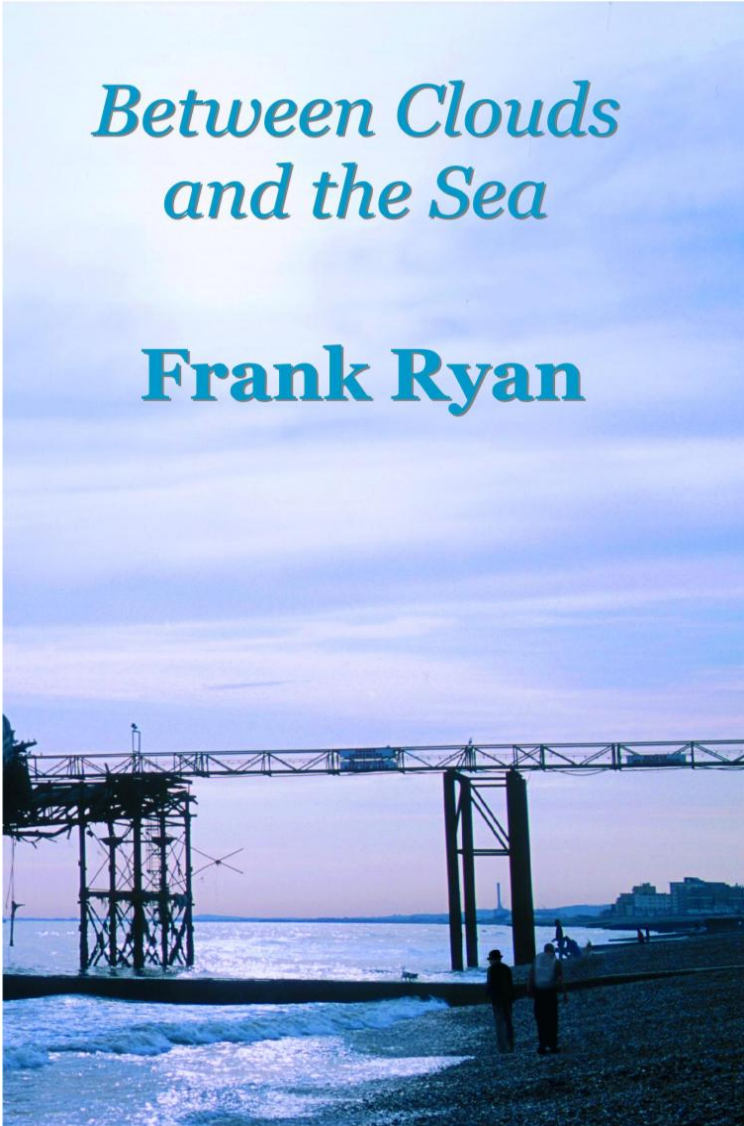


Between Clouds and the Sea

*Between Clouds
and the Sea*

Frank Ryan



Between Clouds and the Sea

Frank Ryan is a distinguished author who has written a “Book of the Year” for *The New York Times* and another that was the “Chosen Book” for Charlie Munger. His books have been acclaimed worldwide and translated into many languages.

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Between Clouds and the Sea

Also in fiction by Frank Ryan

The Doomsday Genie

Goodbye Baby Blue

Sweet Summer

Tiger Tiger

Between Clouds and the Sea

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Hadya no more to do? Was your work all done?

Had ya seen your first son?

Why'dya leave us all here?

Has the battle been won?

Allen Ginsberg: *Elegy for Neal Cassidy*

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For Amy

1

When I was very small I had an obsession with the sea. It was a problem for my Mum and Dad who only had to let me out of their sight for a moment and I was off, stubby legs pumping over the sand and heading straight for that dangerous embrace. Here, tonight, I feel the reawakening of that compulsive need as I gaze down at the shifting surf about my legs, my feet already numb so that I am no longer aware of the coldness of the water, no longer aware that I am still wearing boots and socks or the wetness of my skin beneath my jeans. I am aware, without the slightest sense of strangeness, of the ghostly figures that have come to stand in the water beside me. There is more than one kind of ghost.

‘What happened, Mylie?’

I say nothing.

The voice is that of my mother, Brenda, who is standing there next to my uncle, Tony.

Tony is wearing his Johnny Cash rug. Underneath the rug Tony has that shiny baldness you see in some men at an early age, especially those who lose at gambling. Normally when I see Tony I can’t take my eyes off his bald head because I worry about my own hair. I have thick hair that is hard to control, but I still worry that one of these days I’ll look at myself in the mirror and I’ll see that same bald head shining back at me.

‘Will you look at the state of him!’ Tony says. ‘I hope he knows the trouble he’s in.’

