mitochondria, once free-swimming beings in the primitive seas, since subsumed into cells in veins and arteries, recruited into the red rivulets of my blood; there are the red oxygen-porters and the white adversaries of alien invaders; there are the sturdy bones which, like most other innards see no daylight, and which shall be the last to be liberated in the grave; there are all the others - the nails, the hairs, the cells, the DNA, the water, the proteins, the elements - all transient passengers within this frame carrying my name - which have no loyalty to it, hitchhikers who will hitch another lift when it goes no further. A majority of my DNA is viral in origin and the genes of microbes within and upon me outnumber my human genes by a thousand to one and I could not survive without them. Until recently the scientific Mind has been utterly unaware of them. In what sense does "my" body belong to "my" mind. *My mind?*

Of all the parts of me I enumerate - and those I forget - only one part will be annihilated. The mind.

And within the fractured person of the mind-king, who is who? Who pretends and who is sincere? Who has the legitimacy to overrule and dominate the others?

But ultimately, I have decided, just as vital as the question "who am I" is the question "*what am I?*"

Of course we all sit on Death Row. Every day we hotch along closer to our end. Did I read somewhere that we think of our own death at least twice a day? How often do we think of suicide? I know that there are people who debate with themselves whether to take their own lives. What is the minimum count of blessings required to nullify the case for the prosecution and outweigh the curses? How many do not prosecute the case to its logical outcome ultimately out of fear or due to the distress which they perceive will be caused to their loved ones? How many do the walking-dead number, I wonder.

And what would your last meal be? Allow me to describe mine. I imagine now into existence a large crab - compared to which lobster is far inferior - for which I prepare a mayonnaise with

garlic salt, turmeric, lemon juice and a hint of chilli powder. I have batons of red and yellow peppers, a diced salad of tomatoes, red onion, cucumber and chilli with minted yoghurt; there is a Charlotte potato salad with sweet vinegar, a little vegetable stock and a sprinkle of caraway seed. I bake a small wholemeal loaf and chill a bottle of grey burgundy from my favourite vineyard in Meersburg on the shores of Lake Constance.

A crab has ten legs and I prefer to tear one off to eat at intervals to the rest of the body, as if punctuating a fine poem or piece of music. In themselves the legs are not very special, far less so than the creamy brown head-meat in the shell which combines beautifully with the mayonnaise. Before beginning the feast, the shell should be wrenched from the body and the ten so-called dead men's fingers removed. These are wrinkled and resemble brain tissue. They are not palatable. Required tools are a pair of nutcrackers, a spoon and a fork with a pointy end. Do not forget kitchen towel to wipe the fingers and a dish for the splinters of shell.

And so I begin with a forkful of head-meat followed by a bite of the nutty bread, a forkful of potato salad, a slice of pepper dipped in the mayo and finally a spoonful of the chopped salad. Then I drink a mouthful or two of the wine. Next I turn to a leg, one of the two smallest furthest from the claws - the huge claws always being the climax of the whole meal. If the crab is very fresh then the legs are worthwhile. Otherwise the meat there seems to be the first to shrink and harden. The removal of a claw leaves a hole in the body in which white meat gleams. I resist the temptation to eat this straightway and study the leg. It has three segments and I always break the longest and thickest first with the nutcrackers and prize out the meat with the end of the fork. I suck the joint. And then crack the second segment between my teeth. The tiny claw at the end is of little value and I either discard it or occasionally use it as a tool to remove stubborn meat from the joint or from between my teeth.

If a dead crab could think, how perverse and horrific it would find it that its own appendage is instrumental in the process of its own devouring by me, a creature it has been utterly unaware of. If it could dream, could it ever have a nightmare so appalling as to see itself being chewed up in an alien mouth with such alien matter as capsicum, potato, wheat and grape?

What undreamable, unimaginable destiny might be our own?

The side dishes, bread and wine can be enjoyed in any order from that point onwards. But the crab I eat in strict order. Next is a forkful of pale orange speckled meat from the cavity below the shell - the exposed body - then a longer leg, then more head-meat. The pile of splinters in the bowl begins to catch up with what remains of the animal until on my plate I am left only with the legless body and the claws. I remove the claws and smash the body until it will crack open easily between my fingers. It is easy at this point to get cut by the razor-sharp shell and it is important to take care, particularly after wine. I now have the ten holes whence issued the legs and the hidden cavities in which the sweet white meat sits. Here the end of the fork is vital in extracting as much flesh as possible without slivers of bone to spoil it. When I am satisfied that the body is clean I turn to the claws, the most delicious part of the crustacean. I crack the inner segment and eat the white meat there and in the joint. The claw itself is heavy. I hold it in my palm and bring down the nutcrackers sharply down on it until cracks appear. I peel it carefully like an egg and if the crab is fresh the meat in the claw-ends will come out shaped exactly the same, like sharp little thumbs, as the claw-end bones themselves. But the chief delight is the meat in the body of the claw. It is moist and very sweet and divided by a central fan of opaque shell from which it

comes away easily.

The perfection of leaving just a little of each accompaniment to eat with the one remaining claw is very pleasing. And when all that remains is a pile of broken, empty shell - which can afterwards be simmered with onions, bay leaf, a squirt of tomato puree, white wine and carrots to make a delicious bisque - I slowly drink the remaining third or quarter of the bottle of wine. This whole experience takes an hour and is the most delicious culinary experience I can imagine.

When I am certain I am empty of crab a day or so later I will take the few things I really need - amongst them my binoculars, my book of birds, candles, matches and a batch of mineral water - and drive to the edge of the forest, remove my licence plates and walk to the hide which I discovered back in the summer.

*

This is mixed woodland. It is December and one of the best times to observe birds in the leafless trees. The hide is deep at the heart of the forest and I can feel confident that I shall not be disturbed. It has the mossy feel of somewhere abandoned and long forgotten. I make two trips to the car and lock up.

I have brought a little primus stove to keep me warm, a sleeping bag, gloves and a woolly hat. I have a mat to spread over the hole through which I have climbed. There is a bench of sorts to sit on and on this I place a cushion. The large rucksack in which everything has been carried can be rolled up as a headrest during the day and spread out as a rough mattress on the bench at night. I think I shall spend around ten days in here. I have ten bottles of water and two bottles of brandy - Asbach Uralt - my favourite. I have pens and a notebook in which to write my diary and jot down my observations. And a powerful torch to catch the nocturnal animals by surprise!

My box is about ten metres off the ground and accessible by a ladder - or rather by a stout wooden pole with short rungs nailed to it. It measures roughly two metres by one and sitting down I enjoy a few centimetres clearance between my head and the roof. I have stood up twice and nearly knocked myself out! The planks are made of rough pine and sealed with pitch. There are no draughts. At eye-level there is a hinged flap secured by a fishplate which can be hooked onto a screw above to keep it open. The gap is thirty or forty centimetres deep and about a metre across. A narrow shelf supports my arms and I can place my bird book on it. The view is perfect. A narrow corridor between the trees extends for perhaps fifty metres and ends at the bank of a hidden stream. The stump of a fallen log is an ideal position from which a kingfisher could launch itself onto the sticklebacks below. And beyond there is an impenetrable wall of fir trees, a dark screen against which the electric blue of the bird - nor much bigger than a sparrow - will flash like a young star in heaven.

At four o' clock the light begins to fade and by half-past I have lit a candle and my primus stove. I leave the flap wedged open by a coin for ventilation. The air is still and mild. I hear three or four little owls screeching, one quite close. I am feeling quite hungry but the measure of brandy I allow myself takes my mind elsewhere. I remove my boots and climb into my sleeping bag. I place my notebook on my knee and flick through what I have already written. I turn to a fresh page, jot down the date and note the time.

Dec 10th 16:53

"Thou shalt not kill" is no more than a truism. To think or to plan to contravene it is only a taboo which, after all, can conveniently be suspended in times of war. Is it not true that the more one sees of the human being and his habits, the more disgusted one is, and the weaker the conviction becomes that the "commandment" is beyond normal question? Of course, if too many individuals decided to break it, then existence would be even more haphazard than it already is, and ultimately impossible. We are constrained in modern times by the law, by a tacit contract between us all to ensure our self-preservation, by a natural reluctance to take such a drastic measure, by our own empathies - but ultimately by the lack of an urgent enough reason to kill another person. To those who are already self-righteously shaking their heads in wonder or despair at this line of thinking, consider these situations.

A time machine has been invented and it works perfectly. A weapon has also been invented which will kill instantly and painlessly. If you travel in the machine you will arrive invisible at your destination. You will be able to carry out your task and return instantly to the present without any danger of being arrested. Your victim will not even know he is dying. Afterwards your memory will be wiped clear of the event so that you will not have a bad conscience. Your task: return to 1933 and kill Adolf Hitler. You will save the lives of fifty million people, prevent their suffering and the suffering of countless others. Do you refuse? Are you a moral being? Do you approve of someone else doing the task instead of you?

There are two tigers left on the planet, a male and a female. A hunter has one of them in his sights and you have a gun. There are six billion of your species. Will you shoot the hunter or allow the tiger to become extinct? Or will you "have a quiet word" with him afterwards and point out the error of his ways, as he skins the beast to sell the pelt?

Perhaps heaven is populated by the souls of tigers and other non-human creatures.

If a person maliciously ruined your life and you had a chance to revenge yourself on them, and you had nothing to lose, would you take it or refuse it? Would you be happy to sit in the gutter while he or she rode by in style and laughed at you on each occasion?

Is human DNA which has failed to form a proper person with a conscience sacrosanct? Can the race afford indefinitely to tolerate such "people" in its midst as resources dwindle? Would you silently cheer if someone with a sub-machine gun went out and gunned down the jobs who make the lives of other good people sheer misery? If you silently cheer the perpetrator, why not let him be you?

If you know that that utterly obnoxious and useless body is going to secrete, like an aphid, many others are you not tempted, or even morally obliged, to remove or nullify the testicles or the ovaries? Is not the denial of life to such a brood the same as killing? Should they gobble up resources at the expense of, or to the detriment of more deserving others?

*If you **had** to shoot one of two people, one a useful, caring individual, with a loving family, and the other a frequent child molester, which one would you choose to shoot? Yourself?*

How self-righteous do you feel now?

*

My name is Michael Collins, but in my chess set I am many pieces and move in many ways. I am 45. I am alone. Quite alone. Until this autumn I was married to Moira, a woman eight years my junior. I hate her as much as I still love Irena, wherever she might be. It was a misfortune for both of us that we ever met - for me and Moira I mean; for me because she has ruined me and for her because I have killed her.

Ironically, I had often toyed with the idea of writing a novel where the protagonist, a man with an enormous justification and capacity for loathing, is only restrained from disposing of the objects of his anger by the obligation he has to his family and by the fear of being caught. When a terminal cancer is diagnosed in his lung he instantly becomes a free agent. He then has a window of opportunity of a few weeks before his tumour impairs his ability to target those he reviles. Being an atheist, he does not fear divine retribution, and comes to see himself rather as a force for the good, desiring to cleanse his area of the drug-pushers - who the police overlook - to eradicate the yobs who - equally ignored - terrorise the streets, to kill the corrupt police inspector who failed to investigate properly his sister's death under the wheels of a get-away car and ultimately the villain himself who was never prosecuted.

I began the novel and put it to one side when Moira announced one day a few weeks ago that she was leaving me after three years of marriage. So, I am using these ten days to write a potted version of it. Agents and publishers insist on a minimum of sixty thousand words for novels. By that criterion very many of the world's greatest classics would never have seen the light of day. You can read my effort later.

Is it not strange how life can mirror what we dream up? A friend of mine - I shall call him Jim - a man whose ambition it was to write a novel, irrespective of whether it would be published - showed me the early draft of his book in which the main character, a police officer, takes leave to investigate privately an unsolved murder on a previous "patch" which continues to haunt him. Before he leaves he discovers by accident that his wife is having an affair.

A week after I had read the beginning (which did not particularly impress me) Jim came home one Thursday evening ill from his Bridge night and found his wife of thirty years shouting the house down in her passion with a man from her office.

In spite of his wife's sobbing contrition and loving guarantees, Jim could not get over the trauma and hurt, and a year later, almost to the day, he was discovered cut into four sealed, bloodless parcels on the Birmingham to Leicester railway line.

Six months later she moved in with that colleague.

And Moira? By trying to suck me so dry she unwittingly made me into the instrument of her own downfall. She left me as a husk with no reason to continue and no reason not to kill her. Now that I call poetic justice. Her stupidity was only exceeded by her greed.

I open the flap and turn on my flashlight and instantly see glowing eyes. I am so shocked that I drop it. By the time I have picked it up, the animals - deer? badgers? - are gone. I think suddenly of Irena and wonder why. What in that empty wooded corridor could have possibly made some neuron, labelled Irena, fire within my brain? How many strategies had I devised since my marriage to banish her from my mind? Why does the mind torture the mind when the

mind has instructed the mind to stop? How many minds are there trapped within, in conflict with each other? It is no good. I shall have to write about her now.

IRENA

When I noticed her, as I walked from the bar to sit down, I saw first a blonde head perfectly shaped, half turned away, so that only her left profile gave any clue to the look of her face. How strangely and intriguingly like a peach her cheek was, both in colour and in texture. I registered immediately that she was unusual and not of these parts. She was in conversation with a man on her right and occasionally her voice, lilting and foreign, formed some distinct words though not enough to give me any clue about the gist of what she was saying. He laughed. She laughed. I felt a thrill of pleasure ripple down my spine. I stole a glimpse of her as often as I dared. I quickly assessed her body dressed in a black top, black trousers, and her slim feet in black sandals. She promised to be perfect. Diagonally opposite to me was another man in a suit and opposite to her companion, whose hand had now stolen around her left shoulder. The man in the suit seemed utterly oblivious of me and, amazingly, more generous with his regards for the man than the woman. I began to study him for clandestine glances at her but did not see a one. I realised that the more often I looked, the greater the likelihood of him noticing my curiosity; then he would look at me and probably alert her to my presence. Then she would look at me in the full. Then I would see her face. Then I would no doubt be disappointed, because it could not possibly be as pretty as the face I had constructed it from the evidence of that half-profile. How often do we see the back of a head whose beauty is sadly not matched at all by the front, sometimes grotesquely so?

I looked around the bar at other men and women in pairs and groups and tried to guess what they would look like if they turned.

“I don’t know who you are, or what you are,” I said to myself. “But I adore you.”

Could she read thoughts? I said it again, only much louder in my head. I picked up my glass of beer and took a deep drink. I was already tipsy.

“How’s Paul, Mike?”

Paul was my brother. The voice had come from my right, from her companion. I turned. They were both looking at me.

“I’m Dennis.” he said. “Remember me? Paul’s party?”

“Yes.” I lied. “You work with him, don’t you?”

I knew he did not and only made that up so that he would have to launch into his curriculum vitae. While he talked I nodded like a television interviewer to convince him I was interested in him. What he looked like and what he said I can no longer remember.

My eyes and hers had met and for the sake of propriety could only engage with each other for a few seconds at a time. I felt way out of my depth. I realised later that he was so self-absorbed, probably drunk, that he did not notice how indifferent my glances were for him, and how, whenever I looked at her, it was discomfiting - almost painful. Luckily I caught the question he now put to me and luckily I said something witty in reply. To my utter consternation she threw back her beautiful head and laughed, a peeling laugh of genuine hilarity. I felt cold. I felt hot. She smiled at me in delight. Her eyes were huge and blue. All at once I fell in and drowned. She was the most beautiful woman I had ever met.

“You said you are writer?” she said with astonishment. I could not answer for a split second.

Dennis was getting up to go to the bar. Her slender glass of rosé wine was nearly full so he did not bother her, only enquiring of his friend who tapped the edge of his empty glass and threw up

his arms to stretch and give an end-of-the-working-day yawn.

“I’m a journalist. And I write short stories too. For magazines. Love stories.”

“Love stories??”

I am not a handsome man. I have relied on intelligent women seeing into me to realise what I am. My unprepossessing features have acted as a screen against the stupid, the vain and the shallow. Her eyes were blazing. But I could not decide if she was more delighted with the impression she was so evidently making on me, or the one I was trying to make on her. We love who loves us, do we not?

“Not soppy ones. Quite sad, though really, more often than not.”

“Soppy?”

She looked puzzled.

“Over-sentimental. Like a bad film which makes silly people cry. Soppy. You don’t know the word? Are you Polish?”

She looked at me very seriously and then smiled again. The man in the suit was tapping the corner of a beer mat on the table, which distracted her. Her friend came back through the crowd with two lagers.

“I would like to read you.” she murmured. “I am Czech.”

She turned away and took no further notice of me. Dennis began to be quite loud and outspoken. Someone of their acquaintance had riled him and he began to use expletives regularly and pointedly for effect. At first she laughed but then fell completely silent. I stood and walked past them to the toilets and felt her eyes staring at my back. I did not turn around.

As I re-emerged into the corridor from the Gents she was suddenly there in my face. I tried to smile but could not. She made no attempt. She was earnest, even sad.

“I don’t know who you are,” I said without inhibition. “But I know I love you.”

“I am Irena,” she breathed. She took my right hand and placed a folded piece of paper into my palm and closed it. Then she swept past like the Queen of the Night and went into the Ladies. She had followed me out on purpose. I pocketed the paper and sat back down not three feet away from the man she would soon betray. He was laughing. I felt deep shame.

She came back in, picked up her coat and buttoned herself in as he finished his drink. Her wine glass was barely half empty. They all stood. Dennis wished me goodnight, his friend in the suit nodded but she completely ignored me.

After they had gone I opened the square and saw with a thrill her telephone number.

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“You must tell him, Irena. This is not fair to any one of us.”

We lay one afternoon amidst the turmoil of my bed. She began to weep again. I stroked her breast until the nipple hardened. Aroused, she angrily swept my hand away and turned her back on me. It was mottled red.

“He’ll get over it. It’s hard but everyone gets over it with time.”

She shook her lovely head. Her hair spread out in slow strands on the pillow.

“It will KILL him. He adores me. And I love him. I wish I had never seen you.”

“Then you must choose.”

We had arrived back on the square on the board from where we never made progress.

Her sense of loving gratitude to him for giving her a job and a chance in the UK swayed up and down on the scales against her passion for me. I recalled the conversation we had had after our

first frantic encounter.

“Denis is nice. Denis is sweet and kind to me. But I do not love him as I love you.”

I warned her that I got depressed and tended to drink too much. She had laughed.

“All men I know drink! Denis drinks. And my father, my brother...not my uncle...but my cousin! We are Czechs. And Czechs get very sad.”

She paused and took me in her hand.

“I love Denis but he is not...mmmm...how you say...**hluboký**”

“I don’t know, Irena. My Czech is rather rusty.” I felt myself swell in her hand. “Do you mean very big?”

She let out a snort and let go of me. She slapped my hand.

“No! He is...you know.... not deep, not very serious.....not funny or clever like you. Oh I don’t know. And I even hate you because you are!”

“Denis is ten years younger and prettier than me.”

“It is not important.”

“Surely you do not want ugly children.”

“They will be daughters and will look like me.”

“You hope.”

Then she took me on a teaching tour of her body in Czech and howled with delight at my hopeless pronunciation until I stifled her laughter and made her sing her unearthly lovely tune again.

One Saturday afternoon weeks later, as the horse chestnut a stone’s throw from my window were coming into bloom, we had not made love. She was too upset.

“I cannot go on pretending, Michael. It is awful when I have sex with him. I am not like that. A liar.”

“But you are, my love. You are a liar. And one day, no doubt, you will lie to me.”

“NO! I do not WANT to be this!”

“Then you must tell him.”

“He knows something has changed. And he is quieter. I see he wants to ask me questions but cannot do it. Can we not go away and live somewhere other?”

“Run away?”

“Yes. I will write him a letter or send him a text.”

“Just disappear.”

She brightened like the May sun after a heavy shower.

“I will tell him I have gone back home to care for my mother.”

I said nothing. I saw how easily she could lie and wondered what lies she would one day tell me.

As she lay and plotted her story I took note of the earnest expression on her face for future reference. She was entirely lovely. And then, closing her remarkable eyes, she became the epitome of misery again. She turned her anger on me.

“Why don’t you do something? You know him. You speak the same language. You are COWARD! Why are you not jealous? You know what I have to do with him! Does it not.....worry....you?”

“You mean bother I think.”

“ALRIGHT! Fucking bother! Yes! Stupid bloody word. Bother. Bother. BOTHER!”

She swept the cup and saucer from the space in front of her and cradled her weeping head in her arms. As her anger weakened I dared to stroke her downy forearm and console her, hushing her

as my mother had used to hush me when I was in one of my lows. I told her that it did bother me, but as it meant nothing to her I persuaded myself to view it - and I did view their coupling in a cinematic sense - as just a bodily function which she was obliged to perform, as routine and as unimportant as any other. I told her that I knew it would one day cease. I promised her that we would move to one of the nearby villages where she would never see him.

"I need to stay near my mother, Irena. She is old. You must tell him. I will come with you. We will tell him together."

She shook her tears away like a wet dog and threw her arms around me. I told her of the long walks we would go on in the countryside and of the birds we could watch together.

"Birds? You like to see *birds*?" she said sitting back in genuine puzzlement to study me for a sign that I was pulling her leg. I told her it was a popular hobby in England.

"Sometimes I think I like birds more than people, Irena. People are the ugliest species on the planet."

"You are strange man, Michael. In my country people do not see birds, they shoot them!" She laughed at her joke but, disgusted, I could not even pretend to. She looked at my sourpuss and laughed even louder, throwing her arms around me until I thawed.

What a precious memory that is, the very last one I have of her, like a final photograph in an album.

I had arranged to call on her the next day, after Sunday lunch and tell Denis the truth. I had heard sirens wailing mid-morning and assumed it was the usual toll of daredevil motorcyclists overreaching themselves on the bendy B road not far away, a favourite stretch for them to test their nerve and skills and die on.

When I turned the corner into her road there were police cars, a forensic van, an ambulance and a crowd outside the house. In a flash I saw what had happened. She had let her secret slip out in an argument and he had stabbed her in a jealous rage. There were police tapes forbidding me to cross which I leapt over, only to be rugby-tackled by a policeman. He pinned me to the ground while I screamed at him that I had to see Irena. Another face - a craggier one - thrust itself into mine and told me to calm down. Who was I? What did I have to do with her? I told him and he yanked me to my feet. The door opened and a metal coffin was put onto wheels and taken down the path. The crowd fell silent. I looked on in despair. Expecting him to be led out at any moment in handcuffs, I clenched my fists ready to kill him. But the door closed again.

I watched the coffin loaded into the ambulance and sobbed her name. The detective wheeled me round and called me a bastard under his breath. I saw immediately in his eyes that he too had been cuckolded.

"It's not her, you fuck. It's him. Her bloke. You should be made to clean the blood up. It would take you all day."

"Where is she?" I managed to gasp.

He turned away and got into the squad car. The constable who had tackled me told me he had no idea where she was. I tried her mobile but it was off. I left a message, the first of scores.

Irena, it transpired, had told him the truth after breakfast. At first he had stared into space unable to speak. Then he had begun to shake. He had stood up and taken a long knife from the wooden block it slept in and walked towards her where she sat. But instead of plunging it into her, he had

drawn the blade across the side of his neck completely severing the carotid artery. As he fell into the pool of his own blood he had gasped that he loved her.

She finally sent me one message. "I am back home. I can never see you again."

December 11th 08:31

As soon as I wake I think of her. I take a swig of water and raise my binoculars again to look at the stump of wood poking from the slow-moving stream. I made a pact long ago with myself that I would see a kingfisher before I died. The early light through the December trees is breaking into strands as the wind stirs their branches. It reminds me of Irena's shaken golden hair. Where is she?

I imagine her in a tableau next to a loving man and surrounded by the girls she wanted. I make her smile at me and allow her to vanish. A movement in the forest makes me snatch up my glasses but the stump is vacant. If these were magic glasses perhaps I could see where she is. I take up the notebook in which I had begun my novel.

THE OUTLAW

In a godless society and in communities without the glue of firm familial bonding, where the gang is the defining influence and the vulgar notions of the worst media rot the unformed, or unformable mind, it is truly miraculous that there is not more crime.

I shall call this town Summerwood because its true identity is not important and indeed it can stand in for scores of other places in Britain which have suffered a similar fate. This was a mining town - rough, yes, but decent down to its heavy duty boots, and able to hold its head high with the dignity of labour. People shared the same values and to a large degree it policed itself. Elmhall had always been a difficult estate. Down there lived the petty criminals, the benefit scroungers and the cheats but they were the loathed minority. You were expected to work and many who did not found themselves shopped by their neighbours. Gardens were mainly tidy and the allotments full and busy.

My name is Mick. I am 51. Until 1987 I was a Labour Councillor (the only kind the town would stomach) but when Thatcher got re-elected I gave up politics and hope at the same time. A Lib Dem had been elected in the Smoldersham ward and was so shocked that he nearly had to be revived with smelling salts. It was during the Strike in 1983 that I discovered my hidden talent with the pen, writing blistering letters to the weekly local paper and the evening one in the city and county. Later I began a degree in English at the Open University but gave up.

The closure of the pit in 86 ripped the beating heart out of the town and without its vital pulse and life-blood a slow death set in. Granted, an electronics company did set up on the outskirts where we had always gone nutting and brambling when we were kids, but our pick-hardened hands were not right for the work and the jobs went to the mothers and daughters. Two years later it had relocated to a cheaper area. Some men retrained as plumbers and electricians - but there were only so many painters and decorators, gardeners, rubbish removers, taxi drivers and the like needed in a little place like ours. People began to drift away. The clubs closed on certain nights and then some for ever. The cinema shut. There were separations, divorces and some suicides. Shops and houses began to be boarded up. The drug pushers and bargain-basement whores moved in.

The squatness and squareness of the buildings in the High Street had somehow been disguised by

the busy to-ing and fro-ing in and around them, by their lights and display windows. Once boarded up and smothered with graffiti, with grass and weeds growing in the cracks between foundations and pavement flags, they were repossessed by an extraordinary skeletal ugliness. This is what Thatcherism did to my town. If I got the chance to put my hands around her scrawny old neck I would do to her what she did to us - choke the living daylights out of her.

My son and daughter moved away with our blessing and encouragement. The local comprehensive had done them proud. He works for the EU as a translator and she's an interior designer for Volkswagen in Wolfsburg. We have lost touch rather. When their mother died of an aneurism we drew closer for a while, but they have their lives to lead. And we argued the last time when I went out to Brussels for Christmas. They had wanted us to move out too and even seemed to blame me for the deterioration in their mother's health but stopped short of saying it. But my wife Carol wanted to stay put and close to her ageing parents and my mother. Since losing her I only have my sister Pat now. She lives two streets away with Eddie and she puts us all to shame. She set up the Neighbourhood Watch and is always on to the council about getting things smartened up and mended, particularly for the older folk. She comes out and moves the hoodies on and is not even afraid to tackle the drug pushers and the prossies. She has had more than one window put in and was once shot by an air rifle. The police are conspicuous by their absence or make token gestures before driving off to sit in their lay-bys. There is still uneasiness between us and them, even this many years after the strike. The local force was not used against us but was deployed in Nottinghamshire.

My Pat is rather a large lady and takes after my dad. People think twice before arguing with her. Had she been born a man she would have been much better down the pit than me. I had to have quite a lot of time off with my chest and back. I think if the pit had not closed in 86, I would have not been long retiring anyway. Being a bit of an invalid did not stop me helping out at the Youth Club in the Church Hall. I used to coach the Under-16 footballers and managed to get the local paper to sponsor us. It was never much but it helped to pay for balls and the coach when we played away.

