

DAVID LODGE

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THERAPY

A NOVEL



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To Dad, with love

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The locations of events in this novel are the usual mixture of the real and the imaginary, but the characters and their actions are entirely fictitious, with the possible exception of the writer-presenter of a television documentary briefly mentioned in Part Four.

D.L.

**Therapy.** The treatment of physical, mental or social disorders or disease.

– *Collins English Dictionary*

“You know what, Søren? There’s nothing the matter with you but your silly habit of holding yourself round-shouldered. Just straighten your back and stand up and your sickness will be over.”

– Christian Lund,  
uncle of Søren Kierkegaard.

“Writing is a form of therapy.”

– Graham Greene

\* \* ONE \* \*

RIGHT, here goes.

*Monday morning, 15th Feb., 1993.* A mild February day has brought the squirrels out of hibernation. The leafless trees in the garden make a kind of adventure playground for them. I watched two playing tag in the chestnuts just outside my study window: spiralling up a trunk, dodging and feinting among the branches, then scampering along a bough and leaping to the next tree, then zooming down the side of its trunk headfirst, freezing halfway, claws sticking like Velcro to the corrugated bark, then streaking across the grass, one trying to shake off the other by jinking and swerving and turning on a sixpence till he reached the bole of a Canadian poplar and they both rocketed up its side into the thin elastic branches and balanced there, swaying gently and blinking contentedly at each other. Pure play – no question. They were just larking about, exercising their agility for the sheer fun of it. If there's such a thing as reincarnation, I wouldn't mind coming back as a squirrel. They must have knee-joints like tempered steel.

The first time I felt the pain was about a year ago. I was leaving the London flat, hurrying to catch the 18.10 from Euston, scuttling backwards and forwards between the four rooms, stuffing scripts and dirty socks into my briefcase, shutting windows, switching off lights, re-setting the central-heating timer, emptying milk cartons down the sink, sloshing Sanilav round the toilet bowl – in short, going through the Before You Leave The Flat hit-list that Sally had written out and stuck on the fridge door with magnetic yellow Smileys, when I felt it: a sharp, piercing pain, like a red-hot needle thrust into the inside of the

right knee and then withdrawn, leaving a quickly fading afterburn. I uttered a sharp, surprised cry and keeled over on to the bed (I was in the bedroom at the time). "Christ!" I said, aloud, although I was alone. "What the fuck was that?"

Gingerly I got to my feet. (Should that be "gingerlyly"? No, I've just looked it up, adjective and adverb both have the same form.) Gingerly I got to my feet and tested my weight on the knee, took a few paces forward (funny word actually, nothing to do with ginger, I always thought it meant the way you taste ground ginger, very carefully, dipping a moistened finger into it, and then trying it on the tip of your tongue, but no, it's thought to come from Old French *gençon*, dainty, or *gent*, of noble birth, neither of which applies to me). I took a few paces forward without any ill-effects, shrugged, and put it down to some freakish twitch of a nerve, like the sudden excruciating crick you can get in your neck sometimes, twisting round to get something from the back seat of a car. I left the flat, caught my train, and thought no more about it.

About a week later, when I was working in my study, I crossed my legs underneath the desk, and I felt it again, the sudden stab of pain on the inside of the right knee, which made me gasp, sucking in a lungful of air and then expelling it with a resounding "*Fuuuuckinell!*" From then onwards, I began to get the pain with increasing frequency, though there was nothing predictable about it. It rarely happened when I might have expected it, like when I was playing golf or tennis, but it could happen just *after* a game, in the club-house bar, or while driving home, or when I was sitting perfectly still in my study, or lying in bed. It would make me cry out in the middle of the night, so that Sally thought I was having a nightmare. In fact nightmares are about the only thing I don't have, in that line. I have depression, anxiety, panic attacks, night sweats, insomnia, but not nightmares. I never did dream much. Which simply means, I understand, that I don't remember my dreams, because we dream all the time we're asleep, so they say. It's as if there's an unwatched telly flickering all night long inside my head. The Dream Channel. I wish I could make a video recording of it. Maybe I would get a clue then to what's the

matter with me. I don't mean my knee. I mean my head. My mind. My soul.

I felt it was a bit hard that I should get a mysterious pain in the knee on top of all my other problems. Admittedly, there are worse things that can happen to you, physically. For instance: cancer, multiple sclerosis, motor neurone disease, emphysema, Alzheimer's and AIDS. Not to mention the things you can be born with, like muscular dystrophy, cerebral palsy, haemophilia and epilepsy. Not to mention war, pestilence and famine. Funny how knowing that doesn't make the pain in your knee any easier to bear.

Perhaps it's what they call "compassion fatigue", the idea that we get so much human suffering thrust in our faces every day from the media that we've become sort of numbed, we've used up all our reserves of pity, anger, outrage, and can only think of the pain in our own knee. I haven't got to that stage yet, not quite, but I know what they mean. I get a lot of charity appeals through the mail. I think they pass names and addresses to each other: you only have to make a donation to one organization and, before you know where you are, the envelopes are falling through the letterbox faster than you can pick them up. OXFAM, CAFOD, UNICEF, Save the Children, Royal Institute for the Blind, Red Cross, Imperial Cancer, Muscular Dystrophy, Shelter, etc. etc., all containing form letters and leaflets printed on recycled paper with smudgy b/w pictures of starving black babies with limbs like twigs and heads like old men, or young kids in wheelchairs, or stunned-looking refugees, or amputees on crutches. How is one supposed to stem this tide of human misery? Well, I'll tell you what I do. I subscribe a thousand pounds a year to an organization that gives you a special cheque book to make donations to the charities of your choice. They also recover the tax you've paid on the money, which bumps it up to £1400 in my case. So every year I dispense fourteen hundred quid in little parcels: £50 for the starving babies of Somalia, £30 for the rape victims in Bosnia, £45 towards a water pump in Bangladesh, £25 to a drug-abuse rehabilitation unit in Basildon, £30 for AIDS research, and so on, until the account is

empty. It's rather like trying to mop up the oceans of the world with a box of Kleenex, but it keeps compassion fatigue at bay.

Of course, I could afford to give much more. I could afford *ten* thousand a year from my present income, without too much pain. I could give it all away, for that matter, it still wouldn't be more than a box of Kleenex. So I keep most of it and spend it on, among other things, private medical treatment for my knee.

I went to my GP first. He recommended physiotherapy. After a while, the physiotherapist recommended that I see a consultant. The consultant recommended an arthroscopy. That's a new kind of hi-tech microsurgery, all done by television and fibre-optics. The surgeon pumps water into your leg to create a kind of studio in there, and then sticks three needle-thin instruments into it. One has a camera on the end, another is a cutting tool and the third is a pump for sucking out the debris. They're so fine you can hardly tell the difference between them with the naked eye and the surgeon doesn't even have to put a stitch in the perforations afterwards. He sees what's wrong with your knee-joint by wiggling it about and watching it on a TV monitor, and then cuts away the torn cartilage or tissue or rough bit of bone or whatever it is that's causing the trouble. I'd heard that some patients have just a local anaesthetic and watch the whole operation on the monitor as it's being done, but I didn't fancy that, and said so. Nizar smiled reassuringly. (That's the name of my orthopaedic consultant, Mr Nizar. I call him Knees 'R Us. Not to his face, of course. He's from the Near East, Lebanon or Syria or one of those places, and well out of it from what I hear.) He said I would have a general anaesthetic, but he would give me a videotape of the op to take home. He wasn't joking, either. I knew people had their weddings and christenings and holidays videotaped nowadays instead of photographed, but I didn't know it had got as far as operations. I suppose you could make up a little compilation and invite your friends round to view it over wine and cheese. "*That's my appendectomy, had it done in 1984, or was it '85. . . neat, eh? . . . And this is my open heart surgery, oops, a little bit of camera-jog there . . . Dorothy's womb-scrape is coming up next . . .*" [Memo: idea for *The People Next*

Door in this?] I said to Nizar, "You could probably run a little video-rental business on the side for folk who haven't had any operations of their own." He laughed. He was very confident about the arthroscopy. He claimed that there was a ninety-five per cent success rate. I suppose somebody's got to be in the unlucky five per cent.

I had the operation done at Rummidge General. Being a private patient I would normally have gone into the Abbey, the BUPA hospital near the cricket ground, but they had a bit of a bottleneck there at the time – they were refurbishing one of their operating theatres or something – and Nizar said he could fit me in quicker if I came into the General, where he works one day a week for the NHS. He promised I would have a room to myself, and as the op entailed staying in for only one night, I agreed. I wanted to get it over and done with as soon as possible.

As soon as I arrived at the General by taxi, at nine o'clock one winter morning, I began to wish I'd waited for a bed at the Abbey. The General is a huge, gloomy Victorian pile, blackened redbrick on the outside, slimy green and cream paint on the inside. The main reception area was already full of rows of people slumped in moulded plastic chairs, with that air of abandoned hope I always associate with NHS hospitals. One man had blood seeping through a bandage wrapped round his forehead. A baby was screaming its head off.

Nizar had given me a scrap of graph paper with his name scrawled on it, and the date and time of my appointment – a ludicrously inadequate document for admission to a hospital, I thought, but the receptionist seemed to recognize it, and directed me to a ward on the third floor. I took the lift and was told off by a sharp-faced nursing sister who stepped in at the first floor and pointed out that it was for the use of hospital staff only. "Where are you going?" she demanded. "Ward 3J," I said. "I'm having a minor operation. Mr Nizar." "Oh," she said with a slight sneer, "You're one of his private patients, are you?" I got the impression she disapproved of private patients being treated in NHS hospitals. "I'm only in for one night," I said, in mitigation. She gave a brief, barking laugh, which unsettled me. It turned out that she was in charge of Ward 3J. I wonder sometimes if

she didn't deliberately engineer the harrowing ordeal of the next hour and a half.

There was a row of black plastic chairs up against the wall outside the ward where I sat for about twenty minutes before a thin, drawn-looking young Asian woman, in a house-doctor's white coat, came and wrote down my particulars. She asked me if I had any allergies and tied a dogtag with my name on it to my wrist. Then she led me to a small, two-bed room. There was a man in striped pyjamas lying on one of the beds, with his face to the wall. I was about to protest that I had been promised a private room, when he turned over to look at us and I saw that he was black, probably Caribbean. Not wishing to appear racist, I swallowed my complaint. The house-doctor ordered me to take off all my clothes and to put on one of those hospital nightgowns that open down the back, which was lying folded on top of the vacant bed. She told me to remove any false teeth, glass eyes, artificial limbs or other such accessories I might be secreting on my person, and then left me. I undressed and put on the gown, watched enviously by the Caribbean. He told me he had been admitted three days ago, for a hernia operation, and nobody had come near him since. He seemed to have dropped into some kind of black hole in the system.

I sat on the edge of the bed in my gown, feeling the draught up my legs. The Caribbean turned his face to the wall again and seemed to fall into a light sleep, groaning and whimpering to himself occasionally. The young Asian house-doctor came back into the room and checked the name on my dogtag against her notes as if she had never met me before. She asked me again if I had any allergies. I was rapidly losing faith in this hospital. "That man says he has been here three days and nobody has taken any notice of him," I said. "Well, at least he's had some sleep," said the house-doctor, "which is more than I've had for the last thirty-six hours." She left the room again. Time passed very slowly. A low winter sun shone through the dusty window. I watched the shadow of the window-frame inch its way across the linotiled floor. Then a nurse and a porter pushing a stretcher on wheels came to fetch me to the operating theatre. The porter was a young local man with a poker-player's pallid, impassive

face, and the nurse a buxom Irish girl whose starched uniform seemed a size too small for her, giving her a slightly tarty look. The porter tossed me the usual local greeting—"A'right?"—and told me to hop on to the stretcher. I said, "I could walk, you know, in a dressing-gown. I'm not in any actual pain." In fact I hadn't felt a single twinge in the knee for over a week, which is pretty typical of all such ailments: as soon as you decide to have treatment, the symptoms disappear. "No, you've got to be wheeled," he said. "Regulations." Carefully holding the flaps of my gown together like an Edwardian lady adjusting her bustle, I mounted the stretcher and lay down. The nurse asked me if I was nervous. "Should I be?" I asked. She giggled but made no comment. The porter checked the name on my dogtag. "Passmore, yes. Right leg amputation, ennit?" "No!" I exclaimed, sitting up in alarm. "Just a minor knee operation." "He's only having you on," said the nurse. "Stop it, Tom." "Just pulling your leg," said Tom, deadpan. They covered me with a blanket and tucked it in, pinning my arms to my sides. "Stops you getting knocked as we go through the swing doors," Tom explained. The Caribbean woke up and raised himself on one elbow to watch me go. "So long," I said. I never saw him again.

You feel curiously helpless when you're lying on your back on a stretcher without a pillow under your head. You can't tell where you are or where you're going. All you can see is ceilings, and the ceilings of the General Hospital weren't a pretty sight: cracked plaster, flaking emulsion, cobwebs in corners and dead flies in the lighting fixtures. We seemed to be travelling through miles and miles of corridors. "Got to take the scenic route today," Tom remarked from behind my head. "Theatre lift's broke, ennit? Have to take you down to the basement by the utilities lift and then across to the other wing, then up the other lift and back over again." The utilities lift was industrial-size: cavernous, dimly lit and smelling faintly of boiled cabbage and laundry. As I was pushed over the threshold the wheels caught on something and I found myself staring up into the space between the lift and the shaft at the black greasy cables and grooved wheels of the ancient-looking machinery. It was like being in one of those arty-farty movies where everything is shot from unnatural angles.

*↳ photoshopped  
miscellaneous perspective*



Tom clashed the folding gate shut, the nurse pressed a button and the lift began to descend very slowly with much creaking and groaning. Its ceiling was even more depressing than the ceilings of the corridors. My companions conducted a desultory conversation out of my sight. "Got a smoke on you?" said the nurse. "No," said Tom, "I've given it up. Gave it up last Tuesday." "Why?" "Health." "What d'you do instead?" "Lots and lots of sex," said Tom levelly. The nurse giggled. "I'll tell you a secret, though," said Tom. "I hid cigarettes all over the hospital when I gave up, in case I get desperate. There's one in the basement." "What kind is it?" "Benson's. You can have it if you like." "Alright," said the nurse, "thanks." The lift stopped with a jolt.

The air in the basement was hot and dry from the central-heating plant, and I began to perspire under the blanket as Tom pushed me between walls of cartons and boxes and bins of hospital supplies. Cobwebs hung thickly from the vaulted ceiling like batshit. The wheels jolted over the stone-flagged floor, jarring my spine. Tom stopped for a minute to ferret for one of his hidden cigarettes. He and the nurse disappeared behind a mountainous bale of laundry, and I heard a little squeal and scuffle which suggested he had exacted a favour in return for the Benson and Hedges. I couldn't believe what was happening to me. How could a private patient be subjected to such indignities? It was as if I'd paid for Club Class and found myself in a broken seat at the back of the plane next to the toilet with smokers coughing in my face (metaphorically speaking – the nurse didn't have the nerve to actually light up). What made it worse was knowing that I'd get no sympathy from Sally when I told her the story: she disapproves of private medicine on principle and refused to join BUPA when I did.