It is only half a dream. I am floating between two worlds. My feet stand in the English Channel. Out there, beyond the horizon – invisible,

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although my eyes turn slowly towards it – is France. Above my dizzy, inebriated head is the starry sky of deepest night.

With another turn of my head, I gaze back towards the distant figure of Harry, cloaked in shadow, by the embers of the distant fire on the beach. I think about the Hindu concept of Kismet, which is another word for fate.

I say nothing.

About a month ago, there was a programme on Channel 4 that captured my imagination. It was a nature programme, one of those I like to watch. I had just arrived back at The Palace from working earlies and missed the start but I could see that it was going to be interesting. It was about a river in Australia whose banks had burst during heavy rain, and in the banks of the river lived some colonies of spiders. It was really incredible: there were millions upon millions of these spiders. They lived in burrows under the ground but when the river burst its banks it flooded the spiders' burrows. You'd have thought they were done for.

But the spiders swarmed up out of their holes in the ground. You should have seen them, scrambling up the tall reeds, where they began to spin their webs. These covered the banks, all running together until they became one huge cloud of silk floating over the landscape as far as the eye could see.

I watched this with a growing sense of wonder.

If you were a spider and you had to climb up those tall reeds to spin your webs, it must seem as if you had gone to live in the clouds. The spiders just floated on the breeze in what turned out to be their new home. They captured grasshoppers and other bugs to eat and they went on with their lives, safe from the floods that had washed away their burrows down in the ground.

2

They say that there is never truly a beginning to a story, only a convenient place to start. I suppose that for me this has to be the day when I first met Harry. As a matter of fact I remember it pretty well. It was a freezing day in February of this year, so bitter that frost had etched a diamantine lace over the sixty yards of glazed corridor that links the Unit with the main hospital as I was walking back along it from the pharmacy, bringing some take-home drugs for the early discharges. The time was exactly a quarter past nine in the morning and Oasis', *Don't Look Back In Anger*, was running in my mind. Then, when I arrived at the Unit, I couldn't get through the glass doors because Harry was blocking the entrance into the reception area.

Of course I didn't know at the time that his name was Harry. I knew nothing about him, except that he was a new admission. And to be accurate, he wasn't just lying there. There were six people sitting on him.

I want to get it right.

He was fighting like a madman, shouting and cursing at the top of his voice, and they were holding on to various bits of him. Alan was in charge of it, holding on to his head, and John and Rachel were holding on to his arms, with Barry, Jill and Janet holding on to his legs. I had to inch my way through one door sideways and then pick my step around them in order to drop the drugs off at the desk before I could make my way to the kitchen.

I'm no good to anybody until I get my first mug of tea in the morning. And one of Mary's attempts at escaping had caused me to miss out on it when I had arrived, deliberately early, at a quarter to seven.

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Ann, who works regular earlies, unlocked the kitchen door for me and ushered me in. She didn't give a damn about my tea. Instead she followed me around the room, talking in this nagging voice, while I was putting on the kettle for the hot water, and putting the teabag into the mug. Ann is a middle-aged Scottish woman, who wears the permanent mask of a frown. The thing was, I was still enjoying the music. It's something I like to do, just hang loose with it inside my head while I'm going through some menial routine. But Ann wouldn't let me do that. She was telling me how tired Doctor Henessy must be, after being up half the night as the SHO on call.

It was Doctor Henessy who was talking to the old man on the floor and Ann told me she was getting nowhere.

I like Doctor Henessy, whose first name is Margaret. To be honest with you, she's my favourite amongst the doctors. Everybody, with the exception of old Grumpy, calls her Maggie.

Although Ann is only an enrolled nurse, I respect her opinion when it comes to patients. She had worked it out that the reason Maggie was getting nowhere was because the old man had been brought in after trying to strangle his wife. It was what you might call a gender situation. So there she was, laying this conscience thing on me. She said,

'You know you have a way with the old men, Mylie.'

'Hey!' I grinned. 'Winning – or wicked?'

'Mischievous!' said she, pronouncing it 'mis-chee-vious'. But her mask had wrinkled into the hint of a smile.

Outside Reception, patients were hanging about the upholstered chairs that visitors normally sit in. They're always interested in what's going on.

It was obvious the old man couldn't just stay there on the floor. Normally, the ward staff are very kind to patients. All they were doing was stopping him from escaping while at the same time making sure he didn't hurt himself. I found myself having to squat down on the floor close to his head so I could talk to him.

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'C-D-O,' Alan was mouthing to me above the commotion, which means the old man was coming in as a compulsory detention order under the Mental Health Act.

The way it usually happens is that a qualified psychiatric nurse, known as a Court Diversion Officer, