

Girl Thing

North London, 1995

The morning sun, spilling sneakily through a gap in the blinds, bounced off the mirror and hit me straight between the eyes. Sleepily I tried to brush it away, to little effect; I turned over. But there wasn't much chance of getting back into a decent sleep, still less into the erotic dream I had been enjoying about a woman in a blue raincoat. Too much Leonard Cohen, probably. We were just getting to the good bit too, when someone switched the lights on. My dreams always end like that. Like life really. Grudgingly dragging myself into semi-wakefulness, I reached out for Jane, groping for the softer bits, perhaps she'd been having erotic dreams too, and maybe now we were awake I'd make a halfway decent substitute. But after flailing my arm pointlessly across an unruffled sheet I remembered that she wasn't there at all, that she'd gone away this weekend to see her parents, that the Friday night stroganoff, sex and sleep ritual had been postponed.

But I was awake now. And it was Saturday morning and it was scarcely eight o' clock. And apart from cleaning the bathroom, going to the bottlebank and putting those little end pieces back on the curtain rail that were always dropping off, I had little to do. And now the bloody sun was shining. Great.

I never meant to leave it so long. It seemed improper to take the car to the bottlebank, like smoking in church, or wearing a leather jacket to a vegan restaurant. But I was usually only ever prompted to do it at all because there really was no more room in the cellar and because the dregs of fermenting Spanish vino tablo or whatever were beginning to attract every dipso mouse in the neighbourhood for an alcoholic binge in my basement and the smell of rotten vin rouge and mouse droppings was getting overwhelming. Being a logical sort of person, I had packed them into old Sainsbury's carrier bags in batches of white, brown and green, crammed them noisily into the boot of the Vectra, and set about dispatching them to their splintery fate. And now I was down to the last bag. These were the indistinct ones, a sort of imponderable brownygreen. I gave each of them careful consideration. What would happen, I wondered, if I got them in the wrong bank? Did the man from the recycling company take them all back to the council, sorry gov'nor, can't take these, there's a brown one in 'ere. And would the council worker call down the Director of Environmental Services to settle the matter, look my man, this isn't green, this is Italian ochre, like the quarry tiles in my breakfast bar. Perhaps it would be the subject of a committee report, 'The incidence of transspectral glass in Hackney bottlebanks and its effects on the national cullet market'. It could cause the recycling company to refuse to pay. And that could cause a budgetary crisis in these days of council spending cuts. Jobs could be lost. Children could suffer. Whole families could be reduced to destitution. Suicides would follow, national panic would ensue and the government would fall. And just because I put a bottle through the wrong hole.

This dreaming sunshine was filtering down through the spring trees and dappling the bottlebanks with a kind of auspicion, like the world was not so dull and unpromising as it had seemed. It warmed my face and hands, and I breathed in deeply, tasting fresh grass clippings that just edged in beside the

diesel fumes and stink of fetid carrier bags that skittered around my feet. Smashing up a few dozen bottles, in a safe and controlled environment, made me feel good, therapy for a socially responsible iconoclast. Perhaps I'd do something with the day, a drive would be nice, to the seaside. Southend maybe. But every up has its down of course, and the dribbles of leftover vinegarised vino verde that trickled out of the corner of the last carrier bag had now penetrated my shoe and oozed slimily into my sock.

I dropped the bag:

Oh fuck. Fuck, fuck, fuck. Bugger. Bollocks."

"It can't be that bad can it?"

I started, embarrassed, I had no idea there was anyone else there. I mean, why would anyone hang around a bottlebank, unless they just loved the sound of breaking glass that much? Of course I apologised:

"Oh sorry, I didn't realise there was anyone there. I was just .. and .. on my shoe .."

She was quite small, about five foot, wearing a leather jacket and strategically torn jeans. Her hair was short and spiky, just a bit redder than natural, lipstick to match, and big green eyes. She carried a lumpy brown paper package, tied with string, tucked under her arm. I gestured to it:

"My favourite things?"

"What?"

"Brown paper packages. Tied up with string. You know. The song."

Something between contempt and pity crossed those big green eyes, but ignoring this, she looked across to my car, pointing it out with her elbow, not taking her hands from her pockets:

"That yours?"

"Mmm. I never usually bring it to the bottlebank. I mean, it seems wrong to.."

"Now, you couldn't be giving me a lift could you?"

"Um .. I don't know .. I was just thinking of driving to the seaside.. Southend.."

"Now that'll do nicely, for sure."

I never shall know why I said yes. I never usually offered lifts to strangers, even pretty ones. But those big green mischievous eyes and the soft Irish accent and the spring sunshine and the unexpected promise of the day and the warm sticky squelchy feeling in my shoe ... it was all too much to resist. Suddenly I had an irresponsible feeling of boyish abandon and imagined us running naked through sparkling wavetops that splashed across softly tingling deserted sand, drinking tequila arm in arm in a beachside reed covered bar, making passionate love

under a yellow beachball moon, leaving gritty patterns in the sand for the warm morning tide to wash away.

OK, so I know Southend in March isn't exactly like that. A plate of cockles on the mud behind a windbreak might have been a lot to ask for. But I was always the romantic, and a sucker for an Irish accent, and the A13 to the exotic East beckoned like a polyester genie from a Billericay Top Shop. It was just too late to turn back.

I tried to make small talk as far as Romford. I asked her where she was from, what she did, why she was here, but she was not particularly forthcoming and refused to elaborate on her confusingly brief replies to my questions. Cork City, an electronics specialist, on business. From time to time, she looked behind, glancing down now and then at the brown paper package on the back seat. She seemed distracted, shifty, her leather jacket creaking furtively. I tried to tell her about my job as a freelance buildings engineering consultant specialising in concrete, and the article I'd just written for 'Cementation Weekly' but she actually yawned while I was in mid-sentence, so I stopped. I thought maybe she would politely say I'm sorry, I didn't mean to be rude, do continue; but she didn't. Instead she just kept looking behind her.

Eventually we left London behind and the dreary South Essex agricultural flatwork mixed in with strings of square commuter bungalows and sixties shopping parades opened up before us. The sun had retreated behind a layer of dull peevish cloud and the day seemed nowhere near so enchanting. I wondered what on earth I was doing here at all, let alone with this reticent Irish new age punk who now looked a good deal less charming and more weather-beaten than she had in the excitement of sparkly spring sunlight. But then I felt her relax a bit and her leather jacket creaked around to settle in the seat more comfortably, and she started talking to me:

"Sorry. You must think me very rude. I think we're alright now."

Now it was my turn to get nervous.

"Alright? What d' you mean 'alright'? Why shouldn't we be alright?"

"Nothing. It doesn't matter. Don't worry about it."

"Worry about what? Look, I'm beginning to think maybe this isn't such a good idea. I think maybe I'd better head off back to London. I can drop you off in Basildon, you can get a bus on from there."

I could feel her smile, feel those big green eyes on me:

"Now why would you want to do that? Sure, I'm only going to Southend because that's where you're taking me. Now why would I want to get a bus there? Come on, I'll treat you to a plate of chips and a pint of the black stuff. Let's have a good time."

Well it wasn't quite Tequilas in a reed covered bar, but it was more than I had expected; I was, after all, only supposed to be giving her a lift. I drove on.

By the time we got to Rayleigh the ice was well and truly broken if not entirely melted, for she still occasionally glanced out of the back window, and I found that she was surprisingly easy to talk to. We seemed to have a shared humour, enjoying really rather cruel jokes about farmers and people who drive too slowly on my part, about orangemen and the RUC on her part. It seemed that she'd spent some considerable time in the North, as she put it, in connection with her business. Her name was Siobhan, she told me.

We parked in the town centre and walked to the sea front. The sun had burned hazily through the cloud again, enough to set a glistening shimmer across the mud flats that stretched as far as the distant estuary water, oystercatchers picking and strutting across the silvery bands. Plumes of smoke and steam from the Isle of Grain power station on the far side stretched up into the afternoon. The burned and broken pier stuck out a mile, a memorial to inadequate insurance policies. Siobhan pulled a tin from her pocket and thinly rolled a cigarette. She pointed to the pier:

“What happened?”

“A fire. Just a cigarette, they say. And it's not the first time. It hadn't been re-opened for long. Goodness knows what will happen to it now. It must be uninsurable.”

“Oh.”

She lit the cigarette with a match that she struck against the heel of her boot, a manoeuvre which, inelegant in the less sophisticated, she carried off with the aplomb of a sequinned trapeze artist.

“Come on,” she said, “Let's find those fish and chips I was going to treat you to.”

There was plenty of choice. We settled on a kind of deco fish bar, finished off in yellow and blue ceramics with stained glass panels in orange sunbursts, black Formica tables fixed to the walls. A thin, pinched woman with mousy hair dragged back into a bun so tight that it made her eyes pop out stood before us, pad in hand, pencil ready licked and waiting. Siobhan ordered cod chips and mushy peas, twice, do you want bread and butter David? that's just one round of bread and butter. And two teas. Mugs. Thank you. The pinched woman smiled thinly and left us, scuffing off across the worn vinyl.