But then in the 90s kids seemed to change. They started arguing with me and became less reliable somehow. The behaviour of fathers on the touchline got worse. When they ranted at the referees - who became increasingly harder to recruit - and at me for playing or not playing certain lads or getting my tactics wrong - I realised that they were probably venting a deeper-seated anger. Players began not to turn up and sometimes we could not field a full team. The others lost the match and then lost heart. One Friday, all the windows at the club were put in by a lad called Calow and his mates. They had been banned from the premises for using drugs. The Reverend said he had had enough and padlocked the door to the Church Hall. A year later he had gone. A year after that the chapel was deconsecrated and a motor factor occupied part of it. A few months later the whole building went up mysteriously in flames and the blackened timbers in the roof stand today as an eerie symbol, as if any were really needed, of the increasing bankruptcy, financial and moral, of Summerwood, my home town.

A report came out in the City paper that said half of the adult population here was either unemployed or claiming invalidity benefit. But people smiled over their pints when they heard politicians talking about the jobs which invalids *could* do. Which jobs exactly did they mean? When the glue factory closed and the jobs were exported there was a sick joke going around that the workers were planning to stick together to fight it. We laughed but not in our hearts. My neighbour, who had been a foreman there, tried window cleaning and broke his back in a fall. He

spent months in a cast. He told me he never had been able to stand heights. Grim places breed grim humour. That had become our main product.

But the corrosion which had happened around me was nothing compared to what had happened inside me. I was a Socialist and believed in the ultimate perfectibility of Man. I believed that people were at heart good and did bad things because they were under stress - be it poverty, unemployment, mental illness or something similar - or because of ignorance - and the racism and xenophobia of my fellow miners I put down to their isolation from those they purported to dislike, but who they only really feared. A drinking session with those strangers at the Institute would surely end up with everyone swearing life-long love and allegiance.

In the early years of the town's decline whenever something bad happened - be it acts of vandalism, a violent brawl, an attack on an old person in their home or even a murder - I would resort automatically to a standard response. What do you expect in a place where nobody cares about us any more - least of all we ourselves? But as things got worse this began to sound hollow until it came to me like an echo from a false prophet. Me.

I had to admit to myself that there were people who took the bull by the horns and made the best of things, like my own sister - and Stan who had stood with me shoulder to shoulder both down the pit and on picket duty, and had gone into carpentry and made a good living fitting bespoke wardrobes and kitchens. The thought began to nag at me that perhaps the majority of us were useless and could not stand on our own two feet - as that vile woman had exhorted us all to do. Perhaps we deserved to lie down amongst this squalor. Perhaps this was our natural state. I had plenty of time to read and began to read the bible, not as a true believer but out of genuine interest. My explanations began to sound uncomfortably like excuses. In Genesis I read and deduced that Man was incurably flawed, preferring the uncertain world of knowledge to the safe Eden of obedience. The dilapidation around me and beyond bore eloquent testimony to our lack of respect for our surroundings and one another. It began to look like a vast churned battlefield where people fought only for themselves. From my bedroom window I surveyed with despondency the back garden which I had taken pride in twenty years previously and which now was full of weeds, thorns and thistles, a world away from Eden. The desire and rationale - and the strength - for restoring it had vanished. I began to loathe parts of myself but the part in particular which I could not live with was the one which had not mourned the death of my wife but had privately welcomed it. I suppose I could have pleaded that I was depressed or mentally ill, if not insane, but that stank like another excuse. I was a human being. That explained everything. I began to glance at people in their unguarded moments and had insights into their own unspoken and unspeakable wishes. I could see in my neighbour's wife the impatience for her broken husband to be off her hands. I could see the indifference in the eyes of the policemen who came down occasionally to harass the yobs. And I almost admired the frankness of the contempt in *their* eyes when they returned and took it out with stones on those they thought had shopped them. I cast around within for understanding of their hopeless plight and realised with a shudder of horror that my pail had fallen with a thud to the bottom of my well of sympathy. It was dry.

In this brutish environment people had not *turned* bad; their wickedness had merely risen to the surface like the cans and plastic bags on the pond in the park. I saw this particularly in the young. On the recommendation of Jonesy - Jones The Philosophy we called him at the pithead - I had read some philosophy, including the Swiss, Jean-Jacques Rousseau, the conceiver of the Noble Savage. He got himself in boiling water with the Church by stating that children were born, not

marked with sin, but born perfect and were then corrupted by a cruel, unjust society. If the injustices and cruelties were eradicated, if they could return to a more natural state, hey presto, men would be virtuous. At the time this dovetailed so neatly with my political agenda that I adopted it uncritically. It was only later as I surveyed the landscape I was beset by, that I asked myself where the injustices and cruelties had come from in the first place and how they could be disposed of. I saw the blade of the guillotine tumble and had a solution which had failed over two centuries before. I began to see the young not as innocents born into a rough world but as the devil's varmints in desperate need of de-hoofing and de-horning by good old-fashioned doses of punishment, especially at the time when alcohol and testosterone - the devil's special cocktail - got into their systems. The teachers did their best, with their hands tied behind their back, when parents failed but the disaffected swelled in number and Ofsted put the school where my two had thrived into special measures. Behaviour and attendance were poor and results had declined. Many of the older teachers had retired early and the backbone of the school weakened. The old authority of church and school had gone and parents and the police took the line of least resistance.

My conversion to this pessimistic view of life and mankind could - and should - perhaps have gone one stage further, to see redemption through Jesus Christ as the only salvation. There were too many voices in me however dismissing this as hocus-pocus and my thinker-in-chief saw him as just another hapless victim of human depravity. This then is the background against which my tale unfolds. And it begins with a wholly unexpected tragedy.

I mentioned Calow. There were no ready excuses for him. He was evil. Carried straight from hell to be born here, whatever Jean-Jacques might argue. I had worked with the lad's grandfather and liked him very much. He drank a little too much perhaps but he was the salt of the earth. He was the chairman of the Allotment Association and always made sure that the pensioners got a share of the produce at harvest festival. His son I knew vaguely. He was not a drinking man and rarely came to the club. His eldest went into the navy and the second lad, Paul, had special needs. The third Calow, Neil, was trouble from the word go. Suspended and finally excluded from junior school he was in a young offender's institution by the age of fifteen for arson and subject to an ASBO when he came out. At seventeen he was the leader of the gang which ruled the streets of our estate when darkness fell. His parents had disowned him and he had disowned them. Then the father died suddenly leaving the mother to cope with Paul and Neil - and Lee, a fourth son of ten years who was already getting into trouble. The poor woman took to drink, as the older generation put it.

By the time he was twenty, Neil had gotten himself a reputation as a drug pusher. He had a flat over the parade of shops where the younger ones - amongst them Lee Calow - gathered in the evening. The police had raided the flat twice but found nothing - no stash of money or drugs - to the general astonishment of the neighbourhood. A rumour circulated that Neil had either been tipped off well in advance of the raids or that they had been mounted for show and were meant to find nothing. Another said that he had a lock-up on some industrial estate which the police knew about. No-one trusted the police any more. People had given up calling them out.

"I've heard Calow's flat is a decoy," said Pat one Sunday as I sat in her kitchen drinking coffee and watching her huge triceps wobbling as she peeled the Brussel sprouts. "They reckon he owns a place in Leicester under a completely different name."

"Well tell the police then" I replied. "But don't you get involved."

“I have. I left a message on Crimestoppers. And I’ve written to the Chief Constable. But I reckon I might as well as shout up my own entry. Eddie’s sure the police must be in on his rackets. A friend of his - you know him who used to run the Gun Club - what’s his bloody name?”

“Crick!” shouted Eddie as he came, beer-breasts wobbling, into the kitchen looking for his shirt. “Tony Crick. He swears he saw Calow chatting away with one of the local detectives in the pub before City’s last home match. He swears blind he were the copper who came round to check on his gun security last time.”

“Well you make sure she’s stays out of the way, Eddie. Calow is a nasty piece of work and getting nastier. Big money at stake now. And if the police are really involved they’ll want to protect him. But it hardly seems possible. US style corruption in Summerwood of all places!”

“I feel that sorry for his mam, poor woman. Decent family, hardworking, chapel-going. Now she hardly dares show her face in public. Where the bloody hell are we going to end up?”

That was the last time I saw her. Where she was destined to end up became apparent on the following Tuesday night. It was a foul night in early November, windy and wet. An old lady who lived near the shops had phoned Pat to tell her that youths were chucking fireworks around and had thrown one at her window after she had gone out to the gang. Pat had marched round there and scattered them. They had run off to the shelter of the shop doorways and one had thrown a stone which had hit her on the head, much to their amusement. As she had crossed the road to grab one of them a car had come round the corner and knocked her six feet in the air, killing her instantly. The car was the one always parked around the back belonging to Calow and driven by Calow or his mate, said a witness in the chip shop. But it was wet and the window of the chippy was like a mirror against the dark exterior. That very evening Calow spread it about that his car had been stolen while he had been out. His friend gave him a cast-iron alibi. The next morning the car was found in a field near Loughborough completely burnt out. The police took him in for routine questioning but he was soon on his way.

I sat in home after the funeral and stared at nothing. The next morning on my pebble-dashed wall somebody had sprayed END OF THE GRASS. A distraught Eddie phoned to say that the same had been painted on his fence. As it grew dark I walked to the shops. As soon as the gang - nine or ten of them - saw me there was laughter and I heard one say *her brother*.

“Which one of you is Lee Calow?” I asked as calmly as I could.

“Why do you want to know? Are you gonna grass him up as well?”

The youth who had spoken was holding a tin of cheap lager and looking at me from the back of a black hood. The face was ghastly and elongated, the body thin and limbs spindly like a spider’s. The one next to him drew phlegm into his mouth and spat it expertly onto my shoe to collective and loud approval.

I went to speak but found no words. Between the newsagent’s and the pharmacy a front door opened and a larger, fuller version of Lee Calow appeared.

“’S gooin’ on, Lee? Trouble?”

“Him. He wants to know who I am.”

“Whaffor, *pal*? Whassie done? You aint a peedy, are yer?”

I still could not answer. I was in the presence of pure evil.

“It’s Old Fatso’s brother,” said someone else, clearly bolstered by the appearance of Neil.

“Now, now,” he said, softly clipping the lad’s ear, “No need to speak ill of the dead.”

He turned to me and smiled. He had the dead marble eyes of a psychopath. I stared into them but

could not enter. I nodded and turned. As I walked away something came zinging past my ear. "You wanna stay out of trouble, mate - like us!" yelled a voice.

An hour later my front windows smashed. The next day I had them all boarded up, even the one they had missed.

A month later my cough had not cleared up. I saw there was blood in my phlegm. I told the doctor I was not in any pain but my GP knew my chest well and looked worried. He referred me to the hospital and an X Ray showed a large shadow in my right lung.

"You can expect six or nine months, a year at the very most," said the Asian consultant. "I'm really very sorry."

"How long will I still be able to get around?"

He shrugged. "If I were you I would do whatever you need to do as early as you can."

He was glancing at the clock. He looked at me surprised when I thanked him and took his hand. I went to see Eddie and told him. I could see he was not really sorry. He made me a cup of tea. I drank it and left.

I racked my brains. Tony Who? As I lay in bed it came to me. Tony Crick. Gun Club.

He lived on the main road about ten minutes away. I told him who I was. He asked me in.

"Who was the detective my brother-in-law told me about? He said you saw him talking to Neil Calow before a match in a Leicester pub."

At first he refused to confirm this and he took a lot of persuading.

"I shall never mention your name, believe me Tony. Now please tell me. I shan't go until you do."

"His name his Barnes. Why do you want to know?"

"I have good reason to believe it was him who tipped Calow off about my sister reporting him. What's his first name?"

"Dunno."

"How sure are you it was him you saw in the pub?"

"One hundred percent. I've seen him since at the police station. It was definitely him. Calow killed her you know. It was deliberate."

"How can you be so sure?" I asked.

"Believe me. I know."

"How much would I have to pay you for a handgun?"

He laughed and told me to go. I refused to budge.

"I have about ten thousand left in savings. I am terminally ill. My kids are rich and need nothing from me. Before I die I need to do the world a favour."

"You're not serious."

"I am deadly serious."

I stood up and looked out of his window at a derelict wasteland. His garden.

"Think what ten thou would do for you, Tony."

"How do I know you're not a stool-pigeon?"

"I'm Pat's brother. What earthly motive would I have to come round here just to set you up? I hate the fucking police! I hate that scum on our estate! I swear I'll kill the bastards one way or another! With my bare hands if need be!"

He told me to calm down.

"What will you do with it when you've finished with it?"

“I’ll saw it into bits in my garage and scatter them in Barrowby Pit. Ten thousand Tony. Calow will be history. Barnes will be history. The town will put up a plaque to me when I’m history.”

“You’re mad. No, fuck it. I don’t need this.”

“Here. I’ve written down my number. When you’ve changed your mind, call me.”

A week elapsed. I went to the police station and asked to see DI Barnes and was told it was *DS* Barnes and that he was away in court until two. I elected to wait. At gone half-past a man in a raincoat walked in and went to the desk. He turned and looked at me as soon as he had spoken to the desk sergeant. He was handsome and pleasant, around thirty years of age. He beckoned me to follow him.

“I have information relating to the death of my sister, Patricia Hope.”

He drummed the table with his fingers and took out a sheet of paper. He told me how sorry he was that such a good citizen had been the victim of a hit-and-run accident.

“It was no accident.”

“How do you know?”

“A policeman arranged it. I’ve been told it was an officer here.”

He put the sheet of paper back into his drawer and put one hand on top of the other. He made a most solemn face and told me how serious an allegation that was.

“Do you have any proof?”

I studied his eyes carefully until he looked away. I noticed his neck was red.

“You might be wondering why I asked to see you in particular, officer.”

The redness in his neck intensified and spread into his cheeks. His stare became unpleasant. Here was a chameleon indeed.

“A friend of a friend of a friend told me you were the best listener at the station and had a heart of gold.”

“Who exactly?”

“Just a friend.”

“No. Who exactly is the officer in question?”

“She didn’t know. She thought you might have a good idea. Do you?”

He took a deep breath in through his nose and cleared his throat.

“So it’s just hearsay?” he finally said.

“She has a sixth sense for nosing out the smell of something bad. Like a truffle-pig.”

I sniffed and wrinkled my nose.

“I can tell it concerns you, *DS* Barnes.”

“Concerns *me*?”

“Bothers you. You are clearly such a fine, upstanding policeman that corruption affects you. Gets to you.”

I told him I would leave it with him and went. When I got home I sealed the letter box and padlocked the gate at the end of the entry to the backyard.

I pushed a cheque for ten thousand pounds made out to Anthony Crick, unsigned, through his letter box. Still I heard nothing and it took an event down the other end of the town to change his mind. A girl of twelve stopped a bullet fired from a passing car at a rival drug-dealer as she walked home from Girl Guides. She bled to death in the ambulance.

“Alright.” said Crick quietly over the phone. “Come round tonight. We’ll talk.”

So I signed the cheque and left with a revolver and three bullets. Hearing repeatedly the words

the consultant had spoken, I walked down to the shops. I pushed my way gently through the gaggle of louts and knocked on Neil Calow's door. As soon as he opened I shot him straight through the heart then turned and shot his little brother. As I walked away there was utter silence. As I neared home there was first one siren then another. I got into my car and drove out to the wood and parked as far in as I could get. I slept.

I waited until ten o' clock and phoned the police station on my mobile. I asked if DS Barnes was available and was told to hold the line. I ended the call and drove back into Summerwood. I parked a couple of streets away from the station, walked in past the front desk and went into the office where I had spoken to him. It was empty. I sat down and waited. I placed the gun on the table. I heard voices in the corridor and saw the door handle pressed down. As he came in I said in a clear voice that I wanted to give myself up for three murders.

"Three murders?"

"Yes, you crooked bastard. For yours too."

I pulled the trigger and saw a hole magically appear in his forehead. He went to protest but fell dead to the floor first. I got up and walked out unchallenged. Nobody expected a shooting at a police station. I walked back to my car and drove out to Barrowby still just ahead of the tidal wave rising behind me.

On the lake there were swans, tufted ducks and mallards and as I came to the landing stage they flocked to me expecting to have bread thrown their way. I knelt down by the reeds and rolled back my sleeve. The mud was deep and I thrust the gun down as far as my arm would go, up to my shoulder and watched the mud reset. I dried myself on a paper towel in the toilet and drove back into the town. I gave myself up.

*I look at the kingfisher in my bird book - **alcido atthis**. I have heard of twitchers sitting for seven or eight hours observing a stump in the water waiting for one to settle. The picture tells you why. It is the most poised and brilliant of birds. Its back feathers are the blue of a hot star and its wings a mixture of green, turquoise and royal blue, depending on the light, with an oily sheen. The breast and eye flashes are a warm, almost a burnt orange. Below the eyes, blue is followed by white on the chin and the head is a mottled mix of the two blues. The neck feathers are white. The elegant long beak is a stiletto, navy blue on the top and orange underneath in the female, and blue in the male. Its tail is by contrast stubby and flat. It flies fast and straight but can also hover when it targets its prey, a mixture of bullheads, loaches, minnows, sticklebacks, tiny chubb, mayflies, dragonfly nymphs, stoneflies and beetles. A fish once caught is flown to a perch and stunned by being hit against a branch before being swallowed head-first. It is odd that such a prince of a bird should dig itself a deep nest in the river bank and live in filth and squalor. How strange that a thing of such beauty is a mean streak of cruelty designed to spear its victim in a split second. Can it be the creature of a loving God? Why is it so ornate and beautiful? Are pain and suffering so fleeting in the long procession of events as to be almost illusory?*

*When I was a child I imagined that the world would always care for me, always pick me up and tend to me if I fell. **Gentle Jesus, meek and mild, look upon this little child** was the prayer my mother taught me. I said it obediently and willingly every night at the foot of my bed, on my knees, my palms pressed together ("Or God will not listen, Michael"). I lament now that loss of simple faith and despise the adversities and experiences which had melted it away. I am alone. Had I really fallen in the street a thousand feet might step over me before the arrival of a Samaritan. Hardly an eye would trouble to look down. My favourite author was Dickens.*

Stripped of its farces his world was a dark world of cruelty in which perhaps one gentle light, an Agnes or a Dorrit, or, if he felt generous, two or three might glimmer.

I imagine that the average kingfisher is as aware of our species as the average human being is aware of them. We might as well live on two different planets. In a way we do.

At the moment I feel very hungry. I keep thinking of a mushroom and cheese omelette. I add a little brandy to a beaker of water - too much might make me wretch again - and gently swallow. I feel it warm me inside and after another the hunger subsides. The darkness is gathering and I light a candle.

December 12th 9:03 am.

I rub my fingers to ease the cold and numbness. I drink water very slowly and take painkillers. I review the tale I have written. How guilty is Mick?

How shall I plead? How guilty am I? Guilty or Not Guilty are too black and white. We are all guilty shades of grey. How guilty, by helping to elect the vindictive woman determined to ruin mining Britain, was the bewigged clown about to sit in judgment on me? How guilty am I because I destroyed human vermin? Under a different regime I might be awarded a medal. I decide to be awkward. I do not make a statement to the police and do not answer one question. I stare at the wall and see how far I can breathe in at the frontier of my pain. I do not speak to the fat, sweaty duty-solicitor and he abandons me to whatever pleasure his surreptitious glances at the wall clock and his own wristwatch were hinting at.

At the initial hearing I refuse to plead. Medical and psychological reports are required. I stare at the psychologist and say nothing. The court decides to appoint a lawyer and when the clerk asks me if I am guilty or not, I say

“Your Honour. We cannot make up our minds. “

“Are you guilty or not guilty?”

“Some of us are, we think, and some of us aren’t. Does that mean we will all have to be punished?”

“Extraordinary! Is your client now claiming he suffers from a personality disorder, Mr Tomlinson?”

“No!” I exclaim. “We are all present and correct.”

There is stifled laughter.

“If the one who did it pleads guilty then all the rest of us in here will have to be put in prison as well. That hardly seems fair!”

“I will hold you in contempt!”

I change my voice. “Which one, your honour? Not me, I hope. It was *him* who said that. I respect the law.”

“This is extraordinary! Take the prisoner down!”

“But can’t I stay? I didn’t do a thing. Nor me! Nor me! Nor me -”

“Be silent! All of you! I mean *you*.”

There is uproar. The court is adjourned for further assessment of my insanity. We refuse to speak. By the time the trial comes around we will be in prison hospital or possibly dead. Amen.

I put down my pen and look through my binoculars again. There is a jay not three metres away. What a beautiful creature. What a beautiful word. It is obvious from the shape that the jay belongs to the crows. But what possessed God to make her so gaudy - with her plum plumage and blue patches - and her cousins, the rook and the crow, so plain and black? And why is the jay so shy and retiring when her relations, particularly the magpie, are such impudent opportunists? She screeches in my direction. Garrulus glandarius is her Latin name, which suits her, for talkative she certainly is. She is looking directly at me - and now, off she goes, leaving the corridor to the stream empty again. The stump is unoccupied.

The second thing I noticed about Moira was her limp. Combined with the first thing - her elegance - it aroused and fixed my curiosity. The sight brought immediately to mind a memory of a wounded swan I had once helplessly observed limping on an inaccessible island at the centre of a lake. The woman's eyes seemed to glitter - they turned out to be green Irish eyes - as she studied me on the brink of a smile, until the barmaid distracted them. But I guessed she had seen enough to know she had made the desired impact on me. I watched her head do a tour of the bar to see who else's she might turn as she waited for her drinks. Picking them up, she glanced quickly back in my direction, briefly granted me that smile and went to sit down with her long, slender back to me. In the half-light her pink, silky top with lavender swirls lusted.

I was sitting in exactly in the seat which Irena had occupied that magical evening. I sat there whenever I could. I had been reviewing again the occasion of our first meeting and all the meagre intervening years - there had been nine of them - which might have been full of joy, had her boyfriend been less obsessed with her than I was. I knew that she must wander in her own thoughts back to that evening where she saw me for the first time. Of all the world's co-ordinates these were for me the most significant and poignant. Here I felt closest to her, and even made up conversations with her. Surely no husband or lover had ever been allowed access by her to this holy of holies. We could, in some metaphysical way, be here alone. Perhaps in another, uncomplicated life we would be inseparable companions and at this point would stand our marriage bed. From this thought I drew comfort, so its nonsense served a purpose. I had written to the Czech embassy but her name was such a common one there was no hope of tracing her. I had no idea where she lived or where she had originated. She had told me the name once but despite staring at hours at the map the word remained buried deep in my mind, beyond even the recall of hypnotherapy.

How could anyone suspect the turmoil in my head? I smiled. I was polite. I spoke quietly. I escaped the agony of it in drink and in the consoling conviction that life was futile. Misery, I concluded, was as ephemeral as happiness and when life ceased it would be idle to wonder whether the deceased had endured/enjoyed primarily one or the other. And I knew that the other heads around me had no inkling of that chaos in mine. I imagined myself therefore "into" those heads whenever the pain, which only existed in these few cubic centimetres of mind-matter filling my skull, became acute. I grew weary of inhabiting me. In my stories I fled to become a different principle character and narrator of a different history. For hours or even days I could forget who I was. I became, by those different routes, a refugee from the mayhem of my life.

My novels had begun to sell quite well. I would never win one of those prestigious literary prizes but I had acquired a little local fame. When I sold a screenplay to a television company the local paper did a feature on me. Scraping together the money I had inherited on my mother's death and the sale of her property, as well as my own, plus the income from my writing, I had managed to

buy the old rectory just outside Earlstone which I had admired and coveted ever since I had first spotted it on a teenage bike-ride with a long forgotten sweetheart. It lay on the edge of Far Sutton, a pretty hamlet with its tiny deconsecrated but listed twelfth century church of Saint Anthony, renowned amongst students of sacred architecture for its sculptures of the apostles and its altar screen.

"You're Michael Collinson, aren't you? I recognised you from your photo."

She spoke by my left shoulder as I stood at the bar lost in sentimental thoughts. "No. Collins." I was looking down at those twinkling eyes, taken aback at just how green they were. I felt unable to resist the mischief she was injecting into them. She had a small, delicate mouth and quite a broad face framed by very dark brown, tousled hair. Her nose was pert and upturned. Had she gotten my surname wrong on purpose?

"And you are Irish aren't you?" I added.

"My father was. From Cork."

I looked over at the man she was sitting with. He smiled generously.

"Your husband?"

"No, my brother. I'm Moira. I'm reading your new book."

"Enjoying it?"

"Mmm. Quite. It's strange."

"True to life then at least...."

She smiled more broadly. Had I attracted the first member of my fan club? She put her order in - two pints of Guinness - and I insisted on paying. She introduced me to her brother who looked nothing like her.

"Why do you play the part of a fourteen-year-old girl?" she asked.

"Adeline? I met her in a family in Normandy years ago. She was the sister of my sister's penfriend. We had gone over on a family visit. She fascinated me - sullen, prickly, but amazingly clever. People like that feel isolated and lonely. It just came to me one night, as I was sitting over there, how well she would cope in the impossible situation I had dreamt up. As soon as that hit me, the novel more or less wrote itself. In my head. As I sat over there."

"Is the ending sad?"

"All endings are sad. Lives do not have happy endings."

The brother drank up and said he had to go. He pecked her on her full cheek and went.

"Are you sure he's your brother?"

She laughed. She said it was a crazy question.

"He looks nothing like you. Perhaps he's not who he thinks he is. Lots of children aren't."

My big mouth! Too much to drink rendered it colossal. No finesse. Yet I had not upset her. On the contrary she thought it a good joke. Perhaps she was the one who was "the cuckoo chick in the nest" she added with a mysterious smile. I shrugged.

"Do you say outrageous things to strangers because you think people should make allowances for your eccentric genius, Mr Collinson? Or can't you help it?"

"*Collins. Michael.* I think life is too short to be polite and indirect. Say what you think, I say!"

"I'll drink to that."

We drank. She insisted on buying the next.

"What happened to you leg, Moira?"

"Oh, it fell off in bed one night. I woke up in the morning and it had rolled onto the carpet."

"You must have been quite upset."

"Shit happens, Michael. I got over it by nine."

She said "shit" and "it" with a lot of whispering aspiration, as the Irish do. It ran a shiver down my spine.

"I'm getting a taxi back to Far Sutton. Can I drop you anywhere?"

"No I live a couple of streets away. I can hobble back."

"Live on your own?"

"No. With Jayney. She's divorced. A bisexual florist. Her husband found out about her dark side. I work for her. That's all."

"You're a flower seller!"

"No. I'm her buyer."

"Never seen you in here before."

"Probably because I've never been in. My half-brother wanted a word with me."

"Now he's your half-brother!"

"He's a house-valuer."

"Really?"

She told me she had heard I had bought Sutton Rectory. My antennae ought to have buzzed then and put me on alert, but they were benumbed by alcohol.

A French cynic once said that one of man's greatest delusions was that the woman he loves is special. I had convinced myself - it sounds corny - that Irena was so special that I could never love again. But Moira had beguiled me. She had flattered me subtly and I too must confess that I had played a little game with her - giving her to understand that she had only stimulated me intellectually, that I found her company enjoyable and was not in the least interested in her sexual attributes - as if she was a good friend I could swap chat with - all in order to convince her that I was interested in platonic intercourse, that I was high-minded and above the grubbiness of a casual bedding, in order to get her to try harder sexually, in order to seduce her by a roundabout route. It was a clever-clever game of playing hard-to-get.

I did not realise till much later that I was the prey animal. I was vulnerable because at the bottom of all those wounds I nursed, there was a desire I was unaware of; for them to be healed over and forgotten.

*

GOODFELLOW & GOODFELLOW - Private Investigators. The brass plaque was the only polished thing about the facade. I rang the bell. It chimed the song *As Time Goes By* from *Casablanca*. The intercom clicked and then whispered.

"Hello. James Goodfellow. Can I help?"

"My name's Collins. I would like to speak to one of you."

"Which? My brother or I?"

I winced. Assimilation in language - as the misuse of the apostrophe S demonstrates - is always a good indicator of stupidity. I almost turned to go. But I stayed put.

"Whichever one of you is available."

"Do you have an appointment?"

"No."

"Hold on. I'll just see if *he's* free. *I'm* rather busy. The mysterious Case of the Disappearing Pedigree Poodle....."

I waited. There was another click and the same voice came back on.

"Hello. My brother James says you wish to speak to *me*."

"Not you in *particular*, Mr Goodfellow. Either of you. You sound exactly like your brother."

"That's because we're twins! I'm Jolyon. Is it urgent?"

"Yes, rather. It concerns quite a lot of money."

"You ought to have phoned for an appointment."

I looked at the weeds and grass growing from the cracks of the foundations. The ground floor window to my right was boarded up and the one to my left had its blind pulled down. I thought I heard just then a groan of pleasure from that quarter. The plaque below theirs, rather tarnished, read PLT - Personal Language Tuition - French German Spanish Welsh

The initial demand for these languages amongst the Earlstone public had obviously long since dried up - and in the case of the latter, I surmised - never got going. The red outer door was peeling. Perhaps I could trade advice about corporate imaging for their services.

"Hello?" crackled the voice. "Are you still there? I can spare you fifteen minutes, thirty at the very most. Give the door a good - and I mean a really good push - when it buzzes."

I had to put my shoulder against it to do the trick, and nearly fell against the staircase inside. The steps were of bare grey stone with sparkles in them. The stairwell walls were dirty white.

Someone - a disgruntled client? - had scrawled SHIT half-way up. It would probably fade away completely by the year 2100.

The door at the top of the stairs was a metal one. I pressed the buzzer and heard nothing. I knocked and hurt my knuckles. It sprang open and I pushed it. I saw to my surprise a carpet with a deep red pile, walls tastefully hung with cream wallpaper with a motif of pale grey and red squares, and a tall palm standing against one wall in a large green pot. The outer shabbiness and the inner beauty perfectly summed up, I mused, urban Britain - and the exact reverse of Moira. This strange observation brought me to a standstill and then I saw a very round face with a shiny bald head poking out of the right hand doorway like a huge light bulb.

"Mr Collins, did you say your name was?"

He ushered me in. The office was the epitome of busy untidiness. No doubt he would be able to drop his hand within seconds on any nominated file, book or paper lying scattered around us. It looked as if a sudden gust had blown them there. Mr Jolyon Goodfellow was crammed into a grey waistcoat with a silken back, and suit trousers attached to braces, clearly redundant, for their function had long ago been taken over by his ample arse. His ruddy throat was exposed as he had discarded his red tie and thrown it onto a pile of books which were threatening to fall from the corner of his desk. He dabbed his head with a handkerchief.

"'Ot for November don't you think? Mmmm. Very.. Now 'ow can I be of assistance?"

Now I realised he was a local man. His intercom voice had been subjected to gentrification. He unwrapped a Nuttalls Minto and sat down with a bump. It occurred to him to offer me one but I held up my hand to decline.

"I have reason to believe that I am the victim of a fraud. Three years ago I married a woman called Moira O'Donnell. I suspect that that is not her true name. Two weeks ago, out of the blue, she announced she wanted a divorce."

He rolled the sweet around his mouth and studied me with his brown eyes rendered huge by the powerful lenses in his glasses.

"You *believe*, you *suspect*..." he said at last. "Is that it? A gut feeling she's a wrong 'un?"

"That's why I'm here. If I could prove that I'm right *myself*, I could save myself a lot of money - on your fees for one thing - and on half my wealth for the second. Of course you know that new

divorce rules mean there is a no-fault division of assets down the middle. My assets. My house - or rather the proceeds from the sale of it. She could be the biggest shag-bag in the village and it would make no difference. Fifty-fifty."

"Married three years? She can't surely have much of a claim on assets you owned before the marriage!"

"I was too trusting. Her name is on the deeds. She said she wanted to feel secure. I took legal advice. I might have a case if I can convince a judge I've been conned. But it could cost me a lot of money to challenge her claim."

A thought seemed to strike him and his attitude changed. He found a biro under some papers, scribbled, cursed, threw it at his waste bin - just missing it by a foot - and took out another from his drawer.

"Mr Collins, I subscribe to a private website where investigators like me share information about the latest scams the crooks are up to. Would it surprise you to know that "con" marriages are the latest way to earn 'undreds of thousands of pounds of easy money? All you need to do is put up with the company and ...shall we say....physical proximity and.....*requirements* of the victim for a reasonable length of time before calling it a day. I've been waiting for my first case. Now here you are, *maybe*. Coffee?"

I had gone very cold. I felt queasy.

"I assume you consummated the marriage?"

I could not help but laugh. Moira adored sex. I thought of the first time at the florist's house when she had suddenly removed her leg. Could there ever be a less ambiguous signal that a woman desired intercourse? Gasping, she had pulled me, gasping with horror, shock, laughter and desire, onto the floor. Afterwards she had joked that if I upped and took my leave, she might lie there circling on her back like a turtle for ever. If only I had.

He made me a cup of instant coffee at his kettle, forgot it was for me, tasted it, grimaced and plonked himself back down. Behind this bluff exterior and folksy voice I began to detect a very acute intelligence.

"I think I've shocked you," he said.

"I thought my imagination had run away with me. It does come as a shock to hear my suspicions confirmed."

"Now 'old on! 99.9% of divorces are genuine. Money worries.....arguments about the kids.....it's gone stale in bed...hubby's lost interest or is playing away...or with himself.....or she is...know what I mean?"

"Are you questioning my comprehension or your ability to express yourself?"

He chuckled. He popped another sweet.

"Can I be personal? 'ow 'ave things been between you? Noticed anything different before she dropped the bombshell?"

"Things have been just fine."

"So what makes you think she's conned you?"

"Precisely *that* fact. It's really a hunch. She sent me a text message out of the blue from Ireland. She'd gone back to visit a dying aunt and hadn't come back. I kept phoning to see what was wrong but she never returned my calls."

"Ah! Now that rings a bell. 'Old on."

He clicked his mouse several times and then read out from the page he had brought up.

"Typically, the subject takes 'er leave from the family 'ome to visit a sick relative, tekking with 'er jewellery and other portable valuables. She announces 'er intention to seek a divorce from a

distance. Victims report that their “wife” ‘as persuaded the ‘usband to set up a number of ‘igh-interest deposit accounts , some in ‘er name, some in ‘is, with an upper limit causing the dividing-up of the cash assets of the couple, in order to maximise returns. This is to prevent the victim from squirreling away funds once the news break. I can see that rings a bell, Mr Collins.” I must have looked ashen-faced. I asked him what I could do. He looked at me.

“If she’s genuinely who she says she is, not much. Your only ‘ope is that she gave a false name at the Registry Office, or is a bigamist - unlikely in this day and age - and that it makes your marriage null and void. She can’t divorce you if you ain’t married.”

“A bigamist!”

I thought immediately of her “brother” and the scales fell from my eyes. So this might be who she saw when she went out to see her “mates” on Tuesdays and late night-shopping on other days - and I suddenly remembered he worked for an estate agency. Would he use my own money to buy the possession I treasured most in the world? I told Goodfellow of this concern and he raised an eyebrow.

“Bring me your marriage certificate in and I’ll try to track down her birth certificate at Somerset House.”

“She’s Irish.”

He smiled. “In the divorce court you will have to challenge ‘er identity and somehow persuade the recorder to require ‘er to produce ‘er birth certificate. Look ‘ere.”

I went round to look at the screen he had clicked on. It was the Registry Office website.

“I don’t suppose you remember doing it, but, look, all you need to do is prove your name and nationality. Did she produce her passport?”

“I think she did.”

“Well, all she needs to do is to produce it in court if required. You would have to show why you suspect her. A *hunch* would probably not be enough. ”

“But couldn’t *you* track down her birth certificate?”

“Where was she born?”

“Somewhere in County Cork. Her name is Moira O’Donnell.”

He shook his head. “In Cork alone there are probably a thousand of them.”

“But I have a date of birth.”

“But do you have details of her parents? You’ll need it for the form as well as the place of birth to obtain a duplicate. Anyway, she’s almost certainly thought of all that. By hook or by crook she’ll have her documents in order. And she probably is Moira O’Donnell. Why should she pretend otherwise? She’s a professional divorcer. After you, she will have everything she needs. Are you a wealthy man?”

“I am..... I was. The main thing for me is to keep my home.”

“Buy her out!”

“I can’t. Most of my assets are in the building. Couldn’t I just make the house impossible to sell? Put up the price? Scatter rubbish around whenever there’s a viewer? Be out? Act mad? Bark like a dog?”

“She’d just go back to court and set her lawyer on you for being unreasonable. You’d end up paying her costs and be even worse off.”

He looked at his watch. He needed to go out, he said. He told me to leave it with him and he would have a good think, talk to his brother and contact the website. He told me to bring in a photograph of her. He would see what he could do and give me a ring.

“Is there anything else worth mentioning at this point, Mr Collins?”

Should I tell him? Was it relevant?

“She only has one leg.”

“One. What ‘appened to t’other?”

“A necrotising bug got into a knee wound after a bad fall. She lost the leg up to the thigh.”

He crunched his new sweet. I wondered if he was wondering what it was like to shag a one-legged woman. He grimaced.

“I allays do that. I mean to suck ‘em right to the end. Leave it with me. One leg might give me something to go on.”

I wrote down my address and phone number for him and left.

*

“I know what your game is, Moira. You are apparently not the first to try it on.”

“I haven’t the faintest idea what you are talking about, Michael.”

“I’m not going to give in without a fight.”

“Then it will cost you. And I’ve got some convincing anecdotes - with a witness - about your violent and unreasonable conduct. You will lose more than money, Michael. Bye.”

The line went silent.

I did not doubt who the witness was. The following night I drove into Earlstone. If I could find the “brother” I could give Goodfellow something else to go on. Through “illness” he had not attended the wedding, and nor had any other relative because, as she said she had no others but “Derek”. Derek O’ Donnell or O’ What? I went to the pub and asked a couple of regulars if they remembered Moira and him. I had not been there with her since our wedding - only occasionally on my own. They could recall neither her nor him. And hardly me.

I went back and sat in the car paralysed with despondency and what I can only describe as an absolute cluelessness. The rain was pouring and at the front of the building the smokers were huddling depressingly beneath a sodden gazebo. Should I sit here for ever until the “brother” walked by or go on an endless quest for him, like the quest I had once imagined launching for Irena? Staying put and going were equally disgusting and absurd to me. I contemplated the abandonment of my lovely hamlet and my forced return to this urban drain. With my share of my own wealth - what had she contributed? - I might be able to afford some sort of cottage in Far Sutton - and be reminded every day of the gem I had lost. Perhaps she and the brother would, by some devious strategy at which I could hardly guess, become the new occupiers, staring down at me with scornful smiles from one of the high mullioned, stone-encased windows. Perhaps I should move away entirely and begin a new life abroad. My French was decent and I could imagine myself projecting the image of some artistic recluse with a sad, secret history, high above the village in some crumbling hovel, existing on local cheese and red wine. It might be my next novel - with a happy ending, involving a passionate encounter with a woman on the next hillside, exiled by the stout burghers for eccentric behaviour which only I could appreciate. Or I could emigrate to the Czech Republic where my money would be a fortune. I could bribe my way onto television and appeal for Irena to get in contact. I imagined her again, settled with a new man and her family, and wondered if it would be fair to unsettle her for a second time. My mind returned to the dismal present. Furiously I started the car and drove away.

I had gone only a few yards when a thought made me screech to a halt. The thought was BlueBells. Did the florist still live in that nearby road? I reversed and drove along the one-way street, turning left at the end. Outside the semi where we had first had sex, the blue van was still parked. My spirits rose a jot. Moira had - ostensibly at least - severed contact with Jayney when she had married me and thrown herself - ostensibly at least - into the role of the fine first-lady of leisure in the village.

I rang the bell with scant expectation of success and with nothing prepared to say. I had met Jayney once when I had collected Moira's things from the house. She had, I recalled, the unusual colouring combination of brown eyes and blonde hair, natural or not. I rang again and saw movement. The door opened.

"Moira used to work for you. I'm Michael. Remember?"

She looked rather less attractive than my memory-picture of her. Perhaps three years had eroded her prettiness a little. Perhaps my imagination had been too generous. Had she put weight on? She stood in a floral apron drying her hands on a tea-towel. Something behind her made her turn, and, without thinking about it, she drew the door beside her closer to.

"She's not *here*, Michael."

I acted puzzled. "Why do you assume I'm *looking* for her? When did *you* last see her?"

She shrugged and, overacting, rolled up her brown cow-eyes into their lids. She opened her mouth as if the effort of thinking required it. I did not wait for her to tell her ponderous lie, but raised my voice to ensure that whoever was listening could hear me clearly.

"I was hoping that you might know where her *brother* currently is. She says her aunt is at death's door, but he's not answering his phone. It would be tragic if he didn't manage to get over there to see her one last time. She might even disinherit him, she says. And he wouldn't want that now, would he?"

"Sorry. I can't help you."

"Never mind. Perhaps when the old gal pops her clogs you might do the flowers."

I got into my car and reversed about thirty yards into a space on the left. The falling rain and dull streetlamps would be my camouflage. After twenty minutes however I was ready to give up my conviction that either he or she, or even both, had been there. I gave the windscreen a wipe and saw a man of about the brother's height and build step out into the road and clamber into a car. As he drove past I memorised the number and felt almost sure it had indeed been him. I was certain he had not seen me.

December 13th 10:09

This morning I took longer to wake properly. I am considerably weaker and not so much in pain. My immediate thoughts are with Mick, who needs a clever defence to beat his murder charge - not that he is particularly bothered, with only a few weeks to live, whether he does or not. Lawyers are expensive and there is a great romantic thrill in the thought and deed of conducting one's own defence. I exercise my fingers and lift up my binoculars. I expect to see nothing and am not disappointed. The stump is just a stump. The kingfishers are all extinct. I find a pen.

"Ladies and gentlemen of the jury. I am guilty of killing but am not guilty of murder. I crave your forgiveness for my earlier flight of fancy. We are complex creatures as you yourselves of course realise. But I am neither a murderer nor a manslayer. I did indeed kill three creatures with malice aforethought. One cannot murder an ant, a tiger, and not even our near relative, a

chimpanzee. But you can kill them. Murder relates exclusively to the killing of a *human* being. I contend that the three individuals I killed had divested themselves - or were divested - of all pity, love and humanity. They were therefore callous, without conscience and amoral, and in a real sense *sub-human* or *sub-humane*. Genetically they were of our species. But not morally. Every one of you know - or know of - creatures such as they, and harbour an intense loathing - almost unto a death-wish - of them. These are individuals who do not give a damn about any of us. I realise, one can object that what I did was *sub-human*. If that is in fact your view, then I contend that I cannot be guilty - for whereas a tiger *kills*, only a human being can commit murder. Therefore the argument collapses. A *human* being is incapable of murdering a *human* being.”

Now then, members of the jury, how do you find Mick? Guilty or not guilty?

I rang the bell of Goodfellow and Goodfellow.

“I have a licence plate for you, Mr Goodfellow. It’s Mr Collins.”

“Ah, Mr Collins, I do believe my brother was, ah, dealing with your case. He is however indisposed this afternoon.”

I insisted on coming up and after some grumbling he thought I could not detect, and after an intense rustling of papers, the door sprang open with a long buzz, as if an angry wasp had opened it. A red-faced, portly man emerged from the den of iniquity on my left and hurried clumsily outside. I thought for a second it might have been Jolyon. I mounted the stairs. On the corridor I walked past the first door and all at once was confronted with the same private detective in a yellow waistcoat and brown corduroy trousers. He put me in mind of an obese Rupert Bear. He bade me enter. As I sat down I pulled out a bag of Mintoes and put them on the table.

“I expect you have the same tastes as your twin. These were a little gift for him.”

“Thank you, but no. I can’t abide ’em. I’m a toffee-man, myself. Now Jolyon did give me a copy of his notes on your case.”

He shuffled his papers about until he found a brown document folder then sat back to read the contents, clucking his tongue against the roof of his mouth. As he scanned the notes he absent-mindedly opened my bag of sweets and popped one into his mouth. After a moment he stopped sucking and crunched it. He looked at me over the top of the page with his huge eyes. He asked me about the licence plate I had mentioned. I told him that I was just playing a hunch that my wife’s ex-employer might know where the so called brother was.

“I could tell she was covering up. I hung about. As I sat in the car he came out.”

I gave him the slip of paper with the number.

“Ah,” he said. “Used to ’ave a good contact in the police in the north of the county. But he was shot stone-dead by a self-appointed vigilante who reckoned he was corrupt. In the police station! In his office!...Leave it with me. I’ll see if I might persuade a colleague in Leicester to return a little favour I did ’im. ‘E’s well connected. But it will cost you. £250. On the top of your bill.”

“That’s OK. If I can find out where he lives my guess is that Moira will not be far away. No nearer to Ireland than me or thee. *AND* who he is. I’m positive he’s not her brother. Half or full.”

“But Mr Collins, even if ‘e has a different surname it proves nothing. ‘E might have had a different dad...she might ’ave been married afore and kept ‘er married name, as many women, for sheer convenience, do. You might just be storing up more and more fodder for some £500-an-hour barrister to sink ’is molars into.”

“Well. We’ll see. I just need to get to the truth for a start. I’ll pay you well. Whatever muck you dig up I can decide how to dispose of it. I’m a clever man, Mr Goodfellow. I do not enjoy being

made a monkey of. So, *Jolyon*, I'll leave it with you. Give me a ring."

He put another mint onto his soft, fat lips, took it, like a chameleon with his long tongue, and seemed not to have noticed that I had called him by the wrong name.

The name the £250 managed to dig up was Jimmy Rowan. The address was in Warwickshire, just over the Watling Street border near Naunton. The house stood on its own and had once been an inn. I knocked the door.

Moira congratulated me on my cunning and I calmly congratulated her on hers. She said that Derek really was her half-brother. He came to the door, took her hand and smiled at me in triumph. They did not ask me in. We stood looking at one another. At last, taking one last deep drag on his fag and flicking it into the garden, he spoke.

"Mike, I'm going to make you an offer you can't refuse. You bought the Rectory for six hundred K. Today it is worth nine hundred. Sell it to me for half a million. That way everybody benefits. If you tried to fight us, the legal bill would be over fifty thousand. With no chance of success. You would be even worse off. Half a million would buy you a very nice place in some nice village or other - even a tiny place in ours. You're a successful man, young enough to build up capital again. Just admit you've lost and move on...."

He was quite a big fellow so I contained my anger. I did not wish to add physical humiliation to my moral one. I took a very deep breath and spoke with as much dignity and calm as I could muster.

"So I end up with a hundred thousand pounds less than I paid. You think that's a good deal?"

"Michael," she breathed "It's better than it might be. I can understand why you might be angry."

If she was ashamed she gave no hint of it. She had spoken with assurance.

"Why I *might* be angry, Moira?"

How I longed to wipe the smile off their faces.

"Doesn't it bother you, Derek, that I've been shagging the arse off your girlfriend-cum-sister for three years?"

"No. It's a body function like eating and shitting. And she's pretty good at faking it, aren't you Moira?"

"She wasn't faking it, Derek. Is that what she told you?"

For the first time a hint of redness crept into his cheeks. A sign of doubt and jealousy?

"You faked a lot of things, Moira, but you didn't fake the pleasure I gave you. I believe your Derek - whatever he is - is jealous, but he has no room to be. He's shagging your florist friend! Did you know that, Moira?"

"So what?" she cried with a laugh. "So am I!"

Had she not gloated she would still be alive.

*I am shivering. I take a sip of brandy in water and feel a glow spread out within me. I consider my destiny. I can hardly believe that I have ended up here. I have not led an especially corrupt life. I have not - until November - done anyone a particularly bad turn. Avalanches, falling branches, earthquakes, tsunamis, hurricanes and sociopaths like Moira and Derek are potential hazards in life for everyone, and sheer chance governs whether they cross our paths or not. Does anyone grow **more** idealistic as they advance in years? The iniquities of men, like bones in an ageing body, become more evident with time. Men do more evil than good. Men are more evil*

than good. Is it not fundamentally absurd that matter, whatever that is, conjured up from nowhere it would seem, is blown on solar winds from broken stars onto a planet sufficiently wet and warm to shape it into sentient, thinking beings, who then proceed to spend their brief respite from chill, darkness and oblivion on endless schemes exploiting and impoverishing their fellows? This is so perverse that I am almost persuaded it is deliberate. We might indeed be, as the Ancients thought, mere playthings for the amusement of the gods. No loving God would go to such lengths in order to invent such a complex setting for our minor and major battles. A malicious God intent on fashioning beings to be punished for no reason, as a cruel boy tears the wings off butterflies, would merely invent a red plain on which we would hunger, thirst and burn. The beauty of this world, embodied for me in the kingfisher, is even more cruel because of the illusion of beauty it purveys. We live in a beautiful world whose lurking cruelty is only in remission. It is as if I, an innocent child, surrounded by flowers, have fallen, and am drowning in a pool in which a beautiful sky is reflected.

The scientific heresy - once a spiritual sine qua non when the earth was at the centre of all - that we may be unique in Creation, the only "intelligent" creatures for light years in all directions is now becoming thinkable again. How ironic that when we emerged from that matrix, we inherited in our genes and fibres a violent, self-assertive dynamism which drove us out of Eden, a selfishness beyond the power of the Higher Mind to control, a selfishness which will ultimately destroy us with the weaponry the Inquiring Mind chooses to perfect. Whatever forged our genius invested it with the seeds of its own destruction.

*I took up bird watching one glorious blue day in Norfolk on the coast because I found myself amongst intelligent, calm, sensitive people who loved to share their enthusiasm and knowledge with each other. If such people were in the ascendant and not the shallow, the greedy and the bone-headed, then we would not be far short of Eden. Contrast them with the O'Donnells. There are a million birdwatchers in Britain. But fifty-nine million people could not care less whether all the birds, as well as all the stars, fell out of the sky to earth. Most think the stars are tiny. They play banal games, they watch banal television, love banal music, drive around pointlessly in banal metal boxes raised to the status of icons. **Their** stars are the banal junk-celebrities whose banal exploits fill the front pages of their banal newspapers. They smile at banal advertisements for banal products for which they thereby acquire a banal affinity. They live on banal roads and have banal children. Even when they are not doing evil their banal indifference is just as deadly. What is technically the most marvellous achievement of an explosive universe - the human being - turns out to be extraordinarily, depressingly, disgustingly and unremittingly **banal**. The Superman, the Austrian disciple of that crushingly banal philosopher, Friedrich Nietzsche, who, according to him, earns the right, by dint of his superiority, not to obey or to be judged by the laws of common men, turns out to have a malformed penis, to piss on his banal niece and his banal girlfriend, and to have breath and shit as bad as the worst of them, and to rot just as quickly. The assassin of a John Lennon or a Martin Luther King, and the suicide bomber of the banal are driven by the desire to rise above their nauseating banality, but cannot. The grubby materialism of Moira, her inability to rise in the world without any other talent but to deceive those who have talent, her very wish to rise in the world, to "better herself," her unthinking wish for her physical comfort - are all excruciatingly futile and tedious. And banal.*

Birds are beautiful - and the people who glimpse, through observing them, the astounding,

shocking beauty of creation, can transcend - unless they get obsessed by tedious minutia, like bird-spotting - their own banality.

Life is a monster, we its darting fry.
It devours every single one it bears.
I strive in vain to find a reason why
This shivering candle in the darkness flares.
Why atoms born by some absurd decree
On solar winds from broken stars are blown
Conceived into this fleeting form called me
And wrought into tormented flesh and bone.
They could have rolled in stones in some dark cave
Beyond the warm deceptive light of suns
Beyond the thoughts on one whose sweet eyes gave
A cause for hope where darkest foulness runs.

And why, if I was destined to be born,
Was I, who dreamt of joy, designed to mourn?

*

“What are my options, Mr Goodfellow?”

For a reply he handed me the bill. It came to £550 plus VAT. I did not quibble and handed him a cheque. He shook his head.

“Options? You need a lawyer - or rather you need a bloody lawyer like you need a ‘ole in the ‘ead. If ‘e’s offered you 50k more than the settlement you should ‘ave ‘is ‘and off - even ‘is arm.”

“Then they *would* be a paraplegic couple.”

“A *generous* swindler is not a common or garden bird, Mr Collins.”

“I’d rather die than give in. I’d rather set the house alight than give it to them.”

He studied me with those eyes.

“I can see you’re serious.” He clasped his hands together and lowered his voice.

“I know of a body who operates, shall we say, at the margins and beyond the margins of the law. For a fee he can be very persuasive in ways which may offend the delicacy of some clients, depending on ‘ow desperate they are to ‘ave a resolution to their difficulty.”

Jolyon had resumed his suit identity and ate his mints at regular intervals. We sat in the original office. The starving plant in his window was wilting to a slow death, and, if it had a voice, would have been screaming in agony.

“When you say you know of a body, Mr Goodfellow, might you mean a close relative of yours?”

The remark clearly intrigued him. Perhaps he had never before put his alter ego in the frame as the sinister fixer of things. He adamantly shook his head.

“I am not at liberty to disclose ‘is identity but you are not a million miles from the mark. This body can - for a fee **from** a thousand pounds - dissuade, for example, men who ‘ave formed adulterous liaisons with the wives of clients. They have been known to turn up in the middle of Sutton Coldfield blindfolded and naked on wet, windy nights with their hands tied behind their backs.”

“**From** a thousand pounds, you say? You know *from* is the most deceitful preposition in the English language, Mr Goodfellow. Nearly as deceitful as *up to*.”

“I know, I know. But you gets what you pays for, Mr Collins. I’m not saying it’s cheap and I’m

not saying one might approve of such extreme methods, but as far as the O'Donnells are concerned - and this is rarely the case with swindlers - we know, as the saying goes - **where they live**"

"You don't know these people, Mr G. They have been prepared to endure the spin-offs of a sham marriage for years. Rowan has let his half-sister, who is also his partner, have sex with me. They inhabit the moral-planet Uranus. They are ruthless aliens and I have begun to wonder why they have not just bumped me off and slung me in the pit."

"Too risky."

"Maybe. But one thing is for sure, your strategy of intimidation will not work for long. Virtually half a million pounds is at stake. If we push them into a corner - or Sutton Coldfield - they might go for the ultimate solution. I am looking for a more permanent outcome. A man cannot be divorced by a dead woman."

He was not visibly shocked. He only crunched his sweet. Taking a pen he wrote something quickly on a memo-pad and passed it to me. It read £50 000. I passed it back. He tore out the page and ate it. I told him I would let him know and left.

*

I had been drinking. As the brandy fuelled my sentimental cells I found it less and less plausible that I had been so utterly mistaken in Moira. There was love and virtue somewhere there within, I was sure. Could God truly have made such an exquisite form with such a rotten centre? I decided to write her a letter.

My dearest Moira,

I am convinced that part of you loves me. I suspect that Derek holds you somehow in thrall. Please allow me to tell you what a lovely - if misguided - woman you, my wife, are, and how part of me - the higher part of me which the stink of these sordid events leaves untouched - still holds you in the highest loving esteem.