We moved on again, twisting and turning through the labyrinth of stores, until we reached another, similar lift on the far side of the enormous basement, and rose slowly back into daylight. There was another long journey through more corridors – then suddenly everything changed. I passed through swing doors from the nineteenth century to the twentieth, from Victorian Gothic to hi-tech modern. It was like stepping on to a brightly lit, elegant studio set

after stumbling about in the dark, cable-encumbered space at the back of a sound stage. Everything was white and silver, stainless and gleaming in the diffused light, and the medical staff welcomed me with kind smiles and soft, cultured voices. I was deftly lifted off the stretcher and onto another, more sophisticated mobile bed, on which I was wheeled into an anteroom where the anaesthetist was waiting. He asked me to flex my left hand, and warned me in soothing tones to expect a slight prick as he inserted a kind of plastic valve into a vein in my arm. Nizar sauntered into the room, swathed in pale blue theatre overalls and wearing a snood over his hair, looking like a plump pyjama-clad housewife who had just risen from her bed and hadn't taken her curlers out yet. "Morning, old bean," he greeted me. "Everything tickety-boo?" Nizar speaks immaculate English, but I think he must have read a lot of P. G. Wodehouse once. I was about to say, no, it hadn't been at all tickety-boo so far, but this didn't seem the right moment to complain about my reception. Besides, a warm drowsy feeling of well-being was beginning to come over me. Nizar was looking at X-rays of my knee, holding them up before a lighted screen. "Ah yes," he murmured to himself, as if vaguely recognizing a snapshot of some fleeting acquaintance from the past. He came over and stood at the side of the bed opposite the anaesthetist. They smiled down at me. "A hand-joiner," the anaesthetist commented. What was he implying, I wondered. My blanket had been removed, and not knowing what else to do with my hands I had clasped them on my stomach. The anaesthetist patted my hands. "That's good, very good," he said reassuringly. "Some people clench their fists, bite their nails." Nizar lifted the hem of my gown and squeezed my knee. I sniggered and was about to make a joke about sexual harassment when I passed out.

When I came round, I was back in the two-bedded room but the Caribbean man had gone, nobody could tell me where. My right leg, swaddled in bandages, was as big as an elephant's. Sally, who visited me on her way home from work, thought it looked very funny. As I anticipated, I got no sympathy when I described my morning. "Serves you right for queue-jumping," she said. "My Auntie Emily

has been waiting two years for a hip operation." Nizar came in later and asked me to lift my leg gently a few inches off the bed. I did it very gently – gingerly, you might say – without adverse effect, and he seemed satisfied. "Jolly good," he said, "spiffing."

After a few days on crutches, waiting for the swelling to subside, and several weeks of physiotherapy and controlled exercise to get the quadriceps back to strength, I started to get the same intermittent pain as before. *Fuuuuuuckinell!* I couldn't believe it. Nizar couldn't believe it either. He reckoned he'd identified the trouble – a bit of tissue called plica that was getting nipped in the knee joint – and cut it away. We watched the video of my operation together on the TV in his office. I hadn't been able to bring myself to watch it before. It was a brightly lit, coloured, circular image, like looking through the porthole of a submarine with a powerful searchlight. "There it is, you see!" cried Nizar. All I could see was what looked like a slim silvery eel biting chunks out of the soft underside of a shellfish. The little steel jaws snapped viciously and fragments of my knee floated off to be sucked out by the aspirator. I couldn't watch for long. I always was squeamish about violence on television.

"Well?" I said, when Nizar switched off the video. "Well, frankly old bean, I'm baffled," he said. "You saw for yourself the plica that was causing the trouble, and you saw me cut it away. There's no evidence of torn meniscus or arthritic degeneration of the joint. There's no bally reason why the knee should be giving you any more pain."

"But it is," I said.

"Yes, quite so. It's jolly annoying."

"Particularly for me," I said.

"It must be idiopathic patella chondromalacia," said Nizar. When I asked him to explain he said, "Patella chondromalacia means pain in the knee, and idiopathic means it's peculiar to you, old boy." He smiled as if awarding me a prize.

I asked him what could be done about it, and he said, rather less confidently than before, that he could do another arthroscopy, to see if he had by any chance missed something in the first one, or I could

try aspirins and physiotherapy. I said I would try aspirins and physiotherapy.

"Of course, I'd do it in the BUPA hospital next time," he said. He was aware that I had been less than enchanted with the standard of care at the General.

"Even so," I said. "I'm not rushing into another operation."

When I told Roland – that's the name of my physiotherapist – when I told Roland the substance of this consultation, he gave his sardonic lopsided smile and said, "You've got Internal Derangement of the Knee. That's what the orthopaedic surgeons call it amongst themselves. Internal Derangement of the Knee. I.D.K. I Don't Know."

Roland is blind, by the way. That's another thing that can happen to you that's worse than a pain in the knee. Blindness.

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*Tuesday afternoon, 16th Feb.* Immediately after writing that last bit yesterday I thought I would try shutting my eyes for a bit, to give myself an idea of what it would be like to be blind, and remind myself how lucky I am compared to poor old Roland. I actually went so far as to blindfold myself, with a sleeping mask British Airways gave me once on a flight from Los Angeles. I thought I would see what it was like to do something quite simple and ordinary, like making a cup of tea, without being able to see. The experiment didn't last long. Trying to get out of the study and into the kitchen I cracked my knee, the right one needless to say, against the open drawer of a filing cabinet. I tore off the blindfold and hopped round the room cursing and blaspheming so terribly I finally shocked myself into silence. I was sure I'd done my knee in for good. But after a while the pain wore off, and this morning the joint doesn't seem to be any worse than it was before. No better, either, of course.

There's one advantage of having Internal Derangement of the Knee, and that is, when people ring you up, and ask you how you are, and you don't want to say, "terminally depressed," but don't feel like pretending that you're brimming over with happiness either, you can

always complain about your knee. My agent, Jake Endicott, just called to confirm our lunch appointment tomorrow, and I gave him an earful about the knee first. He's having a meeting with the people at Heartland this afternoon to discuss whether they're going to commission another series of *The People Next Door*. I delivered the last script of the present series only a few weeks ago, but these things have to be decided long in advance, because the actors' contracts will be coming up for renewal soon. Jake is confident that Heartland will commission at least one more series, and probably two. "With audience figures like you're getting, they'd be crazy not to." He said he would tell me the upshot of his meeting at lunch tomorrow. He's taking me to Groucho's. He always does.

It's a year since my arthroscopy, and I'm still getting pain. Should I risk another operation? I Don't Know. I can't decide. I can't make a decision about anything these days. I couldn't decide what tie to wear this morning. If I can't make a decision about a little thing like a tie, how can I make my mind up about an operation? I hesitated so long over my tie-rack that I was in danger of being late for my appointment with Alexandra. I couldn't decide between a dark, conservative tie or a bright, splashy one. Eventually I narrowed the choice down to a plain navy knitted job from Marks and Sparks and an Italian silk number hand-painted in orange, brown and red. But then neither of them seemed to go with the shirt I was wearing, so I had to change that. Time was running out: I put the silk tie round my neck and stuffed the woollen one into my jacket pocket in case I had second thoughts on my way over to Alexandra's office. I did, too - changed over to the knitted tie at a red light. Alexandra is my shrink, my current shrink. Dr Alexandra Marbles. No, her real name is Marples. I call her Marbles for a joke. If she ever moves or retires, I'll be able to say I've lost my Marbles. She doesn't know I call her that, but she wouldn't mind if she did. She *would* mind if she knew I referred to her as my shrink, though. She doesn't describe herself as a psychiatrist, you see, but as a cognitive behaviour therapist.

I have a lot of therapy. On Mondays I see Roland for Physiotherapy, on Tuesdays I see Alexandra for Cognitive Behaviour Therapy,

and on Fridays I have either aromatherapy or acupuncture. Wednesdays and Thursdays I'm usually in London, but then I see Amy, which is a sort of therapy too, I suppose.

What's the difference between a psychiatrist and a cognitive behaviour therapist? Well, as I understand it, a psychiatrist tries to uncover the hidden cause of your neurosis, whereas the cognitive behaviour therapist treats the symptoms that are making you miserable. For instance, you might suffer from claustrophobia in buses and trains, and a psychiatrist would try to discover some traumatic experience in your previous life that caused it. Say you were sexually assaulted as a child in a train when it went through a tunnel or something like that, by a man who was sitting next to you - say he interfered with you while it was dark in the compartment because of the tunnel and you were terrified and ashamed and didn't dare accuse the man when the train came out of the tunnel and never even told your parents or anyone about it afterwards but suppressed the memory completely. Then if the psychiatrist could get you to remember that experience and see that it wasn't your fault, you wouldn't suffer from the claustrophobia any more. That's the theory, anyway. The trouble is, as cognitive behaviour therapists point out, it can take for ever to discover the suppressed traumatic experience, even supposing there was one. Take Amy, for instance. She's been in analysis for three years, and she sees her shrink *every day*, Monday to Friday, nine to nine-fifty every morning on her way to work. Imagine how much it's costing her. I asked her once how she would know when she was cured. She said, "When I don't feel the need to see Karl any more." Karl is her shrink, Dr Karl Kiss. If you ask me, Karl is on to a good thing.

So a cognitive behaviour therapist would probably give you a programme for conditioning yourself to travelling by public transport, like going round the Inner Circle on the Tube, travelling for just one stop the first time, then two, then three, and so on, in the off-peak time for starters, then in the rush hour, rewarding yourself each time you increased the length of your journey with some kind of treat, a drink or a meal or a new tie, whatever turns you on - and you're so

pleased with your own achievements and these little presents to yourself that you forget to be frightened and finally wake up to the fact that there is nothing to be frightened of. That's the theory, anyway. Amy wasn't impressed when I tried to explain it to her. She said, "But supposing one day you got raped on the Inner Circle?" She's rather literal-minded, Amy.

Mind you, people do get raped on the Inner Circle, these days. Even men.

It was my GP who referred me to Alexandra. "She's very good," he assured me. "She's very practical. Doesn't waste time poking around in your unconscious, asking you about potty training, or whether you saw your parents having it off together, that sort of thing." I was relieved to hear that. And Alexandra has certainly been a help. I mean the breathing exercises are quite effective, for about five minutes after I've done them. And I always feel calmer after I've seen her, for at least a couple of hours. She specializes in something called rational-emotive therapy, RET for short. The idea is to get the patient to see that his fears or phobias are based on an incorrect or unwarranted interpretation of the facts. In a way I know that already, but it helps to have Alexandra spell it out. There are times, though, when I hanker after a bit of old-fashioned Viennese analysis, when I almost envy Amy her daily Kiss. (The guy's name is actually pronounced "Kish", he's Hungarian, but I prefer to call him "Kiss".) The thing is, I wasn't always unhappy. I can remember a time when I was happy. Reasonably content anyway. Or at least, a time when I didn't think I was *unhappy*, which is perhaps the same thing as being happy. Or reasonably content. But somewhere, sometime, I lost it, the knack of just living, without being anxious and depressed. How? I Don't Know.

"So how are you today?" Alexandra said, as she always does at the beginning of our sessions. We sit facing each other across ten feet of deep-pile pale grey carpet in two easy chairs, in her handsome, high-ceilinged office, which, apart from the antique desk by the window, and a tall functional filing cabinet in one corner, is furnished more like a drawing-room. The chairs are placed each side of a fireplace,

where a gas fire made of imitation coals burns cheerfully throughout the winter months, and a vase of freshly cut flowers stands in the summer. Alexandra is tall and slim, and wears graceful, flowing clothes: silk shirts and pleated skirts of fine wool long enough to cover her knees demurely when she sits down. She has a narrow, fine-boned face on top of a very long, slender neck, and her hair is drawn back in a tight bun, or is it chignon? Imagine a rather beautiful, long-lashed female giraffe drawn by Walt Disney.

I began by telling her of my pathological indecision over the ties. "Pathological?" she said. "What makes you use that word?" She's always picking me up on negative words I use about myself.

"Well, I mean, a *tie*, for God's sake! I wasted half an hour of my life anguishing about . . . I mean, how trivial can you get?"

Alexandra asked me why I had found it so difficult to decide between the two ties.

"I thought, if I wore the plain dark blue one you would take it as a sign that I was depressed, or rather as a sign that I was *giving in* to my depression, instead of fighting it. But when I put on the bright one, I thought you would take it as a sign that I'd got over my depression, but I haven't. It seemed to me that whichever tie I wore would be a kind of lie." Alexandra smiled, and I experienced that deceptive lift of the spirits that often comes in therapy when you give a neat answer, like a clever kid in school.

"You could have dispensed with a tie altogether."

"I considered that. But I always wear a tie to these sessions. It's an old habit. It's how I was brought up: always dress properly when you're going to the doctor's. If I suddenly stopped wearing a tie you might think it signified something - disrespect, dissatisfaction - and I'm not dissatisfied. Well, only with myself."

A few weeks ago Alexandra got me to write a short description of myself. I found it quite an interesting exercise. I suppose it was what got me going on the idea of writing this . . . whatever it is. Journal. Diary. Confession. Up till now, I've always written exclusively in dramatic form - sketches, scripts, screenplays. Of course, there's a bit of description in every TV script - stage directions, notes on

characters for the casting director (“*JUDY is a good-looking bottle-blonde in her twenties*”), but nothing detailed, nothing analytical, apart from the lines. That’s what TV is – all lines. The lines people speak and the lines of the cathode-ray tube that make up the picture. Everything’s either in the picture, which tells you where you are, or in the dialogue, which tells you what the characters are thinking and feeling, and often you don’t even need words for *that* – a shrug of the shoulders, a widening of the eyes will do it. Whereas if you’re writing a book, you’ve got nothing but words for everything: behaviour, looks, thoughts, feelings, the whole boiling. I take my hat off to book writers, I do honestly.

## \* Laurence Passmore \*

### A SELF-DESCRIPTION

I AM FIFTY-EIGHT YEARS OLD, five feet nine-and-a-half inches tall and thirteen stone eight pounds in weight – which is two stone more than it should be according to the table in our dog-eared copy of *The Family Book of Health*. I didn’t acquire the nickname “Tubby” until I was a National Serviceman in the Army, after which it stuck. But I was always a bit on the heavy side for my height, even when I played football as a youth, with a barrel-shaped torso that curved gently outwards from the chest to the point where shirt met shorts. My stomach was all muscle in those days, and useful for bustling opposing players off the ball, but as I got older, in spite of regular exercise, the muscle turned to flab and then spread to my hips and bum, so now I’m more pear-shaped than barrel-shaped. They say that inside every fat man there’s a thin man struggling to get out, and I hear his stifled groans every time I look into the bathroom mirror. It’s not just the shape of my torso that bothers me, either, and it’s not just the torso, come to that. My chest is covered with what looks like a doormat-sized Brillo pad that grows right up to my Adam’s apple: if I wear an open-necked shirt, wiry tendrils sprout from the top like some kind of fast-growing fungus from outer space in an old Nigel Kneale serial. And by a cruel twist of genetic fate I have practically no hair *above* the Adam’s apple. My pate is as bald as an electric light bulb, like my father’s, apart from a little fringe around the ears, and at the nape, which I wear very long, hanging down over my collar. It looks a bit tramp-like, but I can hardly bear to have it cut, each strand is so precious. I hate to see it falling on to the barber-shop floor – I feel they should put it in a paper bag for me to take home. I tried to grow a moustache once, but it turned out rather funny-looking, grey on one

side and a sort of gingery-brown on the other, so I shaved it off quick. I considered growing a beard, but I was afraid it would look like a continuation of my chest. So there's nothing to disguise the ordinariness of my face: a pink, puffy oval, creased and wrinkled like a slowly deflating balloon, with pouchy cheeks, a fleshy, slightly bulbous nose and two rather sad-looking watery-blue eyes. My teeth are nothing to write home about, either, but they are my own, the ones you can see anyway (I have a bridge on the lower right-hand side where a few molars are missing). My neck is as thick as a tree-trunk, but my arms are rather short, making it difficult to buy shirts that fit. For most of my life I put up with shirts with cuffs that fell down over my hands as far as the knuckle unless restrained by a long-sleeved sweater or elastic bands round the elbows. Then I went to America where they have discovered that some men have arms shorter than average (in Britain for some reason you are only allowed to have arms that are longer than average) and bought a dozen shirts at Brooks Brothers with 3/2" sleeves. I top up my wardrobe from an American mail-order firm that started trading in England a few years ago. Of course, I could afford to have my shirts made to measure nowadays, but the snobby-looking shops around Picadilly where they do it put me off and the striped poplins in the windows are too prim for my taste. In any case, I can't stand shopping. I'm an impatient bloke. At least, I am now. I used not to be. Queuing, for instance. When I was young, queuing was a way of life, I thought nothing of it. Queuing for buses, queuing for the pictures, queuing in shops. Nowadays I hardly ever ride on a bus, I watch most movies at home on video, and if I go into a shop and there are more than two people waiting to be served, more likely than not I'll turn round and walk straight out. I'd rather do without whatever I came for. I especially hate banks and post offices where they have those cordoned-off lanes like Airport Immigration where you have to shuffle slowly forward in line and when you get to the head of the queue you have to keep swivelling your head to see which counter is the first to be free, and more likely than not you don't spot it and some clever dick behind you nudges you in the kidneys and says, "Your turn, mate." I do as much of my banking as possible by a computerized phonenumber system nowadays,

and I send most of my letters by fax, or have Datapost call at the house if I have a script to mail, but occasionally I need some stamps and have to go and stand in one of those long Post Office queues with a lot of old biddies and single parents with snuffling infants in pushchairs waiting to collect their pensions and income support, and I can hardly restrain myself from shouting, "Isn't it about time we had a counter for people who just want to buy stamps? Who want to *post* things? After all, this *is* a Post Office, isn't it?" That's just a figure of speech, of course, I can restrain myself very easily, I wouldn't dream of shouting anything at all in a public place, but that's the way I feel. I never show my feelings much. Most people who know me would be surprised if I told them I was impatient. I have a reputation in the TV world for being rather placid, unflappable, for keeping my cool when all around are losing theirs. They'd be surprised to learn that I was unhappy with my physique, too. They think I like being called Tubby. I tried dropping a hint once or twice that I wouldn't mind being called Laz instead, but it didn't catch on. The only parts of my body that I'm reasonably pleased with are the extremities, the hands and feet. My feet are quite small, size seven, and narrow, with a high instep. They look good in the Italian shoes I buy more frequently than is strictly necessary. I was always light on my feet, considering the bulk they have to support, a nifty dribbler of a football and not a bad ballroom dancer. I move about the house very quietly, sometimes making my wife jump when she turns round and finds me right behind her. My hands are quite small too, but with long, shapely fingers like a pianist's, not that I can play any keyboard except an IBM one.

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I gave this self-description to Alexandra and she glanced at it and said, "Is this all?" I said it was the longest piece of continuous prose I'd written in years. She said, "It hasn't any paragraphs, why is that?" and I explained that I was out of practice in writing paragraphs, I was used to writing lines, speeches, so my self-description had come out as a kind of monologue. I said: "I can only write as if I'm speaking to someone." (It's true. Take this journal for example - I've no

intention of letting anybody else read it, but I can only write it as if it's addressed to a "you". I've no idea who "you" is. Just an imaginary, sympathetic ear.) Alexandra put my self-description away in a drawer to read later. At our next meeting she said it was interesting but very negative. "It's mostly about what's wrong with your body, or what you think is wrong with it, and even the two good points you mention, your hands and your feet, are undercut by the references to buying too many shoes and not being able to play the piano." Alexandra thinks I'm suffering from lack of self-esteem. She's probably right, though I read in the paper that there's a lot of it about. There's something like an epidemic of lack of self-esteem in Britain at the moment. Maybe it has something to do with the recession. Not in my case, though. I'm not in recession. I'm doing fine. I'm well-off. I'm almost rich. *The People Next Door*, which has been running for five years, is watched by thirteen million people every week, and there's an American adaptation which is just as successful, and other foreign-language versions all round the globe. Money from these sub-licences pours into my bank account like water from a running tap. So what's the matter with me? Why aren't I satisfied? I don't know.

Alexandra says it's because I'm a perfectionist. I demand impossibly high standards from myself, so I'm bound to be disappointed. There may be some truth in that. Most people in show business are perfectionists. They may be producing crap, acting in crap, writing crap, but they try and make it *perfect* crap. That's the essential difference between us and other people. If you go into the Post Office to buy stamps, the clerk doesn't aim to give you perfect service. Efficient, maybe, if you're lucky, but perfect - no. Why should he try? What's the point? There's no difference between one first-class stamp and another, and there's a very limited number of ways in which you can tear them off the sheets and shove them across the counter. He does the same transactions, day in, day out, year in, year out, he's trapped on a treadmill of repetition. But there's something special about every single episode of a sitcom, however trite and formulaic it may be, and that's for two reasons. The first is that nobody *needs* a sitcom, like they sooner or later need postage stamps, so its only

justification for existing is that it gives pleasure, and it won't do that if it's exactly the same as last week's. The second reason is that everyone involved is aware of the first reason, and knows that they'd better make it as good as it possibly can be, or they'll be out of a job. You'd be surprised how much collective effort and thought goes into every line, every gesture, every reaction shot. In rehearsals, right up to recording, everybody's thinking: how can we sharpen this, improve that, get an extra laugh there . . . Then the critics slag you off with a couple of snide sentences. That's the one drawback of television as a medium: television critics. You see, although I'm lacking in self-esteem, that doesn't mean to say that I don't want to be esteemed by others. In fact I get pretty depressed if they don't esteem me. But I get depressed anyway, because I don't esteem myself. I want everybody to think I'm perfect, while not believing it myself. Why? I don't know. I.D.K.

Early on in my treatment, Alexandra told me to take a sheet of paper and write down a list of all the good things about my life in one column and all the bad things in another. Under the "Good" column I wrote:

1. Professionally successful
2. Well-off
3. Good health
4. Stable marriage
5. Kids successfully launched in adult life
6. Nice house
7. Great car
8. As many holidays as I want.

Under the "Bad" column I wrote just one thing:

1. Feel unhappy most of the time.

A few weeks later I added another item:

2. Pain in knee.

It's not so much the pain itself that gets me down as the way it limits my scope for physical exercise. Sport used to be my chief form of therapy, though I didn't call it that. I just enjoyed hitting and kicking and chasing balls about – always did, ever since I was a kid playing in a London backstreet. I suppose I got a charge from showing that I was better at it than people expected me to be – that my thick, ungainly body was capable of a surprising agility, and even grace, when it had a ball to play with. (There has to be a ball: without one I'm about as graceful as a hippopotamus.) Of course it's common knowledge that sport is a harmless way of discharging tension, sluicing adrenalin through the system. But best of all, it helps you sleep. I don't know anything like that glowing, aching tiredness you feel after a keen game of squash or eighteen holes of golf or five sets of tennis, the luxury of stretching out your limbs between the sheets when you go to bed, knowing you're just about to slide effortlessly into a long, deep sleep. Sex is nowhere near as effective. It will send you off for a couple of hours, but that's about all. Sally and I made love last night (at her suggestion, it usually is these days) and I fell asleep immediately afterwards, as if I'd been sandbagged, with her naked in my arms. But I woke at 2.30 feeling chilly and wide awake, with Sally breathing quietly beside me in one of the oversized T-shirts she uses for nighties, and although I went for a pee and put on my pyjamas, I couldn't get back to sleep. I just lay there with my mind spinning – spiralling, I should say, down and down into the dark. Bad thoughts. Gloomy thoughts. My knee was throbbing – I suppose the sex had set it off – and I began to wonder whether it wasn't the first sign of bone cancer and how I'd cope with having my leg amputated if this was how I coped with a mere Internal Derangement of the Knee.

That's the sort of thought that comes to you in the middle of the night. I hate these involuntary vigils, lying awake in the dark with Sally calmly asleep beside me, wondering whether I should turn on the bedside lamp and read for a while, or go downstairs and make a hot drink, or take a sleeping pill, buying a few hours' oblivion at the cost of feeling next day as if my bone marrow has been siphoned off in the night and replaced with lead. Alexandra says I should read till I'm sleepy again, but I don't like to turn on my bedside lamp in case it

disturbs Sally and in any case Alexandra says you should get up and read in another room, but I can't face going downstairs into the silent, empty living space of the house, like an intruder in my own home. So usually I just lie there, as I did last night, hoping to drop off, twisting and turning in the effort to find a comfortable position. I snuggled up to Sally for a while, but she got too hot and pushed me away in her sleep. So then I tried hugging myself, with my arms crossed tightly over my chest, each hand grasping the opposite shoulder, like a man in a strait-jacket. That's what I ought to wear instead of pyjamas, if you ask me.

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*Wednesday 17th Feb. 2.05 a.m.* Tonight we didn't have sex and I woke even earlier: 1.40. I stared appalled at the red figures on the LCD of my alarm clock, which cast a hellish glow on the polished surface of the bedside cabinet. I decided to try getting up this time, and swung my feet to the floor and felt for my slippers before I had a chance to change my mind. Downstairs I pulled a jogging-suit over my pyjamas and made a pot of tea which I carried into my study. And here I am, sitting in front of the computer, tapping out this. Where was I yesterday? Oh, yes. Sport.

Roland says I shouldn't do any sport until the symptoms have disappeared, with or without another operation. I'm allowed to work out on some of the machines in the Club's multi-gym, the ones that don't involve the knee, and I can swim as long as I don't do the breast-stroke – the frog kick is bad for the knee-joint, apparently. But I never did like working out – it bears the same relation to real sport as masturbation does to real sex, if you ask me; and as for swimming, the breast-stroke happens to be the only one I can do properly. Squash is right out, for obvious reasons. Golf too, unfortunately: the lateral twist on the right knee at the follow-through of the swing is lethal. But I do play a bit of tennis still, wearing a kind of brace on the knee which keeps it more or less rigid. I have to sort of drag the right leg like Long John Silver when I hop around the court, but it's better than nothing.



They have indoor courts at the Club, and anyway you can play outdoors nearly all the year round with these mild winters we've been having – it seems to be one of the few beneficial effects of global warming.

I play with three other middle-aged cripples at the Club. There's Joe, he's got serious back trouble, wears a corset all the time and can barely manage to serve overarm; Rupert, who was in a bad car crash a few years ago and limps with both legs, if that's possible; and Humphrey, who has arthritis in his feet and a plastic hip-joint. We exploit each other's handicaps mercilessly. For instance, if Joe is playing against me up at the net I'll return high because I know he can't lift his racket above his head, and if I'm defending the baseline he'll keep switching the direction of his returns from one side of the court to the other because he knows I can't move very fast with my brace. It would bring tears to your eyes to watch us, of either laughter or pity.

Naturally I can't partner Sally in mixed doubles any more, which is a great shame because we used to do rather well in the Club veterans' tournaments. Sometimes she'll knock up with me, but she won't play a singles game because she says I'd do my knee in trying to win, and she's probably right. I usually beat her when I was fit, but now she's improving her game while I languish. I was down at the Club the other day with my physically-challenged peer group when she turned up, having come straight from work for a spot of coaching. It gave me quite a surprise, actually, when she walked along the back of the indoor court with Brett Sutton, the Club coach, because I wasn't expecting to see her there. I didn't know that she'd arranged the lesson, or more likely she'd told me and I hadn't taken it in. That's become a worrying habit of mine lately: people talk to me and I go through the motions of listening and responding, but when they finish I realize I haven't taken in a single word, because I've been following some train of thought of my own. It's another type of Internal Derangement. Sally gets pissed off when she twigs it – understandably – so when she waved casually to me through the netting, I waved back casually in case I was supposed to know that she had arranged to have coaching that afternoon. In fact there was a

second or two when I didn't recognize her – just registered her as a tall, attractive-looking blonde. She was wearing a shocking-pink and white shell suit I hadn't seen before, and I'm still not used to her new hair. One day just before Christmas she went out in the morning grey and came back in the afternoon gold. When I asked her why she hadn't warned me, she said she wanted to see my unrehearsed reaction. I said it looked terrific. If I didn't sound over the moon, it was sheer envy. (I've tried several treatments for baldness without success. The last one consisted of hanging upside down for minutes on end to make the blood rush to your head. It was called Inversion Therapy.) When I sussed it was her down at the tennis club, I felt a little glow of proprietorial pride in her lissome figure and bouncing golden locks. The other guys noticed her too.

"You want to watch your missus, Tubby," said Joe, as we changed ends between games. "By the time you're fit again, she'll be running rings round you."

"You reckon?" I said.

"Yeah, he's a good coach. Good at other things too, I've heard." Joe winked at the other two, and of course Humphrey backed him up.

"He's certainly got the tackle. I saw him in the showers the other day. It must be a ten-incher."

"How d'you measure up to that, Tubby?"

"You'll have to raise your game."

"You'll get yourself arrested one day, Humphrey," I said. "Ogling blokes in the showers." The others hooted with laughter.

This kind of joshing is standard between us four. No harm in it. Humphrey's a bachelor, lives with his mother and doesn't have a girlfriend, but nobody supposes for a moment that he's gay. If we did, we wouldn't wind him up about it. Likewise with the innuendo about Brett Sutton and Sally. It's a stock joke that all the women in the club wet their knickers at the sight of him – he's tall, dark, and handsome enough to wear his hair in a ponytail without looking like a ponce – but nobody believes any real hanky-panky goes on.

For some reason I remembered this conversation as we were going to bed tonight, and relayed it to Sally. She sniffed and said, "Isn't it a

bit late in the day for you lot to be worrying about the size of your willies?"

I said that for a really dedicated worrier it was never too late.

One thing I've never worried about, though, is Sally's fidelity. We've had our ups and downs, of course, in nearly thirty years of marriage, but we've always been faithful to each other. Not for lack of opportunity, I may say, at least on my side, the entertainment world being what it is, and I daresay on hers too, though I can't believe that she's exposed to the same occupational temptations. Her colleagues at the Poly, or rather University as I must learn to call it now, don't look much of an erotic turn-on to me. But that's not the point. We've always been faithful to each other. How can I be sure? I just am. Sally was a virgin when I met her, nice girls usually were in those days, and I wasn't all that experienced myself. My sexual history was a very slim volume, consisting of isolated, opportunistic couplings with garrison slags in the Army, with drunken girls at drama-school parties, and with lonely landladies in seedy theatrical digs. I don't think I had sex with any of them more than twice, and it was always fairly quick and in the missionary position. To enjoy sex you need comfort – clean sheets, firm mattresses, warm bedrooms – and continuity. Sally and I learned about making love together, more or less from scratch. If she were to go with anyone else, something new in her behaviour, some unfamiliar adjustment of her limbs, some variation in her caresses, would tell me, I'm certain. I always have trouble with adultery stories, especially those where one partner has been betraying the other for years. How could you not know? Of course, Sally doesn't know about Amy. But then I'm not having an affair with Amy. What am I having with her? I don't know.

I met Amy six years ago when she was hired to help cast the first series of *The People Next Door*. Needless to say, she did a brilliant job. Some people in the business reckon that ninety per cent of the success of a sitcom is in the casting. As a writer I would question that, naturally, but it's true that the best script in the world won't work if the actors are all wrong. And the right ones are not always everybody's obvious

first choice. It was Amy's idea, for instance, to cast Deborah Radcliffe as Priscilla, the middle-class mother – a classical actress who'd just been let go by the Royal Shakespeare, and had never done sitcom before in her life. Nobody except Amy would have thought of her for Priscilla, but she took to the part like a duck to water. Now she's a household name and can earn five grand for a thirty-second commercial.

It's a funny business, casting. It's a gift, like fortune-telling or water-divining, but you also need a trained memory. Amy has a mind like a Rolodex: when you ask her advice about casting a part she goes into a kind of trance, her eyes turn up to the ceiling, and you can almost hear the *flick-flick-flick* inside her head as she spools through that mental card-index where the essence of every actor and actress she has ever seen is inscribed. When Amy goes to see a show, she's not just watching the actors perform their given roles, she's imagining them all the time in other roles, so that by the end of the evening she's assimilated not only their performance on the night, but also their potential for quite other performances. You might go with Amy to see *Macbeth* at the RSC and say to her on the way home, "Wasn't Deborah Radcliffe a great Lady Macbeth?" and she'd say, "Mmm, I'd love to see her do Judith Bliss in *Hay Fever*." I wonder sometimes whether this habit of mind doesn't prevent her from enjoying what's going on in front of her. Perhaps that's what we have in common – neither of us being able to live in the present, always hankering after some phantom of perfection elsewhere.

I put this to her once. "Balls, darling," she said. "With the greatest respect, complete *cojones*. You forget that every now and again I pull it off. I achieve the perfect fit between actor and role. *Then* I enjoy the show and nothing but the show. I live for those moments. So do you, for that matter. I mean when everything in an episode goes exactly right. You sit in front of the telly holding your breath thinking, they can't possibly keep this up, it's going to dip in a moment, but they do, and it doesn't – that's what it's all about, *n'est ce pas?*"

"I can't remember when I thought an episode was that good," I said.

"What about the fumigation one?"