Siobhan pushed the tobacco tin across to me:

“Want one while we wait?”

“Um, yes, OK. Don't mind if I do.”

I had rolled cigarettes before. When I was at university. Fifteen years ago. I opened the tin. The packet of papers had bits torn off the cardboard. I pulled one out. Now, how was it? You sort of hold the paper like that, get a good pinch of tobacco, stretch it along the paper, and roll the paper between both thumbs and forefingers...

Siobhan giggled as I held folornly the lumpy split article, like a sad old bear with its stuffing coming out. I hadn't heard her giggle before. It went straight to bits of me that I was trying not to think about.

" Here," she said, "Let me sort it out."

But there was not time as the cod and chips (twice) arrived. Siobhan put half her chips between the two slices of buttered bread, adding a good thick layer of ketchup and a spoonful of mushy peas. Then she ate the rest of the meal with her fork, not touching her knife at all, except to tidy up her finger nails at the end, scraping off traces of nail varnish that matched her lipstick. I ate my meal more conventionally. The fish was meltingly delicious, the chips rather stodgy, and the tea like thick brown drain cleaner that took the enamel off your teeth. Siobhan put down the knife, examined her fingernails with a satisfied smile, and summoned over the waitress.

" How much?"

The woman took out her pad and made an over elaborate display of adding up a few simple figures.

" Eight pounds fifty."

Siobhan pulled a thick roll of notes from her jacket pocket, held together with a hair elastic. She peeled one off.

" Sorry. I haven't got anything smaller."

The woman took the grubby fifty pound note suspiciously, like she had never seen one before. Possibly she hadn't. She held it up to the light, looked at me, looked at Siobhan, then disappeared out the back of the cafe. Siobhan said nothing but rolled another cigarette. The woman returned with the change. Siobhan gave her five pounds:

"Here. This is for you," she said, around the cigarette.

The waitress smiled in open eyed surprised:

" Oh. Thank you. That's.. very generous."

She held the door open for us to leave, good-bye, thank you. I looked at Siobhan, doing the match trick again:

" That was generous."

" Poor cow. Her life's complete shit. You've got to do something. Now, how about that Guinness?"

And, unexpectedly, disconcertingly, she took my arm.

We found a pub.

“ This’ll do.”

She led me inside. The inmates were all men. A television, high on a chipboard corner shelf, reported the mechanical proceedings of a rather dull Ensign league match. The roar of the crowd was muted to a thin tinny scratching. Not that we were missing much - the crowd was doing about as much roaring as an armadillo. And the place was as inviting as a Siberian gulag without the picturesque snow.

“ Do you think we should find somewhere else?” I ventured.

“ Oh, sure, this’ll be fine. Come on, it’s full of local character, don’t you feel?”

Siobhan bought Guinness - paying with another fifty pound note - and we took our glasses to a small round wobbly table in the corner beneath the television, leaving me with a feeling of uncomfortable conspicuousness brought about by the fact that everyone else in the pub was staring at a point just above our heads. Siobhan seemed not to notice.

“ So,” she said, “Here’s to a grand afternoon out. Now David, will you tell me about yourself?”

I am not normally an irresponsible person. I am the sort of man who would eat litter rather than drop it (although I would be hard pushed to imagine any circumstances where that would be necessary). But the day had taken on such an unexpected shape that sitting in the corner of a rather seedy pub for the afternoon and drinking Guinness with a strange woman seemed perfectly natural. I say ‘strange’; by now she seemed rather less of a stranger. And as the afternoon wore on, it felt like I’d known her for years and the false self-confidence that increases as sensibilities are eroded in these sort of circumstances was getting rewarded in ways which never normally happened. On the few occasions when I did allow myself a few drinks in the company of strangers, office parties, that sort of thing, any gestures of intimacy on my part were always swiftly deflated and I ended up going home early. Jane and I had only managed to get together because she laughed at me so much when I got my tie caught in the paper shredder that she felt guilty and offered to take me for a drink. I think she’d been pitying me ever since. But this was different. Siobhan actually seemed to appreciate me.

She told me a good deal more about herself. She was from a middle class family in Cork - her father was a doctor. She had gone to a good school but had rejected most of the morality and constraint of the Catholic religion when she went on to Trinity College to study electronics and applied physics. It seemed she had thrown herself with some vigour into this rejecting of Catholic morality - or indeed any morality as far as I could determine - with a string of sexual partners which, at my current rate, I would have had to live to the age of three hundred and seventy to match. And that was just the ones she mentioned. Yet she seemed reluctant to bring the story entirely up to date, and the recent past, the reasons she was now in England, she continually avoided, steering the conversation skilfully away and back to the salacious details of her slightly earlier years. I was intrigued by this, assuming it to be related to something that she found it too hard to talk about, some recent love who had got the better of her perhaps. How laughably naive I was.

By the time we emerged from the pub, it was dark. I stared up at the sky, wondering how this could have happened, as if it were a phenomenon that had occurred for the first time today. Siobhan pulled at my arm:

“ Good time, eh?”

“Mmm. I don’t normally like Guinness. Except in Ireland. It tastes better there.”

“ No. Sure it’s exactly the same. It’s the company of the Irish that makes it different. So now what do we do?”

It was Saturday night in Southend. I was far too drunk to drive. I had a beautiful Irish woman (well she seemed so now) clinging to my arm - and I had no idea. I shrugged. Siobhan at once stepped in to fill the gap left by my lack of initiative:

“ I think we find a hotel.”

“ What? No, I can’t, I mean, I have to get back..”

“How? Sure you cannot drive after all that beer. What else do you suggest we do? Come on, I’ll pay. No, don’t even think about arguing. I’ve put you to all this trouble, it’s the least I can do.”

We walked back towards the centre of town. I tried to avoid the cracks between the paving slabs, partly because of a childhood memory dredged up by a beer-numbed brain, and partly because I was nervous about tripping over them. Eventually we found a passable looking hotel, a bit sad and off-season, but not too forlorn. We went inside. A small ocean of swirly pattern red carpet washed away to a reception desk, faced with cream painted reeded hardboard. A picture of the proprietor (we assume) looked down from the flock wallpaper, which lifted coquetishly at the edges. Two brown draylon armchairs surrounded a small coffee table menacingly, as if they begrudged the poor thing its two copies of ‘Southend-on-Sea Borough Council’s Guide to local services’. I picked one up:

‘Southend people. This issue: Nigel Speen, the Borough’s Dog Warden, talks about his unusual hobby’.

Siobhan rang the bell, one of those old-fashioned ones, which you hit with the palm of your hand. A man emerged; the one in the picture on the wall, but more bent and withered. He said nothing but just stood, ageing visibly, staring back at us twice over. Siobhan smiled so very sweetly at him:

“ We’d like a room.”

“ Certainly. Double?”

“ That’ll do fine.’

“ Name?”

“ O’Donovan.”

The man picked up a pen and looked up from the register to Siobhan, his upper lip following a thin eyebrow into a practised lascivious sneer:

“ Mr and Mrs?”

“ Yeah, sure, that’ll do.”

The man scratched ponderously in the register, handed over a key attached to an improbably large brass fob, it’s on the second floor, there’s no lift, they didn’t come to mend it. And he was gone.

The room was squarish, with a visibly concave double bed swathed in a thin nylon quilt, a kidney-shaped glass topped dressing table and a couple of chintz-covered armchairs with worn shiny patches on the arms. There was a huge mural above the bed, a mountain lakes scene, impossibly vivid blues and greens competing with the pink walls and bedspread in an ecstatic frenzy of bad taste. The window overlooked the street below; I could see my car, a hundred yards or so up the road. One corner of the room was cut out by a bathroom. I slid back the door. A switch cord, blackened at the pulling end by years of grubby tugging, swung into my face. I pulled it. The light was hard and sharp, splashing across a collection of flimsy and impermanent looking bathroom fittings, accompanied by a frantic irregular buzz from the extractor fan, like a set from a B-movie. Or bee movie.

Siobhan bounced on the bed:

“ Not bad. A bit soft. Should do us, though.”

The room smelled a bit, like the insides of an old suitcase. I tried to open the window, but it just made a disturbing splitting sound and remained tight shut. Siobhan lay back on the bed and closed her eyes:

“ I need to freshen up a bit. Look David, why don’t you pop out and get us a couple of toothbrushes while I have a shower?”

There was a chemist just up the road. I bought toothbrushes, toothpaste, and a tin of travel sweets for the car. It should have crossed my mind to buy something else of course, but I was still two steps behind this woman. Anyway, I was never sure which kind to buy - women always seemed to have very particular preferences. Jane liked those thick bobbly ones which she said were more fun for her but looked and felt like pink Marigold gloves to me. Still I didn’t like to complain, even if I sometimes got the feeling that she just felt uncomfortable about having anything near her that bore even a passing resemblance to a penis.