I beg you to consider another course of action from the one you have embarked on. Banish Derek from your thoughts and throw in your lot with me! I can reveal to you that I have another novel under way about a man rescued from self-destruction by the returning love of his woman - a novel of which I am particularly proud and hopeful, which promises to be a best-seller and, if made into a film, would see us entirely financially secure.

My spirits could not be lower and I fear a state of dejection leading to a denouement so destructive that neither of us would emerge unscathed.

Michael.

I pulled on my coat and went out into the chill midnight. I posted it. The next morning I could barely believe I had written such a maudlin letter and cursed my lack of pride. I had a mind to stand by the pillar-box and demand the bloody envelope back. Within two days I had my answer. Out of her envelope spilled the contents of mine in tiny bits and a short message: **Don't you fucking threaten me.**

Had he done this or caused her to do it? I rang her on her mobile.

“Moira? Why did you tear up my letter?”

He made me do it, Mike. He’s a psychopath. Please come and rescue me.

“Why? That sentimental load of old bollocks! Like your stupid books and poems! As if you could ever be a proper writer, you inadequate man. “Neither of us” - what did you put? - “will escape unscathed.” Get real, you pathetic *eediot*. One of us will - and it’s not going to be *you*. Come on Mike. You reckon you’re the one with the gift of imagination. There are ways and means for us to get our little hands on *all* your worldly goods. Think about it. Just be grateful that we are not as greedy and unscrupulous as we might be.”

My half-formed intention straightway hardened into a sharp-edged resolution. The only question was the how.

December 14th 14:08

I have only just taken up my pen. I must write slowly as I was becoming illegible yesterday. This morning I had an unnerving experience. I was almost discovered. By a child. I became aware gradually of voices and thought I must be dreaming. But then I heard the unmistakable crack of a branch..

“Don’t Kerry” I heard a man shout. “It’s dangerous and slippy.”

“No it’s not, Dad. It’s OK!”

The voice of the young girl was close. She was on the rungs of the ladder.

“No, come down. You don’t know what’s in there!”

I heard the breathing of the child very close at hand. If I frightened her she might fall twenty feet to the floor. Irena held her finger to her mouth to hush me. I watched in horror almost as the rug at my feet rose, pushed up by the head of the child. She coughed and choked. The rug sank back.

“It smells VILE!” she shouted. I almost giggled.

“As if there’s a dead body in there.” Her voice diminished as she descended. “I think you should call the police, Dad.”

“Oh rubbish! It’s probably not been used for years. Perhaps there’s a dead badger in there.”

She laughed. “How can a badger climb a ladder?”

“Look we’ve got to find the car. It’s got to be this way.....”

I heard them recede until there was silence. Sometime later, I thought I heard a car engine start. For a second I found myself driving it. The girl was beautiful. I held out my hand, she took it, rubbed it and stared out of the window at the frosty fields.

“Irena, what is the Czech word for frost?”

But she was miles away and did not hear me.

“Jolyon? It’s Collins. About your proposal....forget I ever mentioned it. I had a call from my wife. All is forgiven. She’s coming back. Thank you for your efforts. Bye now.”

I did not give him the chance to comment.

I sat and considered how best to kill them. A gun was out of the question as I knew of no way to obtain one. A knife? Too messy. A fire? Other people might get hurt. Should I take up Goodfellow’s offer after all and pay? It seemed the easiest, most cowardly way out. I could manufacture myself a cast-iron alibi of course, even though I would be the chief suspect. But did

I even wish to get away with it? Would I even be the next victim of Goodfellow's "body" once my cheque had been cashed? After all, I might confess and implicate "him". I sat and stared at the beer in front of me. The place was almost empty. The landlord had raised his prices yet again. I thought about the traumatic meeting on their doorstep and heard her appalling words and tinkling laughter. And at that second I realised what a gift they had presented me with in their cocky brazenness.

I first needed to establish whether Rowan had a routine for going to see Jayney. And lo and behold, a week after I had seen him emerge from her house that rainy night, there he was again at exactly the same time. And the week after that he was there again, staying until eight thirty.

I phoned Moira on the Sunday before her death.

"Moira? It's Michael. Just listen. I give in. I've thought it over. I accept Derek's offer."

For a second I thought she had hung up on me. Then she gave a strange little whinny.

"That's great, Mike! I'm so glad you've seen the light! Life is too short to dwell on defeat.

Believe me, I've been there often enough myself."

Her soap-opera play-acting and philosophy disgusted me but I forced myself to laugh. She laughed too in self-congratulation at her astuteness.

"You know what Mike? You might even use this as the basis for a book. Now *that* would be a best-seller! Whatever. I'll tell Derek and he'll start the wheels turning and put the seal on it."

The call had put them at their ease and, I hoped, lowered their guard,

The Thursday following, I parked a hundred yards away from their house in Warwickshire and watched him leave at twenty - five past six. Donning my gloves, I turned on the courtesy light and read again the note I had written, counterfeiting Moira's hand from the angry reply she had sent me and from an old shopping list I had found in a drawer.

You swore to me you had finished with Jayney. You are a liar. You have broken my heart. How could you? My life is ruined. Now I shall ruin yours.

Moira

I had written the note on a piece of plain A4 paper and placed it in a plastic bag to ensure it made no contact with my clothing or car upholstery. I was gambling that they had a printer in the house. I felt for the pen, like a neurotic traveller for his passport, for the umpteenth time in my inside pocket and then got out of the car. The front door was a modern plastic effort and - as I had anticipated - unlocked. I opened it, donned a hairnet and tied plastic bags around my shoes. I went in, put the supermarket bag containing my gear on the floor, and closed the door behind me. The Midlands news was just starting on the blaring television. She had always insisted on having the volume turned up "for the dead" and this was now a perfect cover for my entrance. The lounge door was open and I could see the lights of the television flickering on the right-hand wall. She was just inside the door to the left, facing away from me, in an armchair. Her leg was propped against the arm. Surprise would be my key weapon. I had practised many times on the sweeping brush at home. I pulled the cling film from its roll until I had about two feet stretched out, brought it over her head and clapped it to her face. She froze in shock as I had thought she would and this gave me the vital few seconds I needed to wrap it twice around her. As her hands came up to grapple with the plastic, I brought my left forearm down to trap them, and continued

winding with my right hand, anticipating the desperate pitching of her head like a rodeo-rider. I was astonished to see how quickly first the fight and then the life went out of her. I leant over to look at her eyes, bulging in horror. Her screams were trapped in her head. I showed her the note. "Well, Moira - so long. It looks like I win after all. Sealed, signed and delivered."

And she was gone.

I took her limp hand, pressed her fingertips against the box of cling film and set them down to rest together in her lap. I felt again for the pen, tore the suicide note roughly down the middle, pressed her fingers against it, and left the message on the table next to her. The blank bottom half I put on a work surface in the kitchen, not forgetting the pen. Upstairs I found the printer and exchanged their sheets of paper for a wad of mine. I had arrived at 18:31. By 18:40 I was back in my car and driving away. I stopped and stuffed the long mackintosh I had worn over my clothes into a skip I had seen on the edge of Earlstone.

I had recorded the main news as my alibi. I sat and watched it twice and then wiped the HDD clean. I disconnected the DVD recorder and put it in the deepest, darkest, dampest corner of the cellar. I poured myself a large brandy - and dropped the glass. The pen. Had I pressed her fingertips on the pen? I thought as hard as I could but could not decide. There might be no prints on it. It might be as clean as a whistle. I calculated. It was 20:12. Derek would leave the florist at 20:30 and be discovering the body by about 20:40. It would take me half-an-hour from Far Sutton to drive there. I could not risk it. A terrible chill ran through my veins as I weighed all the possibilities again in this new light.

*

Could I really rely on a lack of forensic thoroughness in the police investigation, in view of the clear evidence of suicide? Would they think to test the pen? How seriously would they take Rowan's claims that because she was looking forward to a nice, fat divorce settlement she was happy as a lark? That not only was she aware of Jayney, but approved of his liaison with her and even had one of her own? The florist would of course back this up - but of course she *would* say that to the police in order to protect Rowan. Or would she? Would she want her good name ruined by the press? Perhaps they would both fall under suspicion, as undoubtedly I would. I needed a fall-back story - one I could surrender to the police only under extreme duress. I thought of Irena. She would be my alibi. I would confess that no matter what Moira said and did I could not drive Irena from my thoughts. She had been an intruder at our table and in our bed. Moira had finally lost patience and left me. Rowan was a liar. She had not been happy at all - she had even phoned me to say that she was thinking of taking her own life in view of Irena. This would make her suicide even more plausible. First she had had to contend with one woman, Irena. Then a second - Jayney - had tipped her over the edge.

If they tested the pen and it *was* clean either I or Rowan would be in the frame. But what motive did Rowan have to kill her? He would have the documentary evidence of her divorce proceedings, would confess to their scam and show that it would make no sense to kill her *before* she came into her fortune. They would realise that I was the killer but would only have the pen and my motive. There would be nothing - no DNA, no prints, no witness - nothing else to link me directly to the scene. If I kept my nerve I might just about get away with it.

How should I play it? Should I be shocked or appear to have been half-expecting her death? Should I be drunk? Drink made me cry easily but equally might cause an unintentional indiscretion. By the time the rap came at the door at just past ten o' clock I had nearly emptied

my bottle of brandy.

The WPC was rather pimply and stern. She had brandy-glass calves and was beer-barrel shaped. Her colleague was tall and young and rather too handsome to remain a beat-bobby for long - or so I thought initially. She was clearer the senior and he was there for the ride to gain the experience of breaking bad news to a body. She pushed her walkie-talkie or whatever they call it these days into the kangaroo pouch of her tunic and took the plunge.

“Mr Collins? Husband of Moira Collins? May we come in?”

“What?” I slurred. “This time of night? Whatever’s the matter?”

They stared at me in an appalled silence. He went to speak but she held up her hand. Here was an ideal chance to play a high card. I thought of Irena sobbing at my kitchen table and that made tears start in my eyes.

“Oh God no. Don’t tell me she’s really gone and done it.”

She took my arm and guided me into the lounge. She growled at the boy to go and make some weak tea. “With lots of sugar.”

I sat down heavily and put my palm to my forehead.

“Your wife is dead, Mr Collins. I’m so sorry. Please try to understand what I’m going to say next. I’m going to have to caution you, as the death is suspicious.”

“You think I did it?”

“No. But it is normal procedure.”

She cautioned me and the boy brought in a tray of mugs.

“Shall I call a doctor?” he whispered. She nodded.

“No.” I countered. “I’m not in shock. I thought this might happen. How was she found?”

“Wrapped in plastic. Suffocated herself. (Take notes, Paul.)”

I affected not to hear her aside. “How could you think I did it? She’s in Ireland!”

I sobbed. She narrowed her eyes and watched Paul jot down what I had said.

“In Ireland? Not in Ireland, Mr Collins. Her body was found near Naunton in a house on the Watling Street. A former pub - The Hollybush.”

“What? She told me she was in Ireland, looking after a sick aunt! Pour me a brandy would you, officer?”

He reached for the bottle but she stayed his hand. She asked me if I thought that was a good idea.

“Don’t you think you’ve already had enough?”

Without awaiting my reply she capped the bottle then had a second thought and unscrewed it. I watched the sly thought make its way slowly across her cratered forehead as she stood up to pour first a little then a lot into the glass. Cunning woman, but not as cunning as me who had poured a third of the bottle away and sloshed some on my shirt, leaving the cap seal on the table to tell its own tale of a boozy evening at home alone. I smelt like a distillery. I was more than tipsy but in control. There came a very sharp rap at the door which made her spring up and go into the hall. She returned with a very sharp-eyed officer dressed in plain clothes. He resembled me. He had a fine, high brow accentuated by receding hair which never saw a comb. Under his breath he asked if I had been cautioned. Paul let him have the notebook which he read in a split second and handed back. He said he was DI Murtagh, rattled off his sympathy-speech while I studied his eyes and he studied mine. I saw a query in them which unsettled me. My hand shook as I picked up the glass but how was he to know it was anxiety not grief? He had an accent I could not place and spoke with a briskness and assurance which had clearly tied many a deceiver in the strands of the web he had woven. “Mr Collins, aren’t you the author of *Johnny Fairplay*?”

“I am.”

He stared at me. He knew.

“If you would rather answer questions in the morning - here or at the station - then that’s fine.”

She whispered something and he seemed to see the bottle for the first time. I took a gulp. I slurred the word “tomorrow” and looked at the empty wall. I sensed he thought his intellectual superiority would have an easy victory over a drunken author.

“Do you know someone we could take you to - or who could come over and stay with you?”

“No. I’ll be fine, Inspector. I did not love my wife but I’m sorry she’s killed herself.”

He nodded, seemed to congratulate me on my ploy but refused the juicy bait.

“What makes you so sure that she killed herself? Remember, you are under caution.”

“Phone call. Last week. Said she was depressed.”

“Did she say why?”

“Our marriage had gone wrong. She wanted a divorce.”

“You thought she was in Ireland?”

“She was. Definitely. Somewhere in Cork.”

“What makes you say “definitely” ?”

I had left my mobile phone out ready precisely for this eventuality. For a decent interval I said nothing then sighed.

“Well, unless she was an out-and-out deceiver.... unless she was leading a double life...But if she was found in.....Norbury.”

“Naunton, Mr Collins,” he breathed.

“That’s what I said.”

The woman was looking at her boss for pity. He was looking at me for a flaw.

“A friend of Mrs Collins we have already interviewed told us she had been in Naunton since mid-October.....”

I felt my heart thumping. The opportunity I had been waiting for was approaching.

“.....so I have it only on your authority, Sir, that your wife had left the country.”

“Yes. I can’t prove it. She told me out of the blue one day her aunt was very poorly and she needed to go home for a while.”

“Did she phone you, or email you? It would help us to build up a picture of her movements if we have records to check.”