"Yes, the fumigation one was good."

"It was bloody brilliant."

That's what I like about Amy -- she's always pumping up my self-esteem. Sally's style is more bracing: stop moping and get on with your life. In fact in every way they're antithetical. Sally is a blonde, blue-eyed English rose, tall, supple, athletic. Amy is the Mediterranean type (her father was a Greek Cypriot): dark, short and buxom, with a head of frizzy black curls and eyes like raisins. She smokes, wears a lot of make-up, and never walks anywhere, let alone runs, if she can possibly avoid it. We had to run for a train once at Euston: I shot ahead and held the door open for her as she came waddling down the ramp on her high heels like a panicked duck, all her necklaces and earrings and scarves and bags and other female paraphernalia atremble, and I burst out laughing. I just couldn't help myself. Amy asked me what was so funny as she scrambled breathlessly aboard, and when I told her she refused to speak to me for the rest of the journey. (Incidentally, I just looked up "paraphernalia" in the dictionary because I wasn't sure I'd spelled it right, and discovered it comes from the Latin *parapherna*, meaning "a woman's personal property apart from her dowry." Interesting.)

It was one of our very few tiffs. We get on very well together as a rule, exchanging industry gossip, trading personal moans and reassurances, comparing therapies. Amy is divorced, with custody of her fourteen-year-old daughter, Zelda, who is just discovering boys and giving Amy a hard time about clothes, staying out late, going to dubious discos, etc. etc. Amy is terrified that Zelda's going to get into sex and drugs any minute now, and distrusts her ex-husband, Saul, a theatre manager who has the kid to stay one weekend every month and who, Amy says, has no morals, or, to quote her exactly, "wouldn't recognize a moral if it bit him on the nose." Nevertheless she feels riven with guilt about the break-up of the marriage, fearing that Zelda will go off the rails for lack of a father-figure in the home. Amy started analysis primarily to discover what went wrong between herself and Saul. In a sense she knew that already: it was sex. Saul wanted to do things that she didn't want to do, so eventually he found someone else to do them with. But she's still trying to work out

whether this was his fault or hers, and doesn't seem to be any nearer a conclusion. Analysis has a way of unravelling the self: the longer you pull on the thread, the more flaws you find.

I see Amy nearly every week, when I go to London. Sometimes we go to a show, but more often than not we just spend a quiet evening together, at the flat, and/or have a bite to eat at one of the local restaurants. There's never been any question of sex in our relationship, because Amy doesn't really want it and I don't really need it. I get plenty of sex at home. Sally seems full of erotic appetite these days -- I think it must be the hormone replacement therapy she's having for the menopause. Sometimes, to stimulate my own sluggish libido, I suggest something Saul wanted to do with Amy, and Sally hasn't turned me down yet. When she asks me where I get these ideas from, I tell her magazines and books, and she's quite satisfied. If it ever got back to Sally that I was seen out in London with Amy, it wouldn't bother her because I don't conceal the fact that we meet occasionally. Sally thinks it's for professional reasons, which in part it is.

So really you would say that I've got it made, wouldn't you? I've solved the monogamy problem, which is to say the monotony problem, without the guilt of infidelity. I have a sexy wife at home and a platonic mistress in London. What have I got to complain about? I don't know.

It's three-thirty. I think I'll go back to bed and see if I can get a few hours' kip before sparrowfart.

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*Wednesday 11 a.m.* I did sleep for a few hours, but it wasn't a refreshing sleep. I woke feeling knackered, like I used to be after guard duty in National Service: two hours on, four hours off, all through the night, and all through the day too, if it was a weekend. Christ, just writing that down brings it all back: snatching sleep lying on a bunk fully dressed in ankle-bruising boots and neck-chafing battledress under the glare of a naked electric light bulb, and then being roughly woken to gulp down sweetened lukewarm tea, and maybe some cold congealed eggs and baked beans, before stumbling

out yawning and shivering into the night, to loiter for two hours by the barrack gates, or circle the silent shuttered huts and stores, listening to your own footsteps, watching your own shadow lengthen and shorten under the arc-lamps. Let me just concentrate for a moment on that memory, close my eyes and try and squeeze the misery out of it, so that I will appreciate my present comforts.

Tried it. No good. Doesn't work.

I'm writing this on my laptop on the train to London. First class, naturally. Definition of a well-off man: somebody who pays for a first-class ticket out of his own pocket. It's tax-deductible of course, but still . . . Most of my fellow passengers in this carriage are on expenses. Businessmen with digital-lock briefcases and mobile phones, and businesswomen with wide-shouldered jackets and bulging filofaxes. The odd retired county type in tweeds. I'm wearing a suit myself today in honour of the Groucho, but sometimes, when I'm in jeans and leather jacket, with my tramp's haircut falling over the back of the collar, people glance suspiciously at me as if they think I'm in the wrong part of the train. Not the conductors, though – they know me. I travel up and down a lot on this line.

Don't get the idea that I'm an enthusiast for British Rail's Inter-City service to London. *Au contraire*, as Amy would say (she likes to pepper her conversation with foreign phrases). There are a lot of things I don't like about it. For instance: I don't like the smell of the bacon and tomato rolls that pollute the air of the carriage every time somebody brings one back from the buffet car and opens the little polystyrene box they micro-wave them in. I don't like the brake linings on the wheels of the Pullman rolling stock which when warm emit sulphurous-smelling fumes, allegedly harmless to health, that creep into the carriages and mingle with the smell of bacon and tomato rolls. I don't like the taste of the bacon and tomato rolls when I am foolish enough to buy one for myself, somehow suppressing the memory of how naff it was last time. I don't like the fact that if you ask at the buffet for a cup of coffee you will be given a giant-sized plastic beaker of the stuff unless you ask for a small (i.e., normal) size. I don't like the way the train rocks from side to side when it picks up any kind

of speed, causing the coffee to slop over the sides of the plastic beaker as you raise it to your lips, scalding your fingers and dripping onto your lap. I don't like the fact that if the air-conditioning fails, as it not infrequently does, you can't ventilate the carriage because the windows are sealed. I don't like the way that, not infrequently, but never when the air-conditioning has failed, the automatic sliding doors at each end of the coach jam in the open position, and cannot be closed manually, or if they can be closed, slowly open again of their own accord, or are opened by passing passengers who leave them open assuming that they will close automatically, obliging you either to leap up every few minutes to close the doors or sit in a permanent draught. I don't like the catches in the WC compartments designed to hold the toilet seats in an upright position, which are spring-loaded, but often loose or broken, so that when you are in mid-pee, holding on to a grab handle with one hand and aiming your todger with the other, the seat, dislodged from the upright position by the violent motion of the train, will suddenly fall forwards, breaking the stream of urine and causing it to spatter your trousers. I don't like the way the train always races at top speed along the section of the track that runs beside the M1, overtaking all the cars and lorries in order to advertise the superiority of rail travel, and then a few minutes later comes to a halt in a field near Rugby because of a signalling failure.

Ow! Ouch! Yaroo! Sudden stab of pain in the knee, for no discernible reason.

Sally said the other day that it was my thorn in the flesh. I wondered where the phrase came from and went to look it up. (I do a lot of looking up – it's how I compensate for my lousy education. My study is full of reference books, I buy them compulsively.) I discovered that it was from Saint Paul's Second Epistle to the Corinthians: "*And lest I should be exalted above measure through the abundance of revelations, there was given to me a thorn in the flesh, the messenger of Satan to buffet me . . .*" I came back into the kitchen with the Bible, rather pleased with myself, and read the verse out to Sally. She stared at me and said, "But that's what I just told you," and I realized I'd had one of my absent-minded spells, and while I was wondering where the phrase

came from she had been telling me. "Oh, yes, I know you said it was St Paul," I lied. "But what's the application to my knee? The text seems a bit obscure." "That's the point," she said. "Nobody knows what Paul's thorn in the flesh was. It's a mystery. Like your knee." She knows a lot about religion, does Sally, much more than I do. Her father was a vicar.

True to form, the train has stopped, for no apparent reason, amid empty fields. In the sudden hush the remarks of a man in shirtsleeves across the aisle speaking into his cellphone about a contract for warehouse shelving are annoyingly intrusive. I would really prefer to drive to London, but the traffic is impossible once you get off the M1, not to mention *on* the M1, and parking in the West End is such a hassle that it's really not worth the effort. So I drive the car to Rumridge Expo station, which is only fifteen minutes from home, and leave it in the car park there. I'm always a little bit apprehensive on the return journey in case I find somebody has scratched it, or even nicked it, though it has all the latest alarms and security systems. It's a wonderful vehicle, with a 24-valve three-litre V6 engine, automatic transmission, power steering, cruise control, air-conditioning, ABS brakes, six-speaker audio system, electric tilt-and-slide sunroof and every other gadget you can imagine. It goes like the wind, smooth and incredibly quiet. It's the silent effortless power that intoxicates me. I never was one for noisy *brmm brmm* sports cars, and I never did understand the British obsession with manual gear-changing. Is it a substitute for sex, I wonder, that endless fondling of the knob on the end of the gear lever, that perpetual pumping of the clutch pedal? They say that you don't get the same acceleration in the middle range with an automatic, but there's quite enough if your engine is as powerful as the one in my car. It's also incredibly, heartstoppingly beautiful.

I fell in love with it at first sight, parked outside the showroom, low and streamlined, sculpted out of what looked like mist with the sun shining through it, a very very pale silvery grey, with a pearly lustre. I kept finding reasons to drive past the showroom so that I could look at it again, and each time I felt a pang of desire. I daresay a lot of other

people driving past felt the same way, but unlike them I knew I could walk into the showroom and buy the car without even having to think if I could afford it. But I hesitated and hung back. Why? Because, when I couldn't afford a car like that, I disapproved of cars like that: fast, flash, energy-wasteful – and Japanese. I always said I'd never buy a Japanese car, not so much out of economic patriotism (I used to drive Fords which usually turned out to have been made in Belgium or Germany) as for emotional reasons. I'm old enough to remember World War Two, and I had an uncle who died as a POW working on the Siamese railway. I thought something bad would happen to me if I bought this car, or that at the very least I would feel guilty and miserable driving it. And yet I coveted it. It became one of my "things" – things I can't decide, can't forget, can't leave alone. Things I wake up in the middle of the night worrying about.

I bought all the motoring magazines hoping that I would find some damning criticism of the car that would enable me to decide against it. No go. Some of the road-test reports were a bit condescending – "bland", "docile", even "inscrutable", were some of the epithets they used – but you could tell that nobody could find anything wrong with it. I hardly slept at all for a week, stewing it over. Can you believe it? While war raged in Yugoslavia, thousands died daily of AIDS in Africa, bombs exploded in Northern Ireland and the unemployment figures rose inexorably in Britain, I could think of nothing except whether or not to buy this car.

I began to get on Sally's nerves. "For God's sake, go and have a test drive, and if you like the car, buy it," she said. (She drives an Escort herself, changes it every three years after a two-minute telephone conversation with her dealer, and never gives another thought to the matter.) So I had a test-drive. And of course I liked the car. I loved the car. I was utterly seduced and enraptured by the car. But I told the salesman I would think about it. "What is there to think about?" Sally demanded, when I came home. "You like the car, you can afford the car, why not buy the car?" I said I would sleep on it. Which meant, of course, that I lay awake all night worrying about it. In the morning at breakfast I announced that I had reached a decision. "Oh yes?" said Sally, without raising her eyes from the newspaper. "What is it?"

"I've decided against," I said. "However irrational my scruples may be, I'll never be free from them, so I'd better not buy it." "OK," said Sally. "What will you buy instead?" "I don't really need to buy anything," I said. "My present car is good for another year or two." "Fine," said Sally. But she sounded disappointed. I began to worry again whether I'd made the right decision.

A couple of days later, I drove past the showroom and the car was missing. I went in and buttonholed the salesman. I practically dragged him from his seat by the lapels, like people do in movies. Someone else had bought my car! I couldn't believe it. I felt as if my bride had been abducted on our wedding eve. I said I wanted the car. *I had to have the car.* The salesman said he could get me another one in two or three weeks, but when he checked on his computer there wasn't an exactly similar model in the same colour in the country. It's not one of those Japanese manufacturers that have set up factories in Britain – they import from Japan under the quota system. He said there was one in a container ship somewhere on the high seas, but delivery would take a couple of months. To cut a long story short, I ended up paying £1000 over the list price to gazump the chap who had just bought my car.

I've never regretted it. The car is a joy to drive. I'm only sorry that Mum and Dad aren't around any more, so I can't give them a spin in it. I feel the need for someone to reflect back to me my pride of ownership. Sally's no use for that – to her a car is just a functional machine. Amy has never even seen the vehicle, because I don't drive to London. My children, on their occasional visits, regard it with a mixture of mockery and disapproval – Jane refers to it as the "Richmobile" and Adam says it's a compensation for hair-loss. What I need is an appreciative passenger. Like Maureen Kavanagh, for instance, my first girlfriend. Neither of our families could afford to run a car in those far-off days. A ride in any kind of car was a rare treat, intensely packed with novel sensations. I remember Maureen going into kinks when my Uncle Bert took us to Brighton one bank holiday in his old pre-war Singer that smelled of petrol and leather and swayed on its springs like a pram. I imagine driving up to her house in my present streamlined supercar and glimpsing her face at the

window all wonder; and then she bursts out of the front door and bounds down the steps and jumps in and wriggles about in her seat with excitement, trying all the gadgets, laughing and wrinkling up her nose in that way she had, and looking adoringly at me as I drive off. That's what Maureen used to do: look adoringly at me. Nobody ever did it since, not Sally, not Amy, not Louise or any of the other women who've occasionally made a pass at me. I haven't seen Maureen for nearly forty years – God knows where she is, or what she's doing, or what she looks like now. Sitting beside me in the car she's still sweet sixteen, dressed in her best summer frock, white with pink roses on it, though I'm as I am now, fat and bald and fifty-eight. It makes no kind of sense, but that's what fantasies are for, I suppose.

The train is approaching Euston. The conductor has apologized over the PA system for its late arrival, "which was due to a signalling failure near Tring". I used to be a closet supporter of privatizing British Rail, before the Transport Minister announced his plans to separate the company that maintains the track from the companies that run the trains. You can imagine how well that will work, and what wonderful alibis it will provide for late-running trains. Are they mad? Is this Internal Derangement of the Government?

Actually, I read somewhere that John Major has a dodgy knee. Had to give up cricket, apparently. Explains a lot, that.

\* \* \* \* \*

*Wednesday 10.15 p.m.* Amy has just left. We came back to the flat from Gabrielli's to watch "News at Ten" on my little Sony, to keep abreast of the global gloom (atrocities in Bosnia, floods in Bangladesh, drought in Zimbabwe, imminent collapse of Russian economy, British trade deficit worst ever recorded), and then I put her in a cab back to St John's Wood. She doesn't like to be out late if she can help it, on account of Zekda, though her lodger, Miriam, a speech therapist with a conveniently quiet social life, keeps an eye on the girl when Amy is out in the evenings.