By the time I got back to the room, Siobhan was freshened up, wet hair clinging to her face and curling around those big green eyes. She wore her leather jacket. This may not have been too surprising; except that she wore nothing else. She smiled, took my hand, and led me across to the bed.

We had sex. That sounds rather matter of fact. To call this ‘sex’ would be like calling a Puccini opera ‘a couple of old songs’, or Arsenal ‘a football team’. But I can think of no suitable words to describe the experience. It was - how can I put

it - energetic. It made my hair stand on end. We generated enough static electricity against the nylon bedspread to illuminate the whole of Southend pier and set it on fire again. Sex with Jane was never like this. It was more like reading a dictionary - it came somewhere between self-denial and sleep. There was never much of a sense of indulgence or spontaneity. I mean I could never imagine Jane greeting me with 'Hi David, d' you fancy a quick shag?' or anything like that. Sex was always in bed, at night, and after a suitable period, (albeit sometimes quite a short period) of regulatory abstinence. And foreplay was something which she did on her own in the bathroom with a springy rubber disc and a tube of spermicidal jelly. True, she had once, in a moment of touching intimacy, suggested that I put the thing in. But I was not so adept at handling such a slimy springy device and it popped from my grasp, pinging out through the bathroom window and into next door's fishpond. She'd never let me near it again after that.

No, this experience with Siobhan had been - well quite literally something else. Maybe I had just had unprotected sex with a dangerously mysteriously Irish woman about whom I had known nothing a few hours ago (and still knew very little now). But my head was in the clouds, my body was a temple of ecstasy, and the bits of me that had been directly involved were somewhere that I could not even begin to describe.

Siobhan giggled:

" You had a good time, then?"

" Mmmm. How was it for you?"

She sat up and pushed a hand through her hair:

" I didn't know anyone actually said that. Look, I've got to pop out to the car. You wait here, OK?"

I was in no mood to question her or to disagree. She could have asked me to wait for her standing on the windowsill stark naked and I probably would have done so quite obediently. She pulled on her clothes and left the room, taking the car keys from where I'd left them on the bedside table.

I lay on the bed staring up at the lurid lakeland mural, floating back down to the gently billowing daydreams that waited there to capture me. I felt like the cat that got the cream, the child that stole the chocolate, and the bird that got the worm, all rolled into one, a sort of squirmy tiramasu. It was then that I idly noticed that the pattern on the mural repeated itself; the same little boat, the same mountain, the same clump of trees and so on repeated three times over but joined so seamlessly that you would not normally detect it. How like life, I thought, the same patterns over and over, but joined together in such a way that you don't realise quite how repetitively ordinary it all is. Not, that is, until something extraordinary happens. And now it had. And it was about to get even more extraordinary.

There was a loud bang outside. Louder than, say, a car backfire or a gunshot, but not what I would have called an explosion. It rattled the windows a bit, but then so would a passing pigeon. More through idle curiosity than any real

concern I left my bed of dreams and tweaked back the grey net curtain to see what was going on.

Now, when I hear a car alarm at night, I awake instantly, wondering if it sounds like mine. But when I hear a bloody great bang out in the street I do not automatically think 'Oh, I wonder if that was my car exploding?'. So it took a few seconds to register that my car was on fire. A group of people had congregated, like they were gathering around waiting for the rest of the display. This seemed a bit foolish considering the petrol tank was half full. People really are very stupid. My first thought was:

'Oh no, my beautiful car.'

But before I had time to move on to 'oh no, my beautiful Siobhan', she was standing beside me, peering round the other end of the net curtain:

"Oh shit," she said, matter-of-factly, "Things are really going to get complicated now."

I stared at her, vaguely aware that my mouth was opening and closing like a bemused hake. She held the brown paper package, still tied with string. Eventually I got some words out, pointing at the package:

"So what ... what's .. that?"

"This? It's a change of clothes of course. You didn't expect me to spend the whole weekend in the same knickers, did you?"

She put the package down on the bed. She paused, staring down at it, considering it thoughtfully. Then she said:

"David, did you go to the car when you went out just now."

"Yes."

"And did you ... do anything while you were there?"

"Yes. I put the travel sweets I bought into the glove compartment. Oh, and I found a torch under the seat. A little one. One of those pen torches."

The penny still teetered on the edge, failing to drop. Siobhan looked out the window again. Black smoke curled up into the night sky, stained orange by the streetlights and flames which flickered and fluttered against the walls and shopfronts. The gathering sirens of emergency vehicles grew louder with grim foreboding. All hell, or at least a little localised bit of hell, was about to break loose. Siobhan spoke slowly, deliberately, cautiously measuring out her words:

"And you switched it on didn't you?"

"Yes. It didn't work. So I shook it, and switched it off again. Why? It wasn't ... a ..."

Siobhan slowly shook her head, like she was speaking to a child who had just inadvertently burned down an important public building:

“ Oh David, why did you do that?”

Now the penny plummeted to its inevitable destination:

“ Do what? Switch it on? It seems to me to be a perfectly natural thing to do, when I find a torch in my car. I mean, it’s what anyone would do isn’t it? How was I to know what it was? I mean, if it had been a big round black thing with a long string fuse I might have been more suspicious. But ...”

She took my hand, sending a swift electric zing through me, transporting me straight back past the bomb, to the last time she’d taken my hand, just a few innocent minutes ago. She stared at me, those big green eyes holding a kind of pitying despair. And, I thought, just a bit of compassion.

“ Oh David.” she said, “ I think I’m going to have to explain one or two things to you, aren’t I?”

We sat down on the edge of the bed. She still held my hand, addressing it rather than me, as though it were an independent creature sitting between us that would understand all the complexities and be able to explain them to me in simple one syllable words. She began slowly:

“ You see David, I am, as I said, a bit of an expert in microelectronics. That .. torch. It was a timing device, linked to a small explosive charge. I had to deliver it to someone here in England. It was just a small test device, to demonstrate its effectiveness. I had to get it to some people tomorrow morning and I was staying over in London for a couple of days but ... well there were these other people who found out I was here ... I had to get them off my trail for a time.”

“ So you’re a terrorist.”

“ Me? Oh no, I’m strictly a mercenary. I’m in this for the money.”

“ So you work for terrorists?”

She frowned, thought for a moment, pushing a hand through her hair:

“ It depends on your definition of ‘terrorist’, but I suppose you could say that, yes.”

“ So what happens now? I mean, now your ... ‘device’ is no more?”

“ Oh that’s not a problem ..”

She reached into her jacket pocket. Another pocket. That jacket seemed to have an unusually large number of hidden pockets.

“ Look ... I have another one.”

She held another torch, exactly the same as the one I had seen in the car. I backed away, instinctively shuffling down to the end of the bed:

“ Oh fuck ... is that one ... is it ...”

Siobhan smiled now, and put it back into her pocket:

“ Relax, It’s perfectly safe. Unless it’s switched on. My devices never, never detonate by accident. That’s why I can get a high price for them. That, and their very small size. And they do a lot of other things too ...” she tailed off, regarding it with a look of respectfully mystic wonderment. What, I wondered, were the ‘other things’ it could do? Perhaps it could double up as a vibrator or a small food processor? She didn’t elaborate.

This was all getting a bit much for me. I liked a quiet, simple life. I got agitated if they changed the ‘up’ escalator at Marble Arch, it could ruin my whole day. Things had to be in their place. I was getting exasperated. Siobhan took my hand again, encouraging me out of the corner into which I’d wedged myself:

“ Come on, David, keep your head. Don’t worry. I’ve been in worse scrapes than this. Let me think this one through a minute ..”

“ Look,” I began, “ I was planning a nice spot of gardening for the weekend. Instead, I’ve just driven forty miles with a bomb under my seat, narrowly missed being splattered across Southend High Street, had unprotected sex with a terrorist, the police are crawling all over the smouldering wreckage of my car and now I’m sitting here face to face with half a pound of semtex. And it’s still only Saturday night. And you tell me not to worry?!”

Siobhan smiled again; that magical smile. It made me trust her, feel safe with her. Or at least, it made me want to have sex with her again, and that could cover for a lot of other things. She shrugged, holding her head slightly to one side, studying me more carefully now:

“ Come on David, loosen up. Enjoy the danger. And in any case, it’s only a couple of ounces of semtex. Everything’s cool. I have a plan.”

‘Cool’ was the last thing I felt, in any sense of the word. I was hardly reassured to know that I was babysitting enough explosive to just blow me apart rather than convert me into a small cloud of particulates. I would in any case have preferred the latter. At least I might have floated up into the stratosphere and made pretty sunsets. Siobhan stood and tweaked back the net curtain again, looking down into the street:

“ The place is crawling with cops. They’re cordoning off the street. We’d better get out of here.”

“ Get out of here? How? We’ll have to walk out of here and straight into the police. And we’ve only just checked in. Can’t we climb out of a back window or something?”

Siobhan looked back into the room. I wasn’t sure whether she was getting agitated because of the police or because of me. I hoped it was because of me. She sighed:

“ Oh sure, you think climbing out of a third floor window is a normal way to leave a hotel that wouldn’t draw attention to ourselves? Why don’t we parachute down

from the roof parapet and pretend we're a circus act? You could dress up as a clown. On second thoughts stay as you are, you'd be more convincing."