“She let me know she had arrived. And I phoned her a couple of times.”

I put my glass down on the corner of my mobile and it fell over. He reached out quickly and shook the brandy off it. He took out a handkerchief and wiped it dry. I looked at it.

“Hold on..... She sent me a message. Here.”

He passed the phone back but I dropped it. The WPC sprang up and said she would look. We watched her scroll through my messages until she found the one which would surely convince him I was telling the truth after all.

In Cork. Aunt Mary v ill x

She passed him the phone and I watched in joy as his rather smug expression changed to one of shock almost. Arrogant bastard. He stared at me even more intensely - in sheer hatred - as if the pressure of the stare might squeeze the truth out of me, like a hand on a throat might squeeze out a final breath. He knew I was the murderer and suddenly knew that I thought I was too clever for him. The fear that I might be right troubled him more than the fear that I might get away with it.

In that second I saw how much he loathed me and felt him redouble his determination. The WPC was sensing the thunder in the air and squirmed in her armchair. The boy was tapping his pencil on the ring binder ostensibly waiting to record my next speech, but his main thoughts were straying on their way home. Not a worry or a sorrow would ever mark his pretty face and the darker ways of the world would always be a surprise and a mystery to him.

They had given me a receipt for my phone. It was evidence. The next morning at the station it was on the interview table. He was playing my game back at me. A younger officer had joined him. He had sharp, prominent features like a hound's and eyes as bright as his master's. His brief was not to take those eyes off me and to discomfort, even to intimidate me. The odds were unfair and, to a guilty man on the defensive foot obviously so; so obviously so that it was absurd. But to protest would be almost an admission of guilt. To seem unaware of Murtagh's game would however be so naïve as to be laughable. He pointed out that I was entitled to have a lawyer present. This was an opening gambit to which there was no easy reply.

I looked first at him, then his hound and then the table. I pictured a chessboard and saw that I had the black men. They stood in their original positions. The whites had moved. Still I refused to begin. Murtagh said he was going to caution me again. It was a sweet move and it chilled me to the marrow. I buried a sudden urge to confess. I marked time. Laughter in the corridor released the almost unbearable tension and he swivelled to look at the door and glowered. We heard another door creak slowly and painfully shut.

"I'm very grateful that you point out my right to representation," I whispered slowly. I rubbed my eye. "If I was guilty of anything - or in danger of being charged for a crime I decidedly did not commit - then I would take up your offer. I have a clear conscience, DI Murtagh."

And I did. I had done nothing "wrong" - only illegal. I smiled at the hound and asked Murtagh how I might be of help.

"Have you ever met a James Rowan?"

"As far as I am aware, no. Should I know him?"

"He claims that he is your wife's half-brother....and that he was her partner."

"You mean Derek? Her partner? Her *sexual* partner?"

"So you have met him?"

"Yes, but I had no idea....that's appalling. He must be lying! She was my wife!"

"When did you last see him?"

I decided to pass on that question while the "news" I had received sank in. I shook my head slowly in wonder and looked at the table.

"I don't believe it." I pretended I had not heard the question at all. "She was seeing him?"

"He discovered the body, Mr Collins. When did you last see him?"

I shook my head again and continued to stare. He asked the question again. This time I told him I was not sure - that it was probably Christmas - then I corrected myself and said it was definitely New Year.

"Would it surprise you that he maintains it was three weeks ago.? At Naunton? At the house where she died?"

I opened my eyes and mouth wide and said nothing for a few seconds. His hound seemed even closer.

"Are you refusing to answer?" he suddenly snarled, losing patience with my pantomime. He threw me off balance for a second. I told him very deliberately - as if he was an idiot - that it was a bloody lie. Murtagh waded in.

“You see, he’s confessed that her marriage to you was a sham, that she was only after your property and assets, that you had been told about the plot and that she wanted to divorce you and walk away with her fifty per cent.”

“Of course I knew she wanted a divorce. She was welcome to her share. It was all my fault. OK, she wanted a divorce. She texted me from Ireland. Let me show you.”

I took the phone and eventually found the first message. I let them see.

“Why did she want a divorce, Mr Collins? I mean what reasons did she give you?”

“It’s personal and I’m not saying, whatever happens.”

“Mr Collins, did you kill your wife?” asked Murtagh.

“Are you mad? I thought she was in Ireland.”

“You *say* you thought she was in Ireland. I put it to you that you knew perfectly well where she was last night.”

“And I put it to you that I did not.”

“Mr Rowan has told us that she was laughing and joking when he left her after six last night. She was looking forward to a holiday they had booked in the Canaries to celebrate what he called their victory. That you had agreed to sell your house to them for half a million - a house worth nearly a million. He showed us the flight tickets. Why on earth would she commit suicide under those circumstances? You have to admit it smells fishy. You had a good motive and the opportunity. Where were you last night between six and eight thirty p.m.?”

“At home in Far Sutton - and alone, before you ask.”

“So no-one can vouch for you?”

“No-one. But who can vouch that what Derek says is true? Any of it? Tickets only prove that he booked a holiday. They don’t prove she knew of it. And you only have his word for it that she was cheerful.”

“But why would he make it all up?”

“You’re the detective. You find out.”

“One of you is lying, Mr Collins. One of you could well be a murderer.”

“*Could well be?* What does that mean?”

“It means that at this stage nothing is certain. But we have a lady who was wrapped - or wrapped herself - in plastic.”

“She *was* depressed. She had lost her leg and worried she would lose her appeal.”

“We only have your word for that. She stood to become a very rich woman. That is a fact.”

“She was not a materialist. She was a very spiritual woman.”

“She was very attractive. A woman you admired but did not love.”

“No.”

“Why?”

“My business. I’ll never tell you, even if it were relevant.”

They had nothing, only the possibility that they could force me into an error. I thought of the pen. Had they already tested it? I *must* have put her prints on it, otherwise Murtagh would not have said *could well be* a murderer. I took a deep breath and relaxed. Now the hound spoke, after first getting the permission of his superior via eye-contact.

“On another matter, Sir,” he growled “Did you visit a woman called Jayne Ormerod, a florist, of Druid Street, Earlstone? Three Thursdays ago?”

“I can’t be sure when it was, but yes I did. I was trying to find Derek - I mean Rowan. Moira couldn’t reach him. Her aunt was at death’s door, she said. She asked me to ask Jayne if she knew where he was. So I went round. She had no idea. That was that.”

“Did Moira phone you or text you?”

“I phoned her.”

“When?”

“I can’t remember. A couple of days earlier. It might have been a Sunday.”

“And you waited until Thursday to go round Jayne’s? Surely the imminent death of a relative required much more urgency?”

I had deliberately got the timing wrong. It was vital not to have a good recollection of trivial events. The phone records would show that we had spoken on the day before I had visited Jayney.

“Look, I honestly cannot remember. My life has been in turmoil since October. My marriage was on the rocks.”

“When did you last speak to her?”

“Last Sunday.”

“The Sunday before she died. Why did you phone her?”

“To ask her to come back. She said she would think it over. But she sounded really low. What makes you think it isn’t suicide? Was there a note?”

They looked at each other. Neither wanted to speak.

“There *was* a note! Why won’t you say? God damn it, I was her husband! I have a right to know! What did it say?”

“We were rather hoping that you might be able to tell us that, Mr Collins,” said Murtagh. “Oh by the way, we’re going to need all your clothes for fibre testing.”

He told me reluctantly that I was free to leave. With a facetious smile at the hound I left.

“Michael!”

I wheeled around and saw DI Murtagh running down a wheel chair ramp, donning his coat against the sleet. He came alongside and looked at me in pity.

“In twenty-nine years I’ve never personally come across a perfect murder and I don’t know of any.”

“That’s because they would not be perfect if you did.”

He grinned. “That novel of yours casts doubt on their existence and I agree. So that makes me all the more determined to find the flaw in yours.”

I said nothing and he assured me that he was not wired up and that even if he was, what I said would not be admissible.

“Why can’t you accept it was suicide? It won’t affect your pay or pension if you’re wrong.”

“You know what Michael, in your predicament I’d have been tempted to do exactly the same. She was not as nice a lady as she looked, as far as I can tell. Part of me doesn’t blame you. It’s definitely getting nastier out there.”

We had walked to where my car was parked. A black and white bird was cocking his tail as he searched amongst some litter for crumbs. Birds reproduce a perfect copy of themselves. They are invariably beautiful and never obese or ugly. They seem to counter Thomas Hardy’s pessimistic view of a fallen, flawed Creation.

“Now there’s an opportunistic little bird for you. The pied wagtail,” he said. “One of my favourites.”

“You’re a twitcher? Me too. My favourite is the kingfisher.”

“You meet some lovely people bird-watching. Take you. I can tell from your old Rover that you’re not a flashy guy, that you don’t feel insecure, that you don’t need to vaunt what you own

to get respect, you don't need that kind of shabby respect which is really envy. Your values are solid. And dignified. It must have been quite hard to kill another human being."

It would have been, had Moira been human. Had she been humane. A black beetle scuttled between our shoes. Neither of us moved to squash it. It was not pretending to be anything other than it was.

Thinking that he must have detected something in my voice, my behaviour or my eyes I asked him what made him so sure that Moira had been murdered. He looked around at the desolate urban landscape and worked out what to say. The pen loomed large in my thoughts and my heart accelerated. Could he look into people with those razor-sharp eyes? How gazeable was I?

"Rowan convinced me. Yes, he was having an affair with the florist - and she admitted it - and even said that she and Moira were an item. He and she were genuinely distraught. Their whole story - sordid though it was - had the ring of truth. So you have to be the liar. Your tale fits together like a perfect puzzle, but like a puzzle it feels manufactured. The inquest should prove very interesting."

"So it all boils down to a gut instinct? A bit thin, don't you think?"

"I agree. But what confirmed it was something you didn't consider, probably because you couldn't control it."

Something gripped my heart like pincers. What had I not considered? I decided not to speak as I feared my voice would tremble. I raised an eyebrow and shook my head. He waited. He wanted to hear me ask but still I refused. Finally he gave in.

"Her face, Michael. It told a story of horror, not of blessed release. The van will be there when you get home. I'd be grateful if you let them in to take your stuff. Take care now."

My shoes and clothes were taken and over a number of days gradually returned to me. If they were being this thorough, they must have tested the pen and found her prints on them. Rowan phoned and called me a fucking bastard and a murderer.

"No, Derek. She was depressed. She told me."

"She was **not** depressed...."

"Derek, she was such a fraud, how can you be so sure she was not deceiving you?"

Was anyone listening in?

"You bastard, Collins. Play games with me! I'll fucking kill you."

The phone went dead. Should I tell Murtagh I had been threatened? No, it would only lend more weight to his certainty. That night, and every subsequent one, I double-checked that every door and window was locked. I went out only when necessary and in broad daylight.

*

"Mr Collins? It's Jolyon Goodfellow. I ought to say I'm sorry about your wife but that would be daft, seeing as you did 'er in. Nice one. I underestimated you. 'Ave you got a pen 'andy to write these numbers down? Ready? 48970451 - got it? And 725004. Right. The first is my bank account number and the second is the sort code. On the first of December and the first of December every year subsequent I shall expect a deposit of £50 000 from you to guarantee my sacred discretion."

I heard a click on the line and then a recording of me discussing an "ultimate solution." The recording ended.

"I'm not such a greedy person or as lacking in scruple as I might be, Mr Collins. Truth is, I'm

not much good at this game and getting too old for it. Nice doing business with you.”

“And how much will your brother want, when he phones?”

He laughed and said they would go 50-50. And the line went dead.

I set up an annual direct debit of £1.20 to cover the cost of a bag of Nuttall's Mintoes. An hour afterwards I went to his office. Where the brass plaque had been was a pale square of whitewash and four holes for rawl-plugs. I had as much chance of finding him as of finding Irena. I called into the fishmonger's and bought the biggest crab he had.

THE KINGFISHER

**A long, green tunnel spans the stream
Which barely moves in June's procession
And floats of minnows and fry of bream
And sticklebacks seek intercession
From the sun to wink at scarpering flies;
But on one thin branch a beam has lit
A prism of a bird in bedazzled eyes
Which cannot see its coverts flit;
A red-green tattooist with a sapphire streak
Requickens the beck of silvery skin,
Which hardly feels the needle beak
As swift as a dart it plunges in.**

**The mouth can scarcely gob one breath
Before fishy eyes are glazed in death.**

December 15th

I am so very cold, particularly my fingers. I can barely hold the pen and it is a real effort to move it, let alone write legibly. Is this going to take far less time than I thought?

(The rest of this entry was by and large illegible and barely went on for a page before stopping -
Murtagh)

December 19th

I could not write anything in the past three days. Yesterday I kept going to sleep. This morning I seem to have gathered my remaining strength for a final effort. First I have something for you DI Murtagh.

Of course you were right, Detective Inspector. It was almost a perfect crime but my mistake was to tell someone. No doubt he will be contacting a newspaper about now to sell the story. Is it really getting worse out there? I doubt if it can. You have given me food for thought and I hope I did you.

Michael Collins

Irena is with me again but saying little. It is ironic that after debating so much how I might find

her that she has finally found me. I could not raise my binoculars just a while ago to look, but I feel sure that at the end of the tunnel, hardly bigger than a common blue butterfly, sitting on a branch was a kingfisher.

Now I am tired again and need a little sleep.

*

Michael Collins was found by a bird watcher in March after the late February snow had melted. His diaries were mainly legible. One inquest has been re-opened and another opened and adjourned.

As soon as I saw him sitting drunk on his sofa a voice told me he had done the deed. The pen *did* have a section of Moira's index finger and thumb prints on it. I really had no idea how to catch Collins out but I would never have given up trying. As far as I and other birdwatchers of my acquaintance know, the woods where he went to die have no kingfishers

Ironically, Jolyon Dimmock Goodfellow was certified dead of an aneurism one day before Mr Collins' diary in the woods began. No tape recording was ever found.

Murtagh.