Now I'm alone in the flat, and possibly in the whole building. The other owners, like me, are only occasionally in residence – there's a long-haul air hostess, a Swiss businessman whose job requires him to shuttle between London and Zürich, accompanied by his secretary and/or mistress, and a gay American couple, academics of some kind, who only come here in university vacations. Two flats are still unsold, because of the recession. I haven't seen anybody in the lift or hall today, but I never feel lonely here, as I sometimes do at home during the day, when Sally is at work. It's so quiet in those suburban streets. Whereas here it is never quiet, even at night. The growl and throb of buses and taxis inching up the Charing Cross Road in low gear carry faintly through the double glazing, punctuated occasionally by the shrill ululation of a police car or ambulance. If I go to the window, I look down on pavements still thronged with people coming out of theatres, cinemas, restaurants and pubs, or standing about munching takeaway junk food or swigging beer and coke from the can, their breath condensing in the cold night air. Very rarely does anyone raise their eyes from the ground level of the building, which is occupied by a pizza & pasta restaurant, and notice that there are six luxury flats above it, with a man standing at one of the windows, pulling the curtain aside, looking down at them. It isn't a place where you would expect anybody to *live*, and indeed it wouldn't be much fun to do so three hundred and sixty-five days a year. It's too noisy and dirty. Noise not just from the traffic, but also from the high-pitched whine of restaurant ventilator fans at the back of the building that never seem to be turned off, and dirt not just in the air, which leaves a fine sediment of black dust on every surface though I keep the windows shut most of the time, but also on the ground, the pavement permanently covered with a slimy patina of mud and spittle and spilt milk and beer dregs and vomit, and scattered over with crushed burger boxes, crumpled drinks cans, discarded plastic wrappers and paper bags, soiled tissues and used bus tickets. The efforts of the Westminster Borough street-cleaners are simply swamped by the sheer numbers of litter-producing pedestrians in this bit of London. And the human detritus is just as visible: drunks, burns, loonies and criminal-looking types abound. Beggars accost you all the time, and

by 10 p.m. every shop doorway has its sleeping occupant. "*Louche*" was Amy's verdict on the ambience (or, as she would say, *ambiance*) when I first brought her here, but I'm not sure that's the right word. (I looked it up, it means shifty and disreputable, from the French word for squint.) The porn and peepshow district is half a mile away. Here second-hand bookshops and famous theatres jostle with fastfood outlets and multicinemas. It's certainly not your conventional des. res. area, but as a metropolitan base for an out-of-towner like me, the situation is hard to beat. London is a midden anyway. If you have to live here you're better off perched on the steaming, gleaming pinnacle of the dunghill, instead of burrowing your way up and down through all the strata of compacted old shit every morning and evening. I know: I've been a London commuter in my time.

When we moved to Rummidge from London twelve years ago, because of Sally's job, all my friends regarded me with ill-concealed pity, as if I was being exiled to Siberia. I was a bit apprehensive myself, to be honest, never having lived north of Palmer's Green in my life (apart from Army Basic Training in Yorkshire, and touring when I was a young actor, neither of which really counts as "living") but I reckoned that it was only fair to let Sally take the chance of a career move from schoolteaching to higher education. She'd worked bloody hard, doing an M.Ed. part-time while being Deputy Head of a Junior School in Stoke Newington, and the advertisement for the lectureship in the Education Department at Rummidge Poly was bang on the nose of her research field, psycholinguistics and language acquisition (don't ask me to explain it). So she applied and got the job. Now she's Principal Lecturer. Maybe she'll be a Professor one day, now that the Poly has become a University. Professor Sally Passmore: it has a ring to it. Pity about the name of the University. They couldn't call it the University of Rummidge because there was one already, so they called it James Watt University, after the great local inventor. You can bet your life that this rather cumbersome title will soon be shortened to "Watt University", and imagine the conversational confusion *that* will cause. "What university did you go

to?" "Watt University." "Yes, what university?" "Watt University."  
And so on.

Anyway, I was a bit apprehensive about the move at the time, we all were, the kids too, having always lived in the South-East. But the first thing we discovered was that the price we got for our scruffy inter-war semi in Palmer's Green would buy us a spacious five-bedroomed detached Edwardian villa in a pleasant part of Rummidge, so that I could have a study of my own for the first time in our married life, looking out on to a lawn screened by mature trees, instead of the bay window of our lounge with a view of an identical scruffy semi across the street; and the second thing we discovered was that Sally and the kids could get to their college and schools with half the hassle and in half the time they were used to in London; and the third thing we discovered was that people were still civil to each other outside London, that shop assistants said "lovely" when you gave them the right change, and that taxi-drivers looked pleasantly surprised when you tipped them, and that the workmen who came to repair your washing-machine or decorate your house or repair your roof were courteous and efficient and reliable. The superior quality of life in Britain outside London was still a well-kept secret in those days, and Sally and I could hardly contain our mirth at the thought of all our friends back in the capital pitying us as they sat in their traffic jams or hung from straps in crowded commuter trains or tried in vain to get a plumber to answer the phone at the weekend. Our luck changed in more ways than one with the move to Rummidge. Who knows whether *The People Next Door* would have ever seen the light of studio if I hadn't met Ollie Silver at a civic reception Sally had been invited to, just when Heartland were looking for a new idea for a sitcom . . .

When Jane and Adam left home to go to University we moved out to Hollywell, a semi-rural suburb on the southern outskirts of the city – the stockbroker belt I suppose it would be called in the South-East, only stockbrokers are rather thin on the ground in the Midlands. Our neighbours are mostly senior managers in industry, or accountants, doctors and lawyers. The houses are all modern detached, in different styles, set well back from the road and bristling with burglar alarms. It's green and leafy and quiet. On a weekday the loudest noise

is the whine of the milk float delivering semi-skimmed milk and organic yoghurt and free-range eggs door-to-door. At the weekend you sometimes hear the hollow clop of ponies' hoofs or the rasp of Range-Rover tyres on the tarmac. The Country Club, with its eighteen-hole golf course, tennis courts, indoor and outdoor pools and spa, is just ten minutes away. That's the main reason we moved to Hollywell – that and the fact that it's conveniently close to Rummidge Expo station.

The station was built fairly recently to serve the International Exhibition Centre and the Airport. It's all very modern and hi-tech, apart from the main Gents. For some reason they seem to have lovingly reconstructed a vintage British Rail loo in the heart of all the marble and glass and chromium plate, complete with pee-up-against-the-wall zinc urinals, chipped white tiles, and even a rich pong of blocked drains. Apart from that, it's a great improvement on the City Centre station, and is twelve minutes nearer London for me. Because, of course, if you're in any branch of show business, you can't keep away from London entirely. Heartland record in their Rummidge studios as a condition of their franchise – bringing employment to the region and all that – but they have offices in London and rehearse most of their shows there because that's where most actors and directors live. So I'm always up and down to Euston on good old BR. I bought the flat three years ago, partly as an investment (though property prices have fallen since) but mainly to save myself the fatigue of a return journey in one day, or the alternative hassle of checking in and out of hotels. I suppose at the back of my mind also was the thought that it would be a private place to meet Amy.

Lately I've come to value the privacy, the anonymity of the place even more. Nobody on the pavement knows I'm up here in my cosy, centrally-heated, double-glazed eyrie. And if I go down into the street to get a newspaper or pick up a pint of milk from the 24-hour Asian grocery store on the corner, and mingle with the tourists and the bums and the young runaways and the kids up from the suburbs for an evening out and the office workers who stopped for a drink on the way home and decided to make a night of it, and the actors and



catering workers and buskers and policemen and beggars and newspaper vendors – their gaze will slide over me without clicking into focus, nobody will recognize me, nobody will greet me or ask how I am, and I don't have to pretend to anyone that I'm happy.

Amy came to the flat straight from work and we had a couple of g & t's before going round the corner to Gabrielli's for a bite to eat. Sometimes, if she comes here from home, she brings one of her own dishes from her deep-freeze, *moussaka*, or beef with olives or *coq au vin*, and heats it up in my microwave, but usually we eat out. Very occasionally she invites me to dinner at her house and lays on a super spread, but it's always a dinner *party*, with other people present. Amy doesn't want Zelda to get the idea that there's anything special about her relationship with me, though I can't believe the kid doesn't suspect something, seeing her mother sometimes going out in the evening dressed to kill and carrying a container of home-made frozen food in one of her smartly gloved hands. "Because I hide it in my handbag, *stupido*," Amy said, when I raised this question once. And it's true that she carries an exceptionally large handbag, one of those soft Italian leather scrips, full of female paraphernalia (or should I just say paraphernalia?) – lipsticks and eyeliner, face-powder and perfume, cigarettes and lighters, pens and pencils, notebooks and diaries, aspirin and Elastoplast, Tampax and panty-liners, a veritable life-support system, in which a plastic container of frozen *moussaka* could be concealed without much difficulty.

I was replacing a phutted lightbulb when Amy buzzed the entryphone, so I was slow to push the button that brought her comically distorted face, all mouth and nose and eyes, swimming into view on the videoscreen in my microscopic hall. "Hurry up, Lorenzo," she said, "I'm dying for a pee and a drink, in that order." One of the things I like about Amy is that she never calls me Tubby. She calls me by a lot of other familiar names, but never that one. I pushed the button to open the front door, and moments later admitted her to the flat. Her cheek was cold against mine as we embraced, and I inhaled a heady whiff of her favourite perfume, Givenchy, eddying round her throat and ears. I hung up her coat and

fixed drinks while she went to the bathroom. She emerged a few minutes later, lips gleaming with freshly applied lipstick, sank into an armchair, crossed her fat little legs, lit a cigarette, took her drink and said, "Cheers, darling. How's the knee?"

I told her it had given me one bad twinge today, in the train.

"And how's the *Angst*?"

"What's that?"

"Oh, come, sweetheart! Don't pretend you don't know what *Angst* is. German for anxiety. Or is it anguish?"

"Don't ask me," I said. "You know I'm hopeless at languages."

"Well anyway, how have you been? Apart from the knee."

"Pretty bad." I described my state of mind over the last few days in some detail.

"It's because you're not writing." She meant script-writing.

"But I am writing," I said. "I'm writing a journal."

Amy's black eyes blinked with surprise. "What on earth for?"

I shrugged. "I don't know. It started with something I did for Alexandra."

"You should write something that will take you out of yourself, not deeper in. Is there going to be another series?"

"I'll tell you later," I said. "I had lunch about it with Jake. How was your day?"

"Oh awful, awful," she said grimacing. Amy's days are invariably awful. I don't think she'd be really happy if they weren't. "I had a row with Zelda at breakfast about the pigsty state of her room. Well, *c'est normal*. But then Karl's secretary called to say he couldn't see me today because of a sore throat, though why he should cancel just because of a sore throat I don't know, because sometimes he doesn't say anything by choice, but his secretary said he had a temperature too. So of course I've been on edge all day like a junkie needing a fix. And Michael Hinchcliffe, whose agent told me he was 'technically available' for that BBC spy serial, and would have been wonderful in the part, has taken a film offer instead, the sod. Not to mention Harriet's latest clanger." Harriet is Amy's partner in the casting agency. Her long-standing relationship with a man called Norman has just broken up and she is consequently unable to think straight

and is apt to weep uncontrollably when speaking to clients on the phone. Amy said she would tell me about Harriet's latest clanger when I had told her about my lunch with Jake, so we went out and settled ourselves at our usual table in Gabrielli's first.

Jake Endicott is the only agent I ever had. He wrote to me when he heard a sketch of mine on the radio, yonks ago, and offered to take me on. For years nothing much happened, but then I struck oil with *The People Next Door* and I wouldn't be surprised if I was his number one client now. He had booked a table in the back room at Groucho's, under the glass roof. It's his kind of place. Everybody is there to see and be seen without letting on that that's what they're there for. There's a special kind of glance that habitués have perfected I call the Groucho Fast Pan, which consists of sweeping the room with your eyes very rapidly under half-lowered lids, checking for the presence of celebrities, while laughing like a drain at something your companion has just said, whether it's funny or not. I had imagined it was just going to be a social lunch, a bit of gossip, a bit of mutual congratulation, but it turned out that Jake had something significant to report.

When we had ordered (I chose smoked duck's breast on a warm salad of rocket and lollo rosso, followed by sausage and mash at a price that would have given my poor old Mum and Dad a heart-attack apiece) Jake said, "Well, the good news is, Heartland want to commission another two series."

"And what's the bad news?" I asked.

"The bad news is that Debbie wants out." Jake looked anxiously at me, waiting for my reaction.

It wasn't exactly a bombshell. I knew that the present series was the last Debbie Radcliffe had contracted for, and I could well believe that she was getting tired of spending more than half of every year making *The People Next Door*. Sitcom is hard work for actors. It's the weekly rep of TV. The schedule for *The People Next Door* is: readthrough on Tuesday and rehearse Wednesday to Friday in London, travel up to Rummidge on Saturday, dress-rehearse and record there on Sunday, day off on Monday, and start again with the next script on Tuesday. It

wipes out the actors' weekends, and if filming on location is required that sometimes takes up their day off. They're well paid, but it's a gruelling routine and they dare not get ill. More to the point: for an actress like Deborah Radcliffe, the character of Priscilla Springfield must have ceased to be a challenge some time ago. True, she's free to do live theatre for about four months a year, between series, but that's not quite long enough for a West End production and anyway Sod's Law would ensure that the parts she wanted didn't come up when she was available. So I wasn't surprised to learn that she wanted her freedom. Jake, needless to say, didn't see it that way. "The ingratitude of people in this profession . . ." he sighed, shaking his head and twisting a sliver of gravadlax on the end of his fork in a puddle of dill sauce. "Who ever heard of Deborah Radcliffe before *The People Next Door*, apart from a few people on the RSC mailing list? We made her a star, and now she's just turning her back on us. Whatever happened to loyalty?"

"Come off it, Jake," I said. "We're lucky that we've had her this long."

"Thank me for that, my boy," said Jake. (He's actually ten years younger than me, but he likes to play the father in our relationship.) "I pressured Heartland into writing a four-year retainer into her renewal contract, after the first series. They would have settled for three."

"I know, Jake, you did well," I said. "I suppose this isn't just a ploy by her agent to up her fee?"

"That was my first thought, naturally, but she says she wouldn't do it for double."

"How can we have another series without Debbie?" I said. "We can't cast another actress. The audience wouldn't accept it. Debbie is Priscilla, as far as they're concerned."

Jake allowed the waiter to refill our wine glasses, then leaned forward and lowered his voice. "I spoke to the people at Heartland about that. David Treece, Mel Spacks and Ollie. Incidentally, this is *completely* confidential, Tubby. Are you going to rehearsal tomorrow? Then don't breathe a *word*. The rest of the cast know nothing about

Debbie leaving. Heartland want you to do a rewrite on the last script."

"What's wrong with it?"

"There's nothing wrong with it. But you're going to have to write Debbie out of the series."

"You mean, kill off Priscilla?"

"Good God, no. This is a *comedy* series, for Chrissake, not drama. No, Priscilla's got to leave Edward."

"Leave him? Why?"

"Well, that's your department, old son. Perhaps she meets another fella."

"Don't be daft, Jake. Priscilla would never desert Edward. It's just not in her nature."

"Well, women do funny things. Look at Margaret. She left me."

"That's because you were having an affair with Rhoda."

"Well, maybe Edward could have an affair with someone to provoke Priscilla into divorcing him. There's your new character!"

"It's not in Edward's nature either. He and Priscilla are the archetypal monogamous couple. They're about as likely to split up as Sally and me."

We argued for a while. I pointed out that the Springfields, in spite of their trendy liberal opinions and cultural sophistication, are really deeply conventional at heart, whereas the next-door Davises, for all their vulgarity and philistinism, are much more tolerant and liberated. Jake knew this already, of course.

"All right," he said at last. "What do you suggest?"

"Perhaps we should call it a day," I said, without premeditation. Jake nearly choked on his sautéed sweetbreads and polenta.

"You mean, kill the show at the end of this series?"

"Perhaps it's reached the end of its natural life." I wasn't sure whether I believed this, but I discovered to my surprise that I wasn't unduly bothered by the prospect.

Jake, though, was very bothered. He dabbed his mouth with his napkin. "Tubby, don't do this to me. Tell me you're joking. *The People Next Door* could run for another three series. There are a lot of

golden eggs still to come out of that goose. You'd be cutting your own throat."

"He's right, you know," Amy said, when I related this conversation to her over supper (in the light of the Groucho lunch, I confined myself virtuously to one dish, spinach cannelloni, but poached from Amy's dessert, a voluptuous tiramisu). "Unless you've got an idea for another series?"

"I haven't," I admitted. "But I could live quite comfortably on the money I've already earned from *The People Next Door*."

"You mean, *retire*? You'd go mad."

"I'm going mad anyway," I said.

"No, you're not," said Amy. "You don't know what mad means."

When we had thoroughly discussed the ins and outs and pros and cons of trying to go on with *The People Next Door* without Deborah Radcliffe, it was Amy's turn to tell me about her day in more detail. But I'm ashamed to say that now I come to try and record that part of our conversation, I can't remember much about it. I know that Harriet's latest clanger was sending the wrong actress to an interview at the BBC, causing great offence and embarrassment all round, but I'm afraid my mind wandered fairly early on in the relation of this story, and I failed to register the surname of the actress, so that when I came to again, and Amy was saying how furious Joanna had been, I didn't know which Joanna she was talking about and it was too late to ask without revealing that I hadn't been listening. So I had to confine myself to nodding and shaking my head knowingly and making sympathetic noises and uttering vague generalizations, but Amy didn't seem to notice, or if she noticed, not to mind. Then she talked about Zelda, and I don't remember a word of that, though I could make it up fairly confidently, since Amy's complaints about Zelda are always much the same.

I didn't tell Amy the whole of my conversation with Jake. At the end of the meal, while we were waiting for the waiter to come back with the receipted bill and Jake's platinum credit card, he said casually, fast-panning round the room and waving discreetly to Stephen Fry, who was just leaving, "Any chance of borrowing your flat next week,

Tubby?" I assumed he had some foreign client arriving whom he wanted to put up, until he added, "Just for an afternoon. Any day that suits you." He caught my eye and grinned slyly. "We'll bring our own sheets."

I was shocked. It's less than two years since Jake's marriage to Margaret ended in an acrimonious divorce and he married his then secretary, Rhoda. Margaret had become a kind of friend, or at least a familiar fixture, over the years, and I've only recently got used to Jake going to functions or staying for the occasional weekend accompanied by Rhoda instead. He could see from my expression that I was disturbed.

"Of course, if it's inconvenient, just say so . . ."

"It's not a matter of convenience or inconvenience, Jake," I said. "It's just that I'd never be able to look Rhoda straight in the eye again."

"This doesn't affect Rhoda, believe me," he said earnestly. "It's not an affair. We're both happily married. We just have a common interest in recreational sex."

"I'd rather not be involved," I said.

"No problem," he said, with a dismissive wave of his hand. "Forget I ever asked." He added, with a trace of anxiety, "You won't mention it to Sally?"

"No, I won't. But isn't it about time you packed it in, this lark?"

"It keeps me feeling young," he said complacently. He does look young, too, for his age, not to say immature. He's got one of those faces sometimes described as "boyish": chubby cheeks, slightly protuberant eyes, snub nose, a mischievous grin. You wouldn't call him good-looking. It's hard to understand how he manages to pull the birds. Perhaps it's the eager, puppyish, tail-wagging energy he seems to have such endless reserves of. "You should try it, Tubby," he said. "You've been looking peaky lately."

When we sat on the sofa together to watch *News at Ten*, I put my arm round Amy's back and she leaned her head against my shoulder. It's the furthest we ever go in physical intimacy, except that our goodbye kiss is always on the lips; it seems safe to go that far when we're

parting. We don't neck while we're sitting on the sofa, nor have I ever attempted any squeezing or stroking below the neckline. I admit that I sometimes wonder what Amy would look like naked. The image that comes into my mind is a slightly overweight version of that famous nude by whatsisname, the Spanish bloke, old master, he did two paintings of the same woman reclining on a couch, one clothed, one naked, I must look it up. Amy is always so *dressed*, so thoroughly buttoned and zipped and sheathed in her layers of carefully coordinated clothing that it's hard to imagine her ever being completely naked except in the bath, and even then I bet she covers herself with foam. Divesting Amy of her clothes would be a slow and exciting business, like unpacking an expensively and intricately wrapped parcel, rustling with layers of fragrant tissue paper, in the dark. (It would have to be in the dark - she told me one of her problems with Saul was his insistence on making love with the lights on.) Whereas Sally's clothes are loose and casual, and so few and functional that she can strip in about ten seconds flat, which she frequently does after coming home from work, walking around upstairs stark naked while doing humdrum domestic tasks like changing the sheets or sorting the laundry.

This train of thought is proving rather arousing, but unprofitably so, since Sally is not here to slake my lust and Amy wouldn't even if she were. Why do I only seem to get horny these days in London, where my girlfriend is contentedly chaste, and almost never at home in Rummidge, where I have a partner of tireless sexual appetite? I don't know.

"*You should try it, Tubby.*" How does Jake know I haven't tried it? It must show in my body language, somehow. Or my face, my eyes. Jake's eyes light up like an infra-red security scanner every time a pretty girl comes within range.

I suppose the nearest I came to trying it in recent memory was with Louise, in L.A., three or four years ago, when I went out for a month to advise on the American version of *The People Next Door*. She was a "creative executive" in the American production company, a Vice-President in fact, which isn't quite as impressive as it sounds to a

British ear, but pretty good all the same for a woman in her early thirties. She was my minder and intermediary with the scriptwriting team. There were eight writers working on the pilot. Eight. They sat round a long table drinking coffee and Diet Coke, anxiously trying out gags on each other. As the company had bought the rights they could do anything they liked with my scripts, and they did, throwing out most of the original storylines and dialogue and retaining only the basic concept of incompatible neighbours. It seemed to me that I was being paid thousands of dollars for almost nothing, but I wasn't complaining. At first I used to attend the script conferences and brainstorming sessions dutifully, but after a while I begin to think my presence was only an embarrassment and a distraction to these people, who seemed engaged in some desperately competitive contest from which I was happily excluded, and my participation became more and more a matter of stretching out on a lounge beside the pool of the Beverly Wilshire and reading the draft scripts which Louise Lightfoot brought to me in her smart, leather-trimmed canvas script satchel. She used to come back at the end of the day in her little Japanese sports coupé to collect my notes, and drink a cocktail, and more often than not we would eat together. She had recently split up with a partner and "wasn't seeing anybody" and I, marooned in Beverly Hills, was very glad of her company. She took me to the "in" Hollywood restaurants and pointed out the important producers and agents. She took me to movie previews and premières. She took me to art galleries and little theatres and, on the grounds that it would help me understand American television, to more plebeian places of resort: drive-in Burger Kings and Donut Delites, ten-pin bowling alleys, and on one occasion a baseball game.

Louise was small but shapely in build. Straight bobbed brown hair which always shone and swung as if it had been freshly washed, which it invariably had been. Perfect teeth. Is there anybody in Hollywood who hasn't got perfect teeth? But Louise needed them, because she laughed a lot. It was a resonant, full-bodied laugh, rather a surprise given her petite figure and general style of poised professional career woman; and when she laughed she threw back her head and shook it from side to side, making her hair fan out. I seemed to be able to

produce this effect very easily. My wry little British digs at Hollywood manners and Californiaspeak tickled Louise. Naturally, for a scriptwriter there is nothing more gratifying than having an attractive and intelligent young woman helpless with laughter at your jokes.

One warm evening towards the end of my stay, we drove down to Venice to eat at one of the shoreside fish places they have there. We ate outside on the restaurant's deck to watch the sun set on the Pacific in a vulgar blaze of Technicolor glory, and sat on in the gloaming over coffee and a second bottle of Napa Valley Chardonnay, with just a small oil-lamp flickering between us on the table. For once I wasn't trying to make her laugh, but talking seriously about my writing career, and the thrill of making the breakthrough with *The People Next Door*. I paused to ask if I should order some more coffee and she smiled and said, "No, what I'd like to do now is take you back to my place and fuck your brains out."

"Would you really?" I stalled, grateful for the semi-darkness as I struggled to arrange my thoughts.

"Yep, how does that grab you, Mr Passmore?" The "Mr Passmore" was a joke, of course - we had been on first-name terms since Day One. But that was how she always referred to me when speaking to other people in the company. I had heard her doing it on the phone. "*Mr Passmore thinks it's a mistake to make the Davises a Latino family, but he will defer to our judgement. Mr Passmore thinks the scene beginning page thirty-two of the twelfth draft is overly sentimental.*" Louise said it was a mark of respect in the industry.

"It's very sweet of you, Louise," I said, "and don't think that I wouldn't like to go to bed with you, because I would. But, to coin a phrase, I love my wife."

"She would never know," said Louise. "How could it hurt her?"

"I'd feel so guilty it would probably show," I said. "Or I'd blurt it out one day." I sighed miserably. "I'm sorry."

"Hey, it's no big deal, Tubby, I'm not in love with you or anything. Why don't you get the check?"

Driving me back to my hotel she said suddenly, "Am I the only girl you've had these scruples about?" and I said I'd always had them, and she said, "Well, that makes me feel better."

I didn't sleep much that night, tossing and turning in my vast bed at the Beverly Wilshire, wondering whether to call Louise and ask if I could have second thoughts, but I didn't; and although we saw each other again on several occasions it was never quite the same, she was gradually backing away instead of coming closer. She drove me to the airport at the end of my stay and kissed me on the cheek and said, "Bye, Tubby, it's been great." I agreed enthusiastically, but I spent most of the flight home wondering what I'd missed.

Time to go to bed. I wonder what they'll be showing on the Dream Channel tonight. Blue movies, I shouldn't wonder.

\* \* \* \* \*

*Thursday morning, 18th Feb.* The video entryphone in the flat is connected to a camera in the porch which gives you a choice of two shots: a close-up of the face of the person ringing your bell, and a wide shot of the porch, with the street in the background. Sometimes in idle moments I press the button for the wide shot to have a look at the people passing or pausing on the pavement. It gives me ideas for characters – you see all types – and I suppose there's a certain childish, voyeuristic pleasure in using the gadget. It's like an inverted periscope. From my cosy cabin high above the ground I scan life on the scruffy surface: tourists frowning over their street-maps, young girls too vain to cover their skimpy going-out gear with topcoats clutching themselves against the cold, young bucks in leather jackets scuffling and nudging each other, infatuated couples stopping in mid-stride to kiss, bumped by impatient men with briefcases hurrying to catch a train at Charing Cross.

Last night, for no particular reason, I pressed the button as I was going to bed, and blow me if there wasn't someone kipping down for the night in the porch. I suppose it's surprising it hasn't happened before, but it's a very small square space not big enough for a grown man to lie down in without his feet sticking out onto the pavement. This bloke was sitting up inside his sleeping-bag, with his back against one wall and his feet against the other, and his head sunk on

his chest. He looked young, with a pointed, foxy face and long, lank hair falling down over his eyes.

I felt quite shocked to see him there, then angry. What a nerve! He was taking up the whole porch. It would be impossible to go in or out without stepping over him. Not that I wanted to go in or out any more that night, but one of the other residents might turn up, and in any case it lowered the tone of the property to have him camped there. I thought about going downstairs and telling him to push off, but I was already in pyjamas and I didn't fancy confronting him in dressing-gown and slippers or alternatively going to the trouble of dressing myself again. I thought of phoning the police and asking them to move him on, but there's so much serious crime in this part of London that I doubted whether they would be bothered to respond, and anyway they would want to know if I had already requested him to move on myself. I stood there, staring at the fuzzy black and white image, wishing that sound as well as vision could be activated from inside the flat on the entryphone, so that I could bark, "Hey, you! Piss off!" through the loudspeaker, and watch his reaction on the video screen. I smiled at the thought, then felt a bit of a bastard for smiling.

These young people who beg and sleep rough on the streets of London, they bother me. They're not like the tramps and winos who have always been with us, filthy and smelly and dressed in rags. The new vagrants are usually quite nicely clothed, in new-looking anoraks and jeans and Doc Martens, and they have thickly quilted sleeping bags that wouldn't disgrace an Outward Bound course. And whereas the tramps skulk like insects in dark neglected places like under railway arches or beside rubbish tips, these youngsters choose shop doorways in brightly lit West End streets, or the staircases and passages of the Underground, so that you can't avoid them. Their presence is like an accusation – but what are they accusing us of? Did we drive them onto the streets? They look so normal, so presentable, they ask you so politely if you have any change, that it's hard to believe they couldn't find shelter, and even work, if they really tried. Not in the West End, perhaps, but who says they have a right to a home in the West End? I have one, but I had to work for it.

Thus and so went my self-justificatory interior monologue, as I

went to bed and, eventually, to sleep. I woke at four and went for a pee. On my way back to bed I pressed the video button on the entryphone, and he was still there, curled up inside his sleeping-bag on the tiled floor of the porch, like a dog in its basket. A police car flashed past in the background, and I heard the strident blare of its siren through the double-glazed windows of the living-room, but the youth didn't stir. When I looked again at half past seven this morning, he had gone.

\* \* \* \* \*

*Thursday afternoon.* I'm writing this on the 5.10 from Euston. I meant to catch the 4.40, but my taxi got trapped in a huge traffic jam caused by a bomb alert in Centre Point. The police had cordoned off the intersection of Tottenham Court Road and Oxford Street, and the traffic was backed up in all directions. I said to the cab-driver, "Who's trying to blow up the building – the IRA or Prince Charles?" But he didn't get the joke – or, more likely, he wasn't amused. These bomb scares keep the tourists away and hurt his business.

I dropped in on a rehearsal this morning, as is my usual practice on Thursdays. When *The People Next Door* was new and still finding its feet I used to attend rehearsals practically every day, but now it runs like a train (or like a train *should* run – this one has suddenly slowed to a crawl for some reason, and we haven't even got to Watford Junction) and I just put in an appearance once a week to check that everything's going smoothly, and maybe do a little fine-tuning on the script. Rehearsals are held in a converted church hall near Pimlico tube station, its floor marked out with lines corresponding to the studio set in Rummidge. Walking in there on a winter's day would disabuse you of any illusion that television light entertainment is a glamorous profession. (I think that's the first time I've ever used the word "disabuse". I like it – it has a touch of class.) The brick walls are painted an institutional slime green and curdled cream, like Rummidge General Hospital, and the windows are barred and glazed with grimy frosted glass. There's the usual job-lot of miscellaneous

furniture pushed against the walls or arranged in the various "rooms": splay-legged Formica-topped tables, plastic stacking chairs, collapsing three-piece suites, and beds with unsavoury-looking mattresses. Apart from the trestle table in one corner with a coffee machine, soft drinks, fruit and snacks laid out on it, the place could be a Salvation Army refuge or a depository for second-hand furniture. The actors wear old, comfortable clothes – all except Debbie, who always looks as if she's on her way to be photographed for *Vogue* – and when they aren't required for a scene they sit slumped in the broken-down chairs, reading newspapers and paperback novels, doing crosswords, knitting or, in Debbie's case, embroidering.

But they all look up and give me a cheerful smile and greeting as I come in. "Hi, Tubby! How're you? How goes it?" Actors are always very punctilious that way. Most producers and directors secretly despise writers, regarding them as mere drudges whose job it is to provide the raw material for the exercise of their own creativity, necessary evils who must be kept firmly in their place. Actors, however, regard writers with respect, even a certain awe. They know that the Writer is the ultimate source of the lines without which they themselves are impotent; and they know that, in the case of a long-running series, it is in his power to enhance or reduce the importance of their roles in episodes as yet unwritten. So they usually go out of their way to be nice to him.

This week they're doing Episode Seven of the present series, due to be transmitted in five weeks' time. Do they, I wonder, have any inkling that this may be the last series? No, I detect no signs of anxiety in their eyes or body language as we exchange greetings. Only between Debbie and myself does a message flash briefly, as I stoop to kiss her cheek where she sits in an old armchair, doing her eternal embroidery, and our eyes meet: she knows that I know that she wants out. Otherwise the secret seems to be safe for the time being. Not even Hal Lipkin, the director, knows yet. He bustles over to me as soon as I come in, frowning and biting his ballpen, but it's a query about the script that's on his mind.

Sitcom is pure television, a combination of continuity and novelty. The continuity comes from the basic "situation" – in our case, two

families with radically different lifestyles living next door to each other: the happy-go-lucky, welfare-sponging Davises, having unexpectedly inherited a house in a gentrified inner-city street, decide to move into it instead of selling it, to the ill-concealed dismay of their next-door neighbours, the cultured, middle-class, *Guardian*-reading Springfields. The viewers quickly become familiar with the characters and look forward to watching them behave in exactly the same way, every week, like their own relatives. The novelty comes from the story each episode tells. The art of sitcom is finding new stories to tell, week after week, within the familiar framework. It can't be a very complicated story, because you've only got twenty-five minutes to tell it in and, for both budgetary and technical reasons, most of the action must take place in the same studio set.