This was hurtful. I was rather fond of my cord jacket, I'd become attached to it over the years. I thought it gave me an air of maturity, like smoking a pipe used to before everyone started complaining about it. She went on:

"Listen, David. The police have no way of knowing that car was yours. We're just two people staying in the hotel. We didn't use your name when we booked in. The car wasn't parked outside, there's no reason for the police to connect us with it. And the hotel proprietor didn't see us come from the car - we walked in from the other direction. And we don't check out, stupid. We just walk out to get a bit of fresh air, like any normal guests might do."

"But where do we go? We don't have a car."

"I have a plan. Trust me. Look, you just sit there and generate a bit of calm. You're just a visitor to this town, and you have only a passing interest in all the fuss outside. You're prepared to agree with any old rubbish the hotelier or anyone else says to us. We're just going out to get something to eat. Got that? Good. Cos you're going to have to do the talking. I'm going to get changed."

I sat down on the bed. The blue lights of police cars flickered through the net curtain and splashed across the mural like lurid mountain lightning. I felt a bit sick. My stomach was knotting up like it always did when I was under pressure. The last time I'd felt like this was just before the Cementation Weekly awards ceremony in Kettering last Autumn, when I snatched the Le Corbusier Medal for 'best new idea in marine aggregates'. I almost stole the prestigious 'most imaginative use of concrete' prize, but was just pipped at the post by a Sicilian firm. I forget their names. But this was different. My stomach twisted up like it was being wrung out by a sumo wrestler. I was in a different league now. I wasn't even playing the same game.

Siobhan emerged from the bathroom looking quite different. She was wearing a short and rather fetching black dress, a black silk jacket, black tights and shoes with heels. She also wore an intricate gold brooch in an entwined Celtic design, with matching earrings. This was the real stuff, softly burnished twenty-four carat, not the sort of thing you find in an Argos catalogue. And she carried a black leather handbag, again softly expensive-looking. This, I assumed, now contained the 'device'; there certainly wasn't much room for generous pockets in the rest of the outfit. Her hair was different too, less spiky and more auburn than red. The transformation really was stunning. She'd only been gone five minutes. Ignoring my nonplussed stare, she stuffed the now rejected torn jeans and leather jacket under the bed:

"Time to get rid of these, I think. They've been seen too much. It'll be a while before anyone finds them. By the look of the underneath of this bed, they'll be undisturbed for a few years."

I wondered how long it would be before I would have been seen too much and she decided to stuff me under a dusty bed for a few years. But right now, she needed me; if not quite in the way I would have liked.

“ Look,” she began, “ I really can’t do accents. And no matter how innocent we look, as soon as I open my mouth the cops are going to get suspicious. So if we do get questioned, you’ll have to do the talking. I’ll just cling to your arm and look girly. At least I’m dressed for the part now. Ow! Jesus Christ, I hate these fucking shoes.”

“ I think you look rather nice,” I ventured.

She muttered something incomprehensible, except for a few expletives. Then, taking my arm, she led me out of the room. We walked down the staircase, creaking conspicuously, the grubby beige carpet turning up at the edge of the treads like an old railway sandwich. We turned the final corner to the last flight leading down to the lobby. Two men in raincoats were talking to the hotel proprietor. Siobhan stiffened:

“ Police. Special branch.”

I froze right there, mid-step between the penultimate and final stair. Siobhan muttered sharply:

“ Come ON! Remember, they’re not looking for us.”

She tugged at my arm. I unfroze, missed my footing, and slithered inelegantly down onto the swirly patterned lobby carpet. Siobhan pulled me up from my knees, once again muttering incomprehensible oaths. The two police officers and the hotelier looked round at the commotion. My heart pounded. I could feel the sweat breaking out across my brow. My hands felt like a pair of dead jellyfish. If ever in my life I’d wanted to be somewhere else, it was now; even if I still wanted Siobhan to be there with me. Although the feeling was not, I by now suspected, entirely reciprocated. One of the alleged police officers smiled at me. I say smiled; it was more of a wan twitching of the lips, slightly curling upwards, but not for very long. He was a stoutish man, his slightly soiled grey mac belted at the waist as if he had done it up in his thinner days and had just grown round it, like a tree grows round an iron band. There was an unpleasantly noticeable stain a few inches below the belt, at the front, displayed with a kind of arrogance. This man didn’t care how his clients might speculate about what dubious biological function might have deposited such a stain just there. His face and hands were blotchy red and a bit puffy, by contrast uncomfortably clean, as though he had himself scrubbed down every morning with a stiff yard broom and carbolic. Possibly this was part of special branch employment conditions. He had displeasingly small eyes too, and just a few wisps of hair, smeared irritatingly across his bald head. His face had the appearance of a boiled cantaloupe with its meanly shaped features squeezed too close together. He didn’t seem like a nice person. He spoke, coming across to us:

“ Good afternoon. Are you staying here?”

His voice was tobacco stained, his breath smelled of stale beer and cabbage. I nodded. He continued:

“ And are you here on business? “

I started well enough:

“ No, no. Just a weekend away by the seaside. A Spring break. You know.”

He didn't acknowledge that he did know; Spring breaks were not in the general purview of this man. Again he continued:

“ And where are you going now?”

“ Oh, just out. You know. Get a bite to eat. Go for a drive .. in the .. no ..”

“ Sorry?”

I felt Siobhan stiffen. And I felt my cool starting to disintegrate, dripping down from the corners of my mouth like a summer ice-cream, like the stupid words I was about to dribble out:

“ I mean we were going to go for a drive. But we can't now. I mean not now .. not after ... after ...”

The cantaloupe-headed policeman narrowed his piggy eyes, his thin little lips curling down sneeringly:

“ I think, sir, madam, that I shall have ask you to come with me. Please come this way.”

His stepped to the side of me; his colleague moved to the side of Siobhan. I tried not to look at her; it was enough to feel the seething fury rising steamily beside me.

“ That was fucking brilliant, David” she muttered, in a practised angry whisper that evaded the two police officers. “ What a fucking great performance. Now we're right in the shit. From here on just play along with me. And don't screw up this time or I'll kill you.”

Sometimes Siobhan's words had just an edge of insincerity. But this time, I felt she really meant it. Between her and these policemen, I felt little compassion coming my way. For once in my life, I knew the meaning of fear.

Cantaloupe-head and his colleague led us out of the hotel and into the street. The evening was a confusion of grim policemen, hundreds of them, far more than a tightly stretched budget would seem to justify. Flashes of spinning blue illuminated acrid smoke traces that curled and twisted around the shapes of firefighters, still picking over the remains of my car like a small flock of orange and yellow vultures. The public had been ushered back behind blue and white tape which flicked and fluttered fitfully in the night air. One police officer, clearly very senior from the profusion of brass buttons and braid that sprouted from his uniform, was being interviewed by television reporters. He basked importantly in the hot white lights, one of those incongruously furry microphones dangling over his head like a child's toy.

Our two seedy escorts ignored all this, but stopped short as a flash of light from a press camera caught us all full in the face. Casting around for another of his macintoshed colleagues, cantaloupe-head gestured toward the press photographer. A little confusion followed as their system of body language failed and the colleague set off in the opposite direction. Cantaloupe-head

called out 'Oi,' then 'The photographer, idiot'. My stomach by now had squirmed into the shape of a pretzel and felt like it was tangling up all the rest of my internal organs with it. Somewhere I had some indigestion tablets. Maybe they would help. I always kept a couple of tablets in my wallet. I reached into my pocket, found my wallet, fumbled; and dropped it. It slipped neatly between the bars of a drain. I watched it disappear with a hollow plop in disbelief. Cantaloupe-head was too busy trying to establish non-verbal communication with his colleague to notice any of this, still flapping and gesticulating with even greater urgency.

The photographer was apprehended and shown some sort of a card. He looked suitably abashed, and cantaloupe-head seemed satisfied. Then someone took my arm and tugged me toward an unmarked car and pushed me inside. Siobhan was peeled away and put in another car. The sea of uniformed too-ing and fro-ing parted for these two vehicles, and we sped away from the scene of our crimes.

No-one spoke on the journey. I was flanked on either side by, I assumed, two further plain clothes police officers. Why two, I wondered? Was I really expected to fling myself from a speeding car if not boxed in on all sides? Would it not have been more cost effective to simply deadlock the doors and have just one minder to stop me garrotting the driver with my bootlaces? I began to formulate a letter of complaint to the chief constable, then realised that my status had slipped from responsible citizen to suspected terrorist. No matter; the journey was a short one and we soon pitched up at a local police station, whereupon I was scooped out of the car and into the reception area. Siobhan was already there. There followed still more confusion, with cantaloupe-head arguing with the station sergeant. Eventually he turned to his colleague, exchanged a few exasperated gestures (this lot didn't seem to be too hot on conversation), and both Siobhan and I were shooed along a corridor into an interview room. Brushing past Siobhan, she slipped me a few words in that targeted whisper:

"Cells must be full. I wouldn't have expected them to interview us both together. Nice trick with the wallet."

It took a few seconds to sink in. Nice trick with the wallet? I'd just lost my driving license, all my credit cards, and all my money. I'd also lost my membership card for the Society of Civil Engineers and a photograph of Jane. That had meant a great deal to me, it was almost twenty years old. I carried it with me everywhere. I was very proud to be a civil engineer. In fact, I had little else on me at all. I'd even left the car keys in the hotel room - they were not after all much use now. With that wallet, I'd lost my entire identity ... my entire identity .. now I realised. I'd got very close to Siobhan very quickly. I was even beginning to think like her.

We were led into a small square room with a table pushed up against one wall and a high window covered in something only a bit more substantial than chicken wire. There was a rather seventies-looking tape recorder on the table, with square corners and over-large buttons. The walls were hard and shiny, with a sort of brownish band at dado height separating two slightly different shades of putrid green, giving the impression that someone had actually designed this as a colour scheme, had sat back when it was finished and thought: 'Hmm, that looks nice'. A clear glass lightbulb hung from a flex, hooded by a metal shade, swinging slightly in a draught that entered with us through the doorway. It

reminded me of the opening sequence of a sixties TV series I used to watch as a child, I half-expected the bulb to go 'pop' and smoulder suggestively. There was nothing else in the room except an old-fashioned coat stand and, rather incongruously, a traffic cone with a helmet on it, like a dwarf orange and white police constable dozing in the corner. Siobhan and I were sat on either side of the table; cantaloupe-head sat at the end. Two stolid minders stood by the door. I felt a foot against mine. I hoped it was Siobhan's. Cantaloupe-head switched on the tape recorder; it set off on a cheery tuneless rhythmic squeaking, like a party of leisurely grasshoppers. He sighed and switched it off again:

"OK, let's do this informally. I'm sure we can get this all sorted out without too much bother, can't we? Good. Now turn out your pockets, please. And you madam, your bag, if you'd be so good."

Siobhan tipped the contents of her bag out onto the table: a purse, a make-up bag, a passport, a packet of indigestion tablets (I was comforted to know that she was a sufferer too), an Irish passport, chewing gum, a packet of condoms, some kind of hair colouring, the roll of notes ... and the torch. I searched through my pockets to try to come up with an equally convincing display of my life's ephemera. But all I could find was half a broken shoelace, an article torn from a journal on age-related stress weaknesses in pre-formed reinforced concrete, one of those cardboard tampon applicator tubes (I cannot imagine how that had got there - possibly Jane had left it lying around my bathroom), and a receipt from Pret-a-Manger for a prawn and avocado sandwich. A rather eccentric collection really. Cantaloupe-head thought so too. He picked up the cardboard tube and peered down it. I wondered quite what he expected to find there. He observed my collection:

"Is that it?"

"Yes. Sorry."

"No driving license, credit cards, anything at all with your name on it?"

I shook my head.

"Don't mind if we check do you? Stand up please."

One of the minders came across to me and 'checked', running his fingers over my clothing and body with, I felt, unnecessary self-indulgence. He nodded to cantaloupe-head and I sat down again.

"So," he began, reading with interest exactly where and when I'd bought my prawn and avocado sandwich, "Who are you then?"

At this point Siobhan, silent up to now, chipped in:

"You don't have to tell him, John. You can stay silent, whatever else they might try to tell you."

Cantaloupe-head narrowed his tiny eyes to a point where they almost disappeared from his face altogether, turning now on Siobhan:

"Quiet. I'm coming to you in a minute."

But Siobhan had got going now. And she didn't like being told to be quiet:

"Now you look here. Neither of us has to say anything, and we have a right to call a solicitor. I want to call mine now. I don't know much about police procedure, but don't you have to charge us or something?"

Cantaloupe-head was ready for this:

"I can hold you without charge for up to twenty-four hours. And up to seven days if I choose to use the PTA. As ..."

He opened her passport, checking her likeness;

"... Ms Doyle, I'm sure you already know."

He turned back to me now:

"I suppose you want to call a solicitor too?"

My solicitor had a small office above an Oxfam shop in Crouch End. He specialised in conveyancing and drainage disputes. I wondered quite how well briefed he was on the Prevention of Terrorism Act.

"Maybe not just yet ..." I ventured,

"Besides, I've got nothing to hide. I don't mind telling you my name. I'm John Finch, and I live at 52, Maple Gardens, London N12."

I felt pleased with that. Quick, I thought. Cantaloupe-head indulged in another bit of non-verbal, and one of the minders left the room. Now he turned to Siobhan, picking up her passport:

"So, you're Mary Doyle, and you're a travel consultant. Sounds like a nice job."

Siobhan didn't reply. Now he picked up the torch. He switched it on. He stared absently into the beam. He switched it off again. He put it back on the table. I felt Siobhan's foot nudge mine. She put her hands flat on the table, not looking at me, the fingers splayed out. She tapped them lightly on the table three times. Ten fingers. Three times. Thirty minutes. I got the message. My stomach took another twist.

Now cantaloupe-head picked up the roll of money, fingering it around lecherously, leering at it with a kind of unconscious lust that he'd shown not a glimmer of towards Siobhan. Nor me, for that matter:

"This is a lot of money for a travel consultant to be carrying around, isn't it? What's it for then?"

Before Siobhan could refuse to answer, the minder came back into the room and, crossing to cantaloupe-head, whispered something into his ear. Cantaloupe-head smiled, that momentary wan twitching of his thin lips, and folded his pappy pink fingers together on the table, turning smugly back to me:

“ So, Mr Finch. Or should I call you Jane. Now that’s an unusual name for a man. I suppose that’s why you call yourself John, is it?”

I could feel Siobhan sigh heavily, although she showed no outward sign of this, her big green eyes turned down to the table. At this point my stomach began to take a turn for the worse. It was reaching its end game, the point in catastrophe theory where a gradual worsening of circumstances leads to a single calamitous event. It happens to concrete sometimes. But it had happened to my stomach only once before. Having squirmed and twisted itself into its utmost tangle, my stomach now began to catastrophically untwist, allowing the contents from different bits of the digestive process to intermingle into an unsavoury and deadly cocktail. I knew what to expect. It was like dropping bits of potassium into water. Watch for the purple flashes. I swallowed hard, trying to delay the inevitable. Between little belches and minor eruptions of part digested Guinness into my oesophagus, I managed to get a few words out:

“ Do you .. think perhaps .. I could go to the toilet ...”

Cantaloupe-head eyed me distastefully:

“ Wait.”

“ You’ll regret it. I think .. I think ...”

Too late. The day’s ill-advised menu could stay in its rightful place no longer and exploded back up into the evening, fish, very mushy peas, chips, Guinness, indigestion tablets and, rather curiously, carrot, in assorted states of decay splattered across the table and into cantaloupe-head’s lap, adding yet more interesting stains to his collection. He yelped and jumped back:

“ Oh Christ, get him out of here!”

One of the minders opened the door while the other took me by the arm. But you know how it is with vomiting. The sharp butyric smell that now pervaded the room made me even more sick. Feeling by now like a stunt double from ‘The Exorcist’, I brought up another helping, cascading down onto the floor and across the minder’s shoes. He too jumped back cursing, but before anyone could regain their proper composure, Siobhan seized the initiative. Jumping from her chair she grabbed my arm and leaped for the open door:

“ Run, David!”

Following Siobhan, I dashed out into the corridor and back toward the reception desk. By pure good fortune the door to the public area was open and the station sergeant was distracted by a noisy Saturday night drunk. Before he could take in the sudden commotion, we were past him and out into the street, across the road, and into a maze of alleyways that snaked conveniently off into the night.

By the time we stopped running we’d left the police far behind. Doubling back and forth through backalleys and narrow town centre access roads, we’d reached the goods entrance of a supermarket. I collapsed onto a pile of old cardboard boxes, tucked away behind a paladin bin. Siobhan leaned against the bin:

“ Phew! That was a nice trick back there, David. You impressed me. I wish I could do that.”

I folded my arms around my still tender stomach, giving myself a bit of a comforting hug:

“ Believe me, you don’t.”

I was exhausted from all that vomiting and running, and now felt cold and shivery. I pulled my jacket around me:

“ I can’t go any further. I feel awful. I think I’m going to die.”

Siobhan bent down and felt my forehead. Her hand felt warm and comforting. She looked rather incongruous in her little black dress and elegant jewellery, here amongst the crushed cardboard and rotting plums. And she had no shoes.

“ You’ve lost your shoes,” I said

She frowned:

“ I kicked them off in the police station. I couldn’t run in those bloody things. Hmm, you do feel a bit cold, and you look rather pale. Just rest a bit. But not for long, mind. I figure we’ve got about fifteen minutes.

“ What? What do you mean ‘fifteen minutes’?”

She stood again, glancing a little nervously back along the access road:

“ Fifteen minutes until that device detonates.”