I was looking forward to seeing this week's episode in production, because it's one of those cases where we approach the territory of serious drama. Basically sitcom is light, family entertainment, which aims to amuse and divert the viewers, not to disturb and upset them. But if it doesn't occasionally touch on the deeper, darker side of life, however glancingly, then the audience won't believe in the characters and will lose interest in their fortunes. This week's episode centres on the Springfields' teenage daughter, Alice, who's about sixteen. When the series started five years ago, she was about fifteen. Phoebe Osborne, who plays her, was fourteen when she started and is now nineteen, but fortunately she hasn't grown much in that time and it's amazing what make-up and hairstyling can do. Adult characters in long-running sitcoms lead enchanted lives, they never age, but with the juveniles you have to allow for a certain amount of growth in the actors, and build it into the script. When young Mark Harrington's voice broke, for instance (he plays the Springfields' youngest, Robert) I made it a running joke for a whole series.

Anyway, this week's episode centres on Edward and Priscilla's fear that Alice may be pregnant, because she keeps throwing up. Cindy Davis next door is a teenage unmarried mother, her Mum looks after the baby while she's at school, and the dramatic point of the episode is that while the Springfields have been terribly liberal-minded about Cindy, they're horrorstruck at the thought of the same thing

happening to their own daughter, especially as the likely father is young Terry Davis, whom Alice has been dating with their teeth-gritting consent. Needless to say, Alice isn't pregnant or even at risk since she won't allow Terry any liberties at all. She keeps throwing up because the sexually frustrated Terry is spiking the goats' milk which is delivered exclusively for Alice's use (she's allergic to cows' milk) with an alleged aphrodisiac (in fact a mild emetic) with the collusion of his mate, Rodge, the milkman's assistant. This is eventually revealed when Priscilla accidentally helps herself to Alice's special milk and is violently sick. ("EDWARD (*aghast*): Don't tell me you're pregnant too?") But before that a good deal of comedy is generated by the elaborately circuitous ways in which Edward and Priscilla try to check out their dreadful suspicion, and the contrast between their public tolerance and private disapproval of single-parent families.

"It's running a bit long, Tubby," Hal said, indistinctly because he was gripping a ballpen between his teeth as he rifled through his copy of the script. Another ballpen protruded from his wiry thatch of hair just above his right ear - parked there some time earlier and forgotten. (*I should be so lucky.*) "I was wondering if we could cut a few lines here," he mumbled. I knew exactly which lines he was going to point to before he found the page:

EDWARD: Well, if she *is* pregnant, she'll have to have a termination.

PRISCILLA (*angrily*): I suppose you think that will solve everything?

EDWARD: Hang on! I thought you were all in favour of a woman's right to choose?

PRISCILLA: She's not a woman, she's a child. Anyway, suppose she chooses to have the baby?

PAUSE, AS EDWARD FACES UP TO THIS POSSIBILITY.

EDWARD (*quietly but firmly*): Then of course we shall support her.

PRISCILLA (*softening*): Yes, of course.

PRISCILLA REACHES OUT AND SQUEEZES EDWARD'S HAND.



I'd already had a run-in about these lines with Ollie Silvers, my producer, when I first delivered the script. Actually he's much more than my producer nowadays, he's Head of Series and Serials at Heartland, no less; but since *The People Next Door* was in a sense his baby, and still gets better ratings than anything else Heartland does, he couldn't bear to hand it over to a line producer when he was promoted, and still finds time somehow to poke his nose into the detail of every episode. He said you couldn't have references to abortion in a sitcom, even one that goes out after the nine-o'clock watershed when young viewers are supposed to be tucked up in bed, because it's too controversial, and too upsetting. I said it was unrealistic to suppose that an educated middle-class couple would discuss the possible pregnancy of their schoolgirl daughter without mentioning the subject. Ollie said that audiences accepted the conventions of sitcom, that some things simply weren't mentioned, and they liked it that way. I said that all kinds of things that used to be taboo in sitcom were acceptable now. Ollie said, not abortion. I said, there's always a first time. He said, why on our show? I said, why not? He gave in, or so I thought. I might have known he'd find a way to get rid of the lines.

When I asked Hal if the cut was Ollie's idea, Hal looked a bit embarrassed. "Ollie was in yesterday," he admitted. "He did suggest the lines aren't absolutely essential to the story."

"Not absolutely essential," I said. "Just a little moment of truth."

Hal looked unhappy and said we could discuss the matter further with Ollie, who was coming in after lunch, but I said it was too late in the day to have a knock-down-drag-out argument on a matter of principle. The cast would pick up the vibrations and get anxious and uptight about the scene. Hal looked relieved, and hurried off to tell Suzie, his production assistant, to amend the script. I left before Ollie arrived. Now I wonder why I didn't put up more of a fight.

The senior conductor has just announced that we are approaching Rugby. "Rugby will be the next station stop." BR has taken to using this cumbersome phrase, "station stop" lately, presumably to distinguish scheduled stops at stations from unscheduled ones in the

middle of fields, concerned perhaps that passengers disoriented by the fumes of bacon and tomato rolls and overheated brake linings in carriages with defective air-conditioning might otherwise stumble out on to the track by mistake and get killed.

\* \* \* \* \*

*Thursday evening.* I got home at about 7.30. The train was only twelve minutes late in the end, and I found my car, unscathed by thieves or vandals, waiting for me where I had left it, like a faithful pet. I roused it with the remote button on my keyring as I approached and it blinked its indicator lights at me and cheeped three times, as the doorlocks clicked open. These remote-control gadgets give me an inexhaustible childish pleasure. Our garage door is operated by one, and it amuses me to start it opening as I turn the corner at the end of the road so that I can drive straight in without pausing. As the door yawned open this evening I saw that Sally's car wasn't parked inside, and when I let myself into the house I found a note in the kitchen to say that she'd gone down to the Club for a swim and sauna. I felt unreasonably disappointed, because I was all primed to tell her about the crisis over Debbie Radcliffe and the argument about the cut in this week's episode. Not that she would be dying to hear about either topic. *Au contraire.*

In my experience there are two kinds of writers' wives. One kind is a combination of nanny, secretary and fan-club president. She reads the writer's work in progress and always praises it; she watches his programmes at transmission and laughs at every joke; she winces at a bad review and rejoices at a good one as feelingly as he does; she keeps an anxious eye on his mood and workrate, brings him cups of tea and coffee at regular intervals, tiptoeing in and out of his study without disturbing his concentration; she answers the telephone and replies to letters, protecting him from tiresome and unprofitable invitations, requests and propositions; she keeps a note of his appointments and reminds him of them in good time, drives him to the station or airport and meets him again when he returns, and gives cocktail parties and dinner parties for his professional friends and patrons. The other kind

is like Sally, who does none of these things, and has a career of her own which she considers just as important as her spouse's, if not more so.

Actually, Sally is the only writer's wife of this kind that I've met, though I suppose there must be others.

So it wasn't that I was hoping for sympathetic advice and knowledgeable counsel when I got home, just an opportunity to get some oppressive thoughts off my chest. Driving from the station, I felt a growing conviction that I had made a mistake in giving in so easily to cutting the reference to abortion in this week's script, and began to torment myself by wondering whether or not to re-open discussion of the matter by phoning Ollie and Hal at their respective homes – knowing that I would be in a very weak position, having agreed to the cut this morning, and that I would create bad feeling all round by trying to revoke that decision, without actually achieving anything in the end anyway because it was probably too late to change the script again. Probably, but not *necessarily*. The actors rehearsed the cut version this afternoon, but could if required restore the missing lines at tomorrow's rehearsal.

I paced restlessly around the empty house, picked up the telephone a couple of times, and put it down again without dialling. I made myself a ham sandwich, but the meat was too cold from the fridge to have any flavour, and drank a can of beer that filled my stomach with gas. I turned on the telly at random and found myself watching a rival sitcom on BBCI which seemed much wittier and sharper than *The People Next Door*, and switched it off again after ten minutes. I went into my study and sat down at the computer.

I feel self-esteem leaking out of me like water from an old bucket. I despise myself both for my weakness in accepting the cut and for my vacillation over whether to do anything about it. My knee has begun to throb, like a rheumatic joint sensitive to the approach of bad weather. I sense a storm of depression flickering on the horizon, and a tidal wave of despair gathering itself to swamp me.

Thank God. Sally has just come in. I just heard the door slam behind her, and her cheerful call from the front hall.

\* \* \* \* \*

*Friday morning 19th Feb.* There was appeal from MIND in my mail this morning. First time I've had one from them, I think. They must have got my address from one of the other charities. Inside the envelope was a letter and a blue balloon. There was an instruction at the top of the letter: "*Please blow up the balloon before you read any further, but don't tie a knot in it.*" So I blew up the balloon, and on it, drawn in white lines, appeared the profile of a man's head, looking a bit like me actually, with a thick neck and no visible hair; and packed inside the cranium, one on top of the other, like thoughts, were the words: BEREAVED, UNEMPLOYED, MONEY, SEPARATED, MORTGAGE, DIVORCED, HEALTH. "*To you,*" said the letter, "*the words on the balloon may seem just that – words. But the events they describe are at the heart of someone's nervous breakdown.*"

Just then, the doorbell rang. Sally had left for work, so I went to the front door, still holding the balloon by its tail, pinched between thumb and index finger to stop the air from escaping. I felt a vaguely superstitious compulsion to obey the instructions in the letter, like a character in a fairy tale.

It was the milkman, wanting to be paid. He looked at the balloon and grinned. "Having a party?" he said. It was half past nine in the morning. "Your birthday, is it?" he said. "Many happy returns."

"It just came in the post," I said, gesturing lamely with the balloon. "How much do we owe you?" I fiddled a ten-pound note out of my wallet one-handed.

"Cracking programme the other night," said the milkman as he gave me my change. "When Pop Davis hid all those cigarettes around the house before he gave up smoking . . . very funny."

"Thanks, glad you enjoyed it," I said. All the local tradesmen know I write the scripts for *The People Next Door*. I can do instant audience research on my own doorstep.

I took the balloon back into my study and picked up the letter from MIND. "*Just as the words grow larger with the balloon, so somebody's problems can seem greater as the pressure on them increases,*" it said.

I looked again at the words packed inside the head. I'm not bereaved (or not very recently – Mum died four years ago, and Dad seven), I'm not unemployed, I have plenty of money, I'm not separated or divorced, and I could pay off my mortgage tomorrow if I wanted to, but my accountant advised me against because of the tax relief. The only way I qualify for a nervous breakdown is under Health, though I suspect MIND was thinking of something more life-threatening than Internal Derangement of the Knee.

I skimmed through the rest of the letter: "*Suicide . . . psychosis . . . halfway house . . . helpline . . .*" After the final appeal for money, there was a PS: "*You can let the air out of the balloon now. And as you do so, please think about how quickly the pressure of someone's problems can be released with the time, care, and special understanding your gift will give today.*" I let the balloon go and it rocketed round the room like a madly farting bluebottle for a few seconds before hitting a window pane and collapsing to the floor. I got out my charity chequebook and sent MIND £36 to provide somebody with a specially trained mental health nurse for a morning.

I could do with one myself today.

Last night, after Sally came in, we talked in the kitchen as she made herself a cup of hot chocolate, and I had a scotch. Or rather I talked, and she listened, rather abstractedly. She was feeling languorously euphoric from her sauna and seemed to have more than usual difficulty in focusing on my professional problems. When I announced that the lines about abortion had been cut from this week's script, she said, "Oh, good," and although she saw from my expression that this was the wrong response, she typically proceeded to defend it, saying that *The People Next Door* was too light-hearted a show to accommodate such a heavy subject – exactly Ollie's argument. Then, when I told her that the future of the show was threatened by Debbie's intention of leaving at the end of the present series, Sally said, "Well, that will suit you, won't it? You can do something new with another producer prepared to take more risks than Ollie." Which was quite logical, but not particularly helpful,

since I don't have an idea for a new show, and am unlikely to get one in my present state.

Sally ran her finger round the inside of her cup and licked it. "When are you going to bed?" she said, which is her usual way of suggesting that we have sex, so we did, and I couldn't come. I had an erection, but no climax. Perhaps it was the scotch, on top of the beer, I don't know, but it was worrying, like working a pump handle and getting nothing out of the spout. Sally came – at least I think she did. I saw a programme on television the other night in which a lot of women were sitting round talking about sex and every one of them had faked orgasm on occasion, either to reassure their partners or to bring an unsatisfactory experience to a conclusion. Perhaps Sally does too. I don't know. She went off to sleep happily enough. I heard her breathing settle into a deep, slow rhythm before I dropped off myself. I woke again at 2.35 with the collar of my pyjama jacket damp with sweat. I felt a great sense of foreboding, as if there was something unpleasant I had forgotten and had to remember. Then I remembered: now I had Internal Derangement of the Gonads on top of all my other problems. I contemplated a life without sex, without tennis, without a TV show. I felt myself spiralling down into the dark. I always think of despair as a downward spiral movement – like an aeroplane that loses a wing and falls through the air like a leaf, twisting and turning as the pilot struggles helplessly with the controls, the engine note rising to a high-pitched scream, the altimeter needle spinning round and round the dial towards zero.

Reading through that last entry reminded me of Amy's odd question, "How's your *Angst*?" and I looked the word up. I was slightly surprised to find it in my English dictionary: "1. *An acute but unspecific sense of anxiety or remorse.* 2. *(In Existentialist philosophy) the dread caused by man's awareness that his future is not determined, but must be freely chosen.*" I didn't fully understand the second definition – philosophy is one of the bigger blank spots in my education. But I felt a little shiver of recognition at the word "dread". It sounds more like what I suffer than "anxiety". Anxiety sounds trivial, somehow. You can feel anxious about catching a train, or missing the post. I suppose

that's why we've borrowed the German word. *Angst* has a sombre resonance to it, and you make a kind of grimace of pain as you pronounce it. But "Dread" is good. Dread is what I feel when I wake in the small hours in a cold sweat. Acute but unspecific Dread. Of course I soon think of specific things to attach it to. Impotence, for instance.

It has to happen sometime, of course, to every man. Fifty-eight seems a bit premature, but I suppose it's not impossible. Sooner or later, anyway, there has to be a last time. The trouble is, you'll only know when you discover that you can't do it any more. It's not like your last cigarette before you quit smoking, or your last game of football before you hang up your boots. You can't make a special occasion of your last fuck because you won't know it is your last one while you're having it; and by the time you find out you probably won't be able to remember what it was like.

I just looked up Existentialism in a paperback dictionary of modern thought. "A body of philosophical doctrine that dramatically emphasizes the contrast between human existence and the kind of existence possessed by natural objects. Men, endowed with will and consciousness, find themselves in an alien world of objects which have neither." That didn't seem much of a discovery to me. I thought I knew that already. "Existentialism was inaugurated by Kierkegaard in a violent reaction against the all-encompassing absolute Idealism of Hegel." Oh, it was, was it? I looked up Kierkegaard. "Kierkegaard, Søren. Danish philosopher, 1813-55. See under EXISTENTIALISM."

I looked up Kierkegaard in another book, a biographical dictionary. He was the son of a self-made merchant and inherited a considerable fortune from his father. He spent it all on studying philosophy and religion. He was engaged to a girl called Regine but broke it off because he decided he wasn't suited to marriage. He trained to be a minister but never took orders and at the end of his life wrote some controversial essays attacking conventional Christianity. Apart from a couple of spells in Berlin, he never left Copenhagen. His life sounded as dull as it was short. But the article listed some of his books at the end. I can't describe how I felt as I read the titles. If the hairs on the back of my neck were shorter, they would have lifted.

*Fear and Trembling, The Sickness Unto Death, The Concept of Dread*—they didn't sound like titles of philosophy books, they seemed to name my condition like arrows thudding into a target. Even the ones I couldn't understand, or guess at the contents of, like *Eiither/Or* and *Repetition*, seemed pregnant with hidden meaning designed especially for me. And, what do you know, Kierkegaard wrote a Journal. I must get hold of it, and some of the other books.

\* \* \* \* \*

Friday evening. Acupuncture at the Wellbeing Clinic this afternoon. Miss Wu began, as she always does, by taking my pulse, holding my wrist between her cool damp fingers as delicately as if it were the stem of a fragile and precious flower, and asked me how I was. I was tempted to tell her about my ejaculation problem last night, but chickened out. Miss Wu, who was born in Hong Kong but brought up in Rummidge, is very shy and demure. She always leaves the room while I strip to my underpants and climb on to the high padded couch and cover myself with a cellular blanket; and she always knocks on the door to check that I'm ready before she comes back in. I thought she might be embarrassed if I mentioned my seminal no-show, and to tell you the truth I didn't fancy the idea of needles being stuck in my scrotum. Not that she normally puts the needles where you might expect, but you never know. So I just mentioned my usual symptoms and she put the needles in my hands and feet, as she usually does. They look a bit like the pins with coloured plastic heads that are used on wall-maps and notice-boards. You feel a kind of tingling jolt when she hits the right spot, sometimes it can be as powerful as a low-voltage electric shock. There's definitely something to this acupuncture business, though whether it does you any lasting good, I don't know. I went to Miss Wu originally for my Internal Derangement of the Knee, but she told me frankly that she didn't think she could do much about it except to assist the healing process by improving my general physical and mental health, so I settled for that. I feel better afterwards for the rest of the day, and maybe the next morning, but after that the effect seems to wear off. There's a slightly penitential

aspect to it – the needles do hurt a little, and you're not allowed to drink alcohol on the day of the treatment, which is probably why I feel better for it – but I find Miss Wu's infinitely gentle manner comforting. She always apologizes if a particularly strong reaction to the needle makes me jump; and when (very rarely) she can't find the spot, and has to have several tries, she gets quite distressed. When she accidentally drew blood one day, I thought she would die of shame.

While the treatment is going on we chat, usually about my family. She takes a keen interest in the lives of Adam and Jane. Her questions, and my occasional difficulty in answering them, make me guiltily aware how little thought I give to my children these days, but they have their own lives now, independent and self-sufficient, and they know that if they are in serious need of money they only have to ask. Adam works for a computer software company in Cambridge, and his wife Rachel teaches Art History part-time at the University of Suffolk. They have a young baby so they're completely taken up with the complex logistics of their domestic and professional lives. Jane, who did a degree in archaeology, was lucky enough to get a job at the museum in Dorchester, and lives in Swanage with her boyfriend Gus, a stonemason. They lead a quiet, unambitious, vegetarian life in that dull little resort and seem happy enough in a New Age sort of way. We see them all together these days only at Christmas, when we have them to stay in Hollywell. A tiny shadow of a frown passed across Miss Wu's face when she realized from my remarks that Jane and Gus are not married – I guess that this would not be acceptable in her community. Well, I hope Jane will get married one day, preferably not to Gus, though she could probably do worse. Today I boldly asked Miss Wu if she expected to marry herself and she smiled and blushed and lowered her eyes, and said, "Marriage is a very serious responsibility." She took my pulse again and pronounced that it was much improved and wrote down something in her book. Then she left the room for me to get dressed.

I left her cheque in a plain brown envelope on the little table where she keeps her needles and other stuff. The first time she treated me I made the mistake of taking out my wallet and crassly thrusting banknotes into her hand. She was very embarrassed, and so was I

when I perceived my *faux pas*. Paying therapists is always a bit tricky. Alexandra prefers to do it all by mail. Amy told me that on the last Friday of every month when she goes into Karl Kiss's consulting room there's a little envelope on the couch with her bill in it. She picks it up and silently secretes it in her handbag. It is never referred to by either of them. It's not surprising, really, this reticence. Healing shouldn't be a financial transaction – Jesus didn't charge for miracles. But therapists have to live. Miss Wu only charges fifteen quid for a one-hour session. I wrote her out a cheque for twenty, once, but this only caused more embarrassment because she ran after me in the car park and said I'd made a mistake.

When I was dressed she came back into the room and we made an appointment for two weeks' time. Next Friday I have aromatherapy. Miss Wu doesn't know that, though.

I'm game for almost any kind of therapy except chemotherapy. I mean tranquillizers, antidepressants, that sort of stuff. I tried it once. It was quite a long time ago, 1979. My first very own sitcom was in development with Estuary – *Role Over*, the one about a house-husband with a newly liberated, careerist wife. I was working on the pilot when Jake called me with an offer from BBC Light Entertainment to join the script-writing team for a new comedy series. It was a typical twist in the life of a freelance writer: after struggling for years to get my work produced, suddenly I was in demand from two different channels at once, I decided that I couldn't do both jobs in tandem. (Jake thought I could, but then all *he* had to do was draw up two contracts and hold out two hands for his commission.) So I turned down the Beeb, since *Role Over* was obviously the more important project. Instead of just telephoning Jake, I wrote him a long letter setting out my reasons in minutely argued detail, more for my own sake than for his (I doubt if he even bothered to read it through to the end). But the pilot was a disaster, so bad that Estuary wouldn't even expose it to the light of cathode tube, and it looked as if the series would never happen. Naturally I began to regret my decision about the BBC offer. Indeed "regret" is a ridiculously inadequate description of my state of mind. I was convinced that I had totally destroyed

my career, committed professional suicide, passed up the best opportunity of my life etc. etc. I suppose, looking back, it was my first really bad attack of Internal Derangement. I couldn't think about anything else but my fateful decision. I couldn't work, I couldn't relax, I couldn't read, couldn't watch TV, couldn't converse with anybody on anything for more than a few minutes before my thought process, like the stylus arm of a haunted record deck, returned inexorably to the groove of futile brooding on The Decision. I developed Irritable Bowel Syndrome, and went about drained of energy by the peristaltic commotion in my gut, fell exhausted into bed at ten-thirty and woke two hours later soaked in sweat, to spend the rest of the night mentally rewriting my letter to Jake demonstrating with impeccable logic why I could perfectly well work for the BBC and Estuary at the same time, and constructing other scenarios which turned back the clock and allowed me to escape in fantasy the consequences of my decision: my letter to Jake was lost, or returned to me unopened because wrongly addressed, or the BBC came back pleading with me to have second thoughts, and so on. After a week of this, Sally made me go and see my GP, a taciturn Scot called Patterson, not the one I have now. I told him about my restless bowels and sleeplessness, and guardedly admitted to being under stress (I wasn't yet prepared to open the door on the raving madhouse of my mind to another person). Patterson listened, grunted, and wrote me out a prescription for Valium.

I was a Valium virgin – I suppose that was why the effect of the drug was so powerful. I couldn't believe it, the extraordinary peace and relaxation that enveloped me like a warm blanket within minutes. My fears and anxieties shrank and receded and disappeared, like gibbering ghosts in the light of day. That night I slept like a baby, for ten hours. The next morning I felt torpid and mildly depressed in an unfocused sort of way. I dimly sensed bad thoughts mustering below the horizon of consciousness, getting ready to return, but another little pale green tablet zapped that threat, and cocooned me in tranquillity again. I was all right – not exactly in scintillating form either creatively or socially, but perfectly all right – as long as I was taking the pills. But when I finished the course, my obsession

returned like a rabid Rottweiler freed from the leash. I was in an infinitely worse state than I had been before.

The addictive nature of Valium wasn't fully appreciated in those days, and of course I hadn't been taking it long enough to become addicted anyway, but I went through a kind of cold turkey as I struggled against the temptation to go back to Patterson and ask for another prescription. I knew that if I did so, I would become totally dependent. Not just that, but I was sure that I would never be able to write as long as I was on Valium. Of course I couldn't write while I was off it, either, at the time, but I had a kind of intuition that eventually the nightmare would pass of its own accord. And of course it did, ten seconds after Jake called me to say Estuary were going to recast and do another pilot. It got an encouraging response, and they commissioned a whole series, which was a modest success, my first, while the BBC show bombed. A year later I could hardly remember why I had ever doubted the wisdom of my original decision. But I remembered the withdrawal symptoms after the last Valium and vowed never to expose myself to that again.

Two spasms in the knee while I was writing this, one sharp enough to make me cry out.

*→ Is it possible to brace when? It demands re-reading the piece in order to make sense of*

\* \* \* \* \* *the present.*

*Saturday evening, 20th Feb.* I heard a surprising and rather disturbing story from Rupert at the Club today. Sally and I went there after an early lunch to play tennis, outdoors. It was a lovely winter's day, dry and sunny, the air crisp but still. Sally played doubles with three other women, I with my crippled cronies. It takes us blokes a long time to get into our kit, we have to put on so many bandages, splints, supports, trusses and prostheses first – it's like mediaeval knights getting into their armour before a battle. So Sally and her pals were well into their first set as we walked, or rather limped, past their court on our way to ours. Rupert's wife Betty was partnering Sally, and just at that moment she played a particularly good backhand volley to win a point, and we all applauded. "Betty's been having some coaching

too, has she, Rupert?" Joe remarked, with a grin. "Yes," said Rupert, rather abruptly. "Well, our Mr Sutton certainly does something for the ladies," said Joe. "I don't know what exactly, but . . ." "Oh, knock it off, Joe," said Rupert irritably, striding on ahead. Joe pulled a face and wagged his eyebrows at Humphrey and me, but said nothing more until we reached the court and picked partners.

I played with Humphrey, and we beat the other two in five sets, 6-2, 5-7, 6-4, 3-6, 7-5. It was a keenly contested match, even if to an observer it might have looked from the speed of our movements as if we were playing underwater. My backhand was working well for once, and I played a couple of cracking returns of service, low over the net, that took Rupert quite by surprise. There's nothing quite so satisfying as a sweetly hit backhand, it seems so effortless. I actually won the match with a mistimed volley off the frame of my racquet, which was more characteristic of our normal play. However, it was all very enjoyable. Joe wanted to switch partners and play the best of three sets, but my knee had tightened up ominously, and Rupert said his painkillers were beginning to wear off (he always takes a couple of tablets before a game), so we left the other two to play singles and went for a drink after we'd showered. We carried our pints to a nice quiet corner of the Club bar. In spite of the occasional twinge of pain in my knee, I felt good, glowing from the exercise, almost like the old days, and relished the cool bitter, but Rupert frowned into his jar as if there was something nasty at the bottom of it. "I wish Joe wouldn't keep on about Brett Sutton," he said. "It's embarrassing. It's worse than embarrassing, it's unpleasant. It's like watching somebody picking at a scab." I asked him what he meant. He said, lowering his voice, "Didn't you know about Jean?" "Jean who?" I said stupidly. "Oh, you weren't there, were you," Rupert said. "Joe's Jean. She had it off with young Ritchie at the New Year's Eve do."

Young Ritchie is Alistair, son of Sam Ritchie, the Club's golf pro. He looks after the shop when his father is out giving lessons, and does a bit of beginners' tuition himself. He can't be more than twenty-five. "You're not serious?" I said. "Cross my heart," Rupert said. "Jean got tight, and started complaining because Joe wouldn't dance, then she got young Ritchie to dance with her, giggling and hanging round

his neck she was, then some time later they both disappeared. Joe went looking for her, and found them together in the First Aid room, in a compromising position. It's not the first time it's been used for that purpose, I believe. They'd locked the door, but Joe had a key, being on the Committee." I asked Rupert how he knew all this. "Jean told Betty, and Betty told me." I shook my head incredulously. I wondered why Joe was making all these cracks about Brett Sutton being the club gigolo, if he himself had just been cuckolded by young Ritchie. "Diversionary tactics, I suppose," Rupert said. "He's trying to draw attention away from Ritchie and Jean." "What possessed young Ritchie?" I said. "Jean is old enough to be his mother." "Perhaps it was pity," Rupert suggested. "Jean told him she hadn't had it since Joe had his back operation." "Had what?" "It," said Rupert. "Sex. You're a bit slow on the uptake today, Tubby." "Sorry, I'm gobsmacked," I said. I was thinking of our conversation in the indoor courts last week: it was disturbing to realize that what I took to be Joe's harmless teasing had had this painful subtext. I recalled now that Rupert hadn't joined in the banter, though Humphrey had. "Does Humphrey know about this?" I asked. "I dunno. I don't think so. He hasn't got a wife to pass on the gossip, has he? I'm surprised Sally hasn't picked it up." Perhaps she has, I thought, and hasn't told me.

But when I asked her later if she'd heard any scandal about Jean Wellington, she said, no. "But then I wouldn't," she said. "It's a trade-off, that sort of gossip. You don't get any dirt if you don't dish some yourself." I thought she would ask me for more details, but she didn't. Sally has extraordinary self-control in that way. Or perhaps she just isn't curious about other people's private lives. She's very wrapped up in her work at the moment – not only her teaching and research, but admin. There's a lot of reorganization going on as a result of the change of status from Poly to University. They can make up their own degree programmes now, and Sally is chairing a new inter-Faculty postgraduate degree course in Applied Linguistics shared between Education and Humanities, as well as sitting on numerous committees, internal and external, with names like F-QUAC (Faculty Quality Assurance Committee) and C-CUE

(Council for College and University English), and organizing the in-service training of local junior-school teachers to implement the new National Curriculum. I think she's being exploited by her Head of Department, who gives her all the trickiest jobs because he knows she'll do them better than anyone else, but when I tell her this she just shrugs and says that it shows he's a good manager. She brings home piles of boring agendas and reports to work through in the evenings and at the weekends. We sit in silence on opposite sides of the fireplace, she with her committee papers, I connected to the muted television by the umbilical cord of my headphones.

Severe twinge in the knee while I was watching the news tonight. I suddenly shouted "Fuck!" Sally looked up from her papers enquiringly. I took off the headphones momentarily and said, "Knee." Sally nodded and went back to her reading. I went back to the news. The main story was a development in the James Bulger murder case, which has been dominating the media for days. Last week the little boy, only two years old, was enticed away from a butcher's shop in a shopping mall in Bootle by two older boys, while his mother's attention was distracted. Later he was found dead, with appalling injuries, beside a railway line. The abduction was recorded by a security video camera, and every newspaper and TV news programme has carried the almost unbearably poignant blurred still of the toddler being led away by the two older boys, trustingly holding the hand of one of them, like an advertisement for Startrite shoes. It appears that several adults saw the trio after that, and noticed that the little boy was crying and looking distressed, but nobody intervened. Tonight it was announced that two ten-year-old boys have been charged with murder. "The question is being asked," the TV reporter said, standing against the backdrop of the Bootle shopping mall, "What kind of society do we live in, in which such things can happen?" A pretty sick one, is the answer.

\* \* \* \* \*

Sunday 21st Feb. 6.30 p.m. I'm writing this on my laptop in the break

between the dress rehearsal and the recording of *The People Next Door*, sitting at a Formica table in the Heartland Studios canteen, surrounded by soiled plates and cups and glasses left over from an early dinner shared with the cast and production team, and not yet cleared away by the somewhat lackadaisical catering staff. Recording begins at 7.30, after a half-hour warm-up session for the audience. The actors have gone off to Make-Up for repairs, or are resting in their dressing-rooms. Hal is doing a last check on the camera script with his PA and vision mixer, Ollie is having a drink with David Treece, Heartland's Controller of Comedy (I love that title), and I have just managed to shake off the attentions of Mark Harrington's chaperone, Samantha, who lingered after the others had gone, so I have an hour to myself. Samantha Handy has a degree in Drama from Exeter University and is doing the job *faute de mieux*, as Amy would say. Looking after a twelve-year-old boy whose chief topic of conversation is computer games, and making sure he does his homework, is obviously not her natural vocation. She really wants to write for television and seems to think I can help her get a commission. She's a good-looking redhead, with amazing boobs, and I suppose another man, Jake Endicott for instance, might be tempted to encourage her in this illusion, but I told her frankly that she would do better to try and persuade Ollie to give her some scripts to report on as a first step. She pouted a little and said, "It's just that I have this fabulous idea for an offbeat soap, a kind of English *Twin Peaks*. Sooner or later somebody else is going to think of it, and I couldn't bear that." "What is it?" I said, averting my eyes from her own twin peaks; and then added hastily, "No, don't tell me. Tell Ollie. I don't want to be accused of pinching it one day." She smiled and said it wasn't my sort of thing, it was too kinky. "What's kinky?" said Mark, who was working his way through a second helping of Mississippi Mud Pie. "None of your business," said Samantha, flicking him lightly on the ear with a long, tapered fingernail. She asked me if I thought she should get an agent, and I said I thought that would be a good idea, but I didn't offer to introduce her to Jake Endicott. This was entirely for her own good, but naturally she didn't appreciate my