I don’t know why I asked. I should have been able to guess this woman by now:

“ You don’t mean ...”

“ I do mean. We’ve got to go back in there. The charge in that device is just a tad bigger than in the other one. And believe it or not, I don’t want to blow the balls off whatever poor sad bastard happens to be hanging around in that room in ...”

She looked at her watch:

“ .. thirteen minutes time. Besides, I don’t have any more of them, and I didn’t come all this way to give up now.”

“ But we’ve just been running for at least five minutes. Nearer ten. We can’t possibly get back in time.”

Siobhan smiled:

“ Oh yes we can. We’ve come full circle. Look, that’s the back of the police station, just over there. And that’s the last place they’ll think of looking for us. Come on.”

Struggling to my feet I followed, wishing she would show me at least as much compassion as she did the police. Right then I didn't feel that she'd spare the life of this poor sad bastard for a two-bob tram ticket, never mind how ever many thousand she was going to get for that bloody torch. But then she gave me another nice smile and that made me a whole lot better, warming up a bit as I trotted along beside her, although feeling just a little like a rabbit trotting along in the headlights of an oncoming car. We crossed the supermarket car park and approached the police station again. The moon had come up now, casting quick sheets of silver across the tarmac around us. A black cat ran out of the darkness and back again. Angels danced in mercurial pools on the police station roof. I was not surprised. Events had in any case long since lost any resemblance to reality; now I was just light-headedly enjoying the fantasy.

The mercurial pools began to evaporate as we got closer to the police station, and the angels turned out to be no more heavenly than a couple of tom cats scrapping over a dead pigeon. But my head was still swimming around a bit. A slightly dishevelled Siobhan by moonlight might have been irresistibly alluring, even with dirty feet, but common sense ought to have prevailed and I should have turned and run. But I didn't. Instead, I followed Siobhan through an open gate and into a yard cluttered with traffic signs, old abandoned bicycles, and assorted mysterious metalwork. There was also a dustbin. How interesting, I thought, it would be to investigate the contents of a police dustbin. What would it contain? Redundant bicycle clips? Unwanted evidence? Extracted fingernails? Siobhan looked at the bin:

“ Probably just endless paperwork,” she said in response, with unexpected empathy. This was odd because I hadn't actually said anything.

“ Give us a hand with it.”

I helped her carry the bin across to an open window. Siobhan climbed onto the bin and tucked her dress into her knickers. Now I could see that she was not wearing tights, but those elasticated hold-up stockings. This vision of erotica had a very obvious effect on me, and I had to catch my breath as she climbed in through the open window, and disappeared. The tomcats on the roof were now making a dreadful din and I was getting worried that someone might come out to see what all the fuss was about. For some reason, I was reminded of Jane in her more passionate moments. What, I wondered, would she think if she could see me now, breaking into the back of a police station with a dangerous terrorist to steal (for it was now, after all, official police property) an unexploded bomb? Certainly, she'd be surprised. But 'surprised' hardly covered it. Jane was very much a creature of habits and routines, a civil servant, one of those essential cornerstones of a stable society. Jane was the sort of person who gave money to hospital scanner appeals, washed her car on Sundays, and bought sensible underwear in Marks and Spencer's. She even swept the pavement outside her house. It was her conservatism and social responsibility that I admired. The poor woman would be shocked beyond her own restrained comprehension. This thought gave me a little tingle of excitement. The most dangerous things I'd done before that I could think of was taking a rowing boat out on Victoria Park lake without a life jacket. I was beginning to see how this sort of thing could be addictive.

The cats continued. I considered throwing something at them, but thought that bits of ironwork bouncing across the roof might attract even more attention. But

then Siobhan reappeared, climbing back down and beckoning me across to a side gate. We peered through a gap. Siobhan held my hand. After a minute or so, police and civilian staff began to emerge from the building. There seemed to be a degree of confusion and a fair bit of shouting, with the station sergeant eventually taking charge, ticking people off on a role, and ushering them away across the road.

“What did you do?” I whispered.

“I used the telephone in that office to warn them about the bomb. I said it was going off in about five minutes and they should get out fast. They evidently took me seriously. They didn’t twig that I was dialling from an internal phone because I did it by getting an outside line and coming back into the switchboard. The number was on their letter head. You can do that on a DDI phone. Clever, eh?”

It was, I thought. We watched as the police station decanted. Cantaloupe-head and his colleagues went too, clearly reluctantly, gesticulating to each other as they sloped off across the road. Siobhan moved away from the gate and back to the bin. She looked at her watch:

“I figure I’ve got about three minutes.”

She climbed back through the window. I began counting. One chimpanzee, two chimpanzees ... I’d always thought of chimpanzees as fairly sprightly animals. But these chimpanzees moved desperately slowly, each one languidly lingering longer than any decent chimpanzee should linger. One hundred and twenty chimpanzees, one hundred and twenty one chimpanzees. I began to worry that my chimpanzees were just too long, and that the difference between the time taken to say one, two or three and the time taken to say one hundred and twenty one, one hundred and twenty two, one hundred and twenty three, was longer than the time taken to say chimpanzee and I was therefore about half a minute behind. Now seemed to be the time to turf out the falsified statements and old fingernails from the dustbin and hide in it. But before I could muse further on the temporal and physical space occupied by higher primates, Siobhan re-emerged from the window, clutching her bag. And her shoes. She climbed back down, looking very pleased with herself:

“Got it! Oh, don’t worry, it’s perfectly safe now.”

She stood on the dustbin, big green eyes smiling, a shoe in each hand, smudged lipstick, gold earrings, her dress tucked into her knickers, one stocking top slipping down her thigh. She looked like an anarchic circus act. I laughed:

“What?” she said, slightly irritatedly, then, looking down at herself:

“I suppose I do look a bit of a sight don’t I?”

She handed me her shoes and bag and pulled her dress from her knickers, smoothing it down. I held out my hand to help her down:

“Allow me to help you, madam.”

“Thank you, sir.”

For just a few moments, we stood, hand in hand in the moonlight, her looking so happy and pleased, me thinking that perhaps a bit of this could be due to me. But the moments were so very small and my thoughts so very foolish, and soon interrupted by the sound of sirens swelling into the night sky. Siobhan pulled on her shoes:

“ Bomb squad. Come on, time to leave.”

We left. But we didn't go far. Half way across the car park, Siobhan stopped and rummaged in her bag.

“ What now?” I asked.

“ I have a plan.” she replied, not looking up from the bag.

“Another plan?”

“ Yes. Trust me. Haven't I kept us out of trouble so far... for sure?”

I wondered just exactly what would have happened if, in her view, we had been in trouble. Just then she found what she was looking for:

“ Aha!”

She took out the packet of condoms. This hardly seemed the time or place, and even recalling events in the hotel room or the view from beneath of Siobhan climbing through the police station window, I doubted if I could summon up the wherewithal on this particular occasion. She peeled off the wrapper and pulled out not the familiar little vacuum sealed package, but a thin, black electronic device. She switched it on and pointed to a nearby car:

“ That's a TVR isn't it? I think this works with those. Watch ..”

She pointed the device at the red Chimera and pressed a button: there was a pause of ten, maybe twenty long seconds, during which a string of LEDs on the device flickered in sequence. Then the hazard lights flashed and the car locks clicked open. By now, the sirens had peaked to a crescendo outside the police station. Siobhan opened the driver's door and shoved something into the ignition switch. She fiddled around for a few seconds; then started the engine. Closing the door, she walked around to the passenger side.

“ Come on,” she said, “ Lets get out of here.”

I leaned against the car:

“ Look, Siobhan, I'm really tired and I'm still feeling pretty awful. I feel sick and shivery and I don't think I can drive. Will you drive, please?”

She muttered something.

“ Sorry?”

She snapped back angrily:

“ I said I can’t drive. OK? I never learned. Yes, it’s a bloody nuisance. But why do you think I’ve kept you tagging along all this time? Did you think it was because I fancied you or something? Now let’s get the fuck out of here before that lot find their prize has been stolen and come swarming out here to look for us. Just drive. Get us out of town. Take the road back to London.”

I drove. Out of the town centre, leaving the sodium orange glow of town centre streetlights behind us, off down the empty A13 back to London. It was just after midnight. I was driving a stolen car. I was on the run from the police. I felt like my stomach had been turned inside out like a piece of tripe. I couldn’t quite remember exactly how I’d got here, nor could I imagine where I was going to go next. Siobhan was sullen and silent, sitting with arms folded, staring straight ahead. The moon was lower now, getting bigger as it dipped down to the horizon, huge and full and round like it was pregnant, like it was about to burst open and give birth to many new moons.

Eventually Siobhan spoke:

“ Look, David, I’m sorry about what I said back there. I’m not hanging on to you just as a driver. It was more than that ... I can’t say any more just yet. But I am sorry. We need to get across country a bit. Head for the Dartford Bridge. How do you feel now?”

“ Very tired. Are we going far?”

She opened her bag, and offered me an indigestion tablet:

“ Here.”

I deferred:

“ I don’t think they’ll help now ..”

She smiled:

“ It will. Trust me.”

I took one. It didn’t taste of much. But within a couple of minutes I really did start to feel a lot less tired. And a lot more positive about things. And wow, this really was quite an exciting car to drive and what the fuck if it was stolen. Suddenly I felt like I could drive right on through the night and enjoy it. A fast car, a beautiful woman, the open road, and the silent elegance of the dead dark hours that ordinary people abandon. This was living.

It took no time at all, or so it felt, to get to the Dartford Bridge. Those chimpanzees had been transformed from the sluggish beasts that languished out the back of the police station to the megajet monkeys from hell, we were on one big roll here, surfing the interstate like a couple of outlaws in a ‘66 Stingray. Well actually we were on the M25 just outside Orpington, but this TVR was a damn sight faster than any of that old American crap. Siobhan directed me on to the M20. The motorway was deserted. I put my foot down and the TVR pushed excitedly forward, the growly engine noise rising to an almost erotic purr as the road unwound like a spooled ribbon, like we were standing still and countryside was just rolling out beneath us. It felt like I could take my hands off the wheel

and it would just keep on coming. Fortunately I was just sufficiently in possession of senses to realise this was inadvisable. Siobhan yawned and stretched:

“ Try to keep the speed down to 120. You’ll attract attention.”

“ Oh. Sorry. Any chance of another one of those indigestion tablets.”

She giggled:

“ I think you’d better not. It’s probably better to keep the car wheels in contact with the road and your brain somewhere near in contact with the real world. Just keep driving.”

We left the M20 at Ashford. The landscape opened out into the wide open space of Romney Marsh, full of black sky and pricked with sparkly stars now the moon had gone. Ethereal misty marsh meadows stretched out flat between strings of low hedges and oil black drainage ditches, dotted with luminous sleeping sheep. We headed for New Romney. This was an unfamiliar part of the world to me, I’d only been here once before, on a trip to the Kent and East Sussex Steam Railway one hot Sunday afternoon. Jane had preferred to remain in the garden, for some reason. We passed through the small town, its shopfronts sleeping through the night. I think we passed a police car. It paid us no attention; by now I was beginning to slow down. Siobhan directed me down to a beachside road, which we followed out of the little town and along the edge of the sea until she eventually told me to pull over, in a shingle car park by a little cafe. It seemed a very strange place. The buildings were low and ramshackle, like a seaside shanty town, scrapped together from bits of roofing felt and clapboards. Some appeared to be converted railway carriages. They were dotted randomly about the flat shingle, interspersed with bits of rusty machinery and the occasional carcass of a fishing boat, jaggedly silhouetted against the imperfectly dark sky. And there were lighthouses, two of them, the beam from the larger one wiping around the misty night sky like a giant helicopter blade. The whole place was built on shingle: some of the cottagers had constructed gardens of a sort, unfamiliar scrubby green plants with mean spiky leaves, like soft cactuses. Behind us, the narrow concrete-block road tapered palely off into the night. But dominating the whole of this was a huge grey-black fortress, swallowing up the sky, dotted with lights like jewels set into a mythical monolith, thin curls of steam rising from vents and pipework. I opened the car window. There was a dull hum, mixed with the rhythmic, rolling sucking from waves against the beachstones. Suddenly I felt confused, and again very tired:

“ What is this place?”

“ Dungeness. That’s the nuclear power station. You look wiped out, David. Why don’t you get a bit of sleep? We’re early.”

I looked at the clock, and realised that I’d driven from Southend to Dungeness in less than two hours. I was about to ask ‘early for what?’, but before I could get the words out, I fell asleep.

Deep in that sleep, I had some very strange dreams. It would be too embarrassing to go into details, but they involved Siobhan, Jane, hotel bedrooms and, for some reason, sheep. They were very vivid and immensely enjoyable.

When I awoke, I had a dreadful headache. I struggled to bring the world into focus. The power station and its plumes of steam glowed with a reddish phosphorescence. Confused at first, I then saw the orange glow gathering in the sky out to sea, staining the water a deep purplish pink and picking out the shoreline pebble banks. Siobhan was not in the car. Getting out, I looked around for her. The morning air was sparkling fresh and stung my nostrils. A stiffening sea breeze cut across my face like a fresh-stropped razor, bringing me some way to my senses.

Three people had gathered by the power station perimeter fencing. One of them appeared to be Siobhan. There was another woman, and a man. I started to walk across to them, my footfalls scrunching in the shingle. They looked round as I approached. The other woman was tallish, with shoulder length brown hair. She wore a rather formal grey suit. It was a suit very much like Jane's work suit.

As I drew closer, I realised that the suit was not like Jane's. It was Jane's. And I could be certain of this because it was Jane who was wearing it. For a moment I thought that perhaps I was still part asleep or the effects of Siobhan's indigestion tablets had not yet worn off. I stumbled on the shingle, then regained my footing and continued on toward the group, my shingly footfalls drawing up to these three people. Jane smiled:

" Hello David."

I was awake. It was her. This was real.

" Jane? I ... Why ... What are you ..."

I looked at Siobhan. She held another bundle of notes. And Jane held the torch. The man standing just behind Jane wore a black suit and held nothing at all, but looked none the less menacing for it. He had a bald head which glowed orangey pink in the gathering sunrise, and wore dark glasses, which seemed a bit unnecessary since it was barely light. I looked at the man .. and the money .. and the torch ...

" But ... Jane ... so you're buying the ... device?"

Jane put on her best gently patronising look. I'd seen it many times before. I'd seen it in Siobhan, too. Perhaps that was what had attracted me to her. Jane reached out her long elegant fingers and touched my sleeve, as if to reassure me that she was real, that it was her, here, now, doing this:

" David, you knew I worked for the MoD. I'm just doing part of my job. Sharon here is one of our contacts. She's a genius with microelectronics and explosives. Sometimes we do business with her. Unofficially."

I turned to Siobhan:

" Sharon?"

She shrugged:

" Sorry. Siobhan sounds more romantic."

The sweet, lilting Irish accent seemed to have morphed into something more like Black Country. I was still very confused. I started searching for explanations:

“ But Jane, you always said you were a civil servant.”

“ And so I am, David. But there, you never showed that much interest in exactly what I do, did you?”

The bald headed man in the suit and shades shuffled a bit nervously. But I was going to get to the bottom of this now. Back to Siobhan, or Sharon, again:

“ But you said you worked for terrorists. And you’re not even properly Irish are you?”

She shook her head:

“ No, I said I was a mercenary. You said I worked for terrorists and I agreed. As I said, it depends on your definition of a terrorist. And I come from Wolverhampton. I was a little surprised you were taken in by the accent – I don’t think Irish people really say ‘to be sure’ do they?”

Jane smiled at this. I continued:

“ So ... was this a set up? I mean, was I supposed to take Siobhan or Sharon or whoever she is to Southend?”

Jane nodded:

“ Yes. Sorry, but I couldn’t tell you in advance. In case you were ... well we couldn’t tell you. Sharon had some rather nasty people on to her, and we had to get her out of circulation for a bit. We needed someone who was more or less untraceable, whom they didn’t know. I knew you always went to the bottlebank on the first Saturday of the month. The rest of it was up to Sharon.”

“ But how did you know ... I mean, I could have just ignored her and walked away.”

Jane smiled again, and sighed:

“ David, you forget how well I know you. And besides, you’re a man. If there’s one thing men cannot resist, it’s temptation.”

It was one of Jane’s more irritating habits, getting quotations wrong. I stumbled on:

“ But .. Siobhan and I ... the hotel ...”

Jane waved her long fingers dismissively:

“ Oh, poo. Forget it. I don’t mind lending you out in a good cause. And I do wish you’d just try not to be so bloody moral. Now David, Sharon and I have some unfinished business to sort out. Oh, and don’t worry about your car by the way. There’ll be a new one waiting for you when you get home. It was the least

we could do. But remember the old one was ... how can I put it ... retrospectively stolen, on Saturday morning. OK? Freddie here will take care of you now.”

I tried to protest, ineffectually:

“ But ... but ... how could you know? Why me? How ... how could you do this ... to me?”

Jane looked up at the huge electricity cables where they spun out above us, woven off onto the pylons that marched away across the flat marshland and into the far distance:

“ It’s a girl thing, David. You wouldn’t understand.”

She began to walk away. Siobhan followed, then turned back and walked up to me. She took both my hands:

“ David, I’m so sorry I had to deceive you. But, well, I did say I was a mercenary. And, you know, I really quite like you.”

She squeezed my hands, and kissed me. Jane called out:

“ Come on, Sharon. We’ll be late.”

Siobhan waited a few seconds more, still holding my hands, those big green eyes holding more beautiful secrets than I could ever imagine:

“ Goodbye, David.”

And she turned to go. I watched her and Jane scrunch back across the shingle towards Jane’s car, parked just beyond the TVR. The sun was pushing up above the horizon now, a big golden disc bleaching out the colours of its own blood red birth. Bits of seaweed flicked and flittered where they stuck to the larger stones, and a polythene bag scurried like tumbleweed across the pebbles in the white morning breeze. People were beginning to emerge from the shacks and cottages. It was a new day. I watched as Jane and Siobhan reached Jane’s car. And just before they got in to drive away, I could almost have been certain that they held hands. The car rolled back across the shingle, and then out along the narrow road, its tyres counting out an accelerating rhythm against the joins in the flat concrete surface. In a few moments, the car was gone. I stood watching the space where it had last been, trying to make all this out. I looked up into the sky. Seagulls hung and turned in the clear blue; far above an aeroplane vapour trail spun out like spider’s silk, dispersed and evaporated into space. I sighed. It was going to be another beautiful Spring day.

Freddie took off his sunglasses. I could see now why he wore them. One of his eyes was badly cut.

“ I think sir,” he said, slowly, “ That we’d better be going now.”

I nodded. Somehow I didn’t want to go. I wanted to stay and think about all this, here with the wind in my face and the fresh smell of the sea. But I was tired. I needed to sleep. I needed to sleep for a long, long time. I looked at Freddie. He seemed benign, a bit sad even. A seagull screeched away across the

fence and up into the shadow of the power station. Far away on the sea, a fishing boat struggled with the tide. I turned and followed Freddie out of that place. And to this day, I have never been back there.

A Childhood in Half-Hour

It seems so strange to think that when I was born, Winston Churchill was prime minister. True, this was his second go, brought back by the British people more out of frustration than post-war gratitude, when they realised the austerity of 1950s peacetime was even worse than the austerity of the war. But it just seems so long ago, ancient history: I can't believe I've lasted that long.

My childhood was dominated by the Second World War. My parents talked about it endlessly, whenever they were alone, whenever they were in company. For that generation, it left a mark on their lives like a huge scar, something they could reveal and compare amongst friends, no other experience would ever come close. As a child, I was immersed in images of the war: from my mother, the London blitz, shrapnel showers from aerial dogfights, firestorms, doodlebugs, dancing with Clark Gable, the VE day street parties. My father's experiences were less dramatic, recorded in a collection of photographs stuck to fibrous black paper with un-warlike pencilled titles such as 'Malay Girls at the NAAFI', or 'Ronnie and Alf at the Taj Mahal', all smiles and clean uniforms. The closest he got to action was when he spent two days behind enemy lines, accidentally - the Japanese had advanced, it seemed, but forgot to tell him. His little band of warriors were rescued from their airstrip by an irate American captain in a Jeep, telling them they really weren't supposed to be there. Still, he got a medal for it. Eventually, he did have to prepare himself for certain death, training to drive off a landing craft in the first wave of the invasion of Singapore. But twenty-four hours before he was scheduled to die, a hundred thousand Japanese civilians sacrificed their lives to save him: the Hiroshima bomb was dropped, and the invasion was abandoned.

These were the stories I grew up with. No wonder that whenever I see or hear or read anything about the war, it seems like I was there. If I believed in reincarnation, I would be sure that I had been. But it was just the backdrop for my generation, dripped into our minds throughout our formative years. It was just 1951 when my parents met, my mother was a member of the Communist Party but campaigning for the left-wing Labour MP Tom Dryberg. Their meeting had something to do with chicken feed and my father offering advice about her sister's broody pullets, but I'm a bit hazy about the details. My father was driving a bread van at the time and conducting a secret affair with the wife of a local wealthy businessman, that much I do know. I'm not sure what my mother was up to romantically, I think her time was taken up by her politics. Anyway, they were married and bought a house outside Chobham, in the Surrey countryside. Buying a house, for working class people, was almost unheard of in those days, but my mother had received a reasonable settlement from her previous, spectacularly unsuccessful, marriage.

The 1950s were a strangely desperate time. Everyone was determined to force an order and calm on our communities, an image that still persists today. Women returned to the home from their factories to devote their lives to serving their loving, hard-working husbands, waving from their kitchen windows to the rosy-faced vicars and bicycling policemen who kept their lives ordered and safe. But nothing could be further from the truth. In Britain, the 1950s were tough, the economy crippled by the US government's lease-lend scheme, a generation of young men trained as killers finding it hard to fit into civilian life, the rewards of victory slipping swiftly away as the empire crumbled and the bombsites grew forests of weeds. No surprise that the murder rate was the highest ever

recorded, and towns such as Brighton became virtual no-go areas for the police, dominated by violent gangs of disillusioned ex-servicemen. Read 'Brighton Rock' for a true picture of 1950s Britain, not the imagined nostalgia of some other commentators.

As a small child, I was insulated from all this of course, growing up in the genteel Surrey countryside. Even so, I could still pick up on the irregularities, the whispered tales of vicars and scoutmasters, former pillars of our safe community, who had suddenly disappeared 'because they had been interfering with little boys', as my mother would say. None of this was ever reported, of course. Paedophilia was scarcely even a crime in those net-curtained days. But I was blindly happy and protected, my memories are of Rag, Tag and Bobtail on our tiny television, my father making me aeroplanes from bits of scrap wood in the shed, catching dew-jewelled cobwebs in curled hazel twigs on autumn mornings, and playing poosticks on the bridge over the stream at Pennypot. Days out too: watching for the curious mid-air doors and fireplaces on the peeling papered walls of half-demolished bombed-out ruins as we took the train up to London, watching the glow of the locomotive firebox and sparks ascending into the darkness as we returned, through a hole wiped in the fuggy condensation of a steam-heated carriage.

My father was an ambulance driver, a job that gave us a telephone so he could be contacted in an emergency. Strange, as we had no car and he had to cycle ten miles to work. My mother's friends would visit to look at the telephone, pick up the cream handset and listen, replacing it quickly when the Chobham operator chipped in with her abrupt 'number please'. My mother had once been a telephone operator, in those days before STD dialling. She told me they would say anything to relieve the repetitive boredom: 'bread and cheese', 'rubber knees', 'mother's fleas'; no-one ever seemed to notice, she said. Not that my mother could ever demonstrate our telephone to her friends. We knew no-one else with a phone, so there was no-one to call.

Cycling ten miles to work every day, often in the rain and snow, took its toll on my father. He suffered from asthma and became unwell. So my parents determined to get a car, turning the garage into a deep litter house to rear chicken in the run-up to Christmas. Another enduring memory is of my entire extended family plucking and drawing chickens in our kitchen just before Christmas, turning the place into a blood-spattered charnel house. I sat on the doormat playing with a chicken leg, making the claws open and close by pulling on its severed tendons with an engrossed fascination.

This enterprise was evidently successful, for they acquired an enormous Studebaker station wagon, left behind by US troops after the war, just about the least appropriate vehicle for the narrow English lanes in which we lived. I would travel in the back, in my high chair, ideally placed to cannon through the windscreen in the event of an accident: safety and security really did have different meanings on those peculiar post-war days.

Perhaps the one less happy memory of those times is of the nuns coming into our garden, like a pair of mangy black crows, telling me that my mother was an adulteress and I would go to hell. I had no idea what an 'adulteress' was of course, nor had I ever heard of hell: they might as well have told me I was going to Basingstoke. But I could sense their malicious intent. Years later, I learned that my mother's previous marriage, to a Catholic naval officer, had been

annulled because it was never consummated. It had taken my mother many years to get the annulment, although the Catholic Church of course refused to recognise it, and continued to persecute her. She had naturally grown to despise Catholicism, and indeed all religion, bringing me up as a devout atheist: something for which I shall be eternally grateful. She did however give up her Communism after the 1956 invasion of Hungary, inexplicably voting Conservative for the rest of her life.

As the 1960s dawned, my parents decided to embark on a dubiously unstable although endlessly fascinating career as unsuccessful entrepreneurs. They bought a shop in Old Woking, close to an area of wasteland that was designated to become a new trading estate. This, they figured, would bring in much trade and make them millionaires. The shop was no more than eight metres wide by five metres deep. In this space, we sold both hardware and food. The left side was devoted to tins of vegetables and condensed milk, Lyons fruit pies, boxes of loose biscuits, and a freezer with peas that came in solid blocks wrapped in waxed cardboard. There was fresh food in a chiller cabinet too, cheeses, ham and bacon, and fresh vegetables, mostly in wooden boxes on the outside forecourt.

On the right hand side of the shop, there were tins of Valspar paint, big boxes of screws and nails, assorted tools with satisfyingly smooth wooden handles, and cabinets of small drawers containing all manner of hinges, brackets, knobs and widgets, like magical herbs in a witch's cave. In spring, there would be bedding plants in wooden trays and hessian sacks of seed potatoes, on the forecourt alongside the vegetables. My mother would look after the grocery side, in her white nylon shopcoat. My father would look after the hardware side, in his brown canvas overall. They were so proud. I can remember the day the signwriter came to paint our name over the shop: my father put his arm around me and said:

“When you're a bit older, we'll add '& son' to that,”

But that never happened.

To be continued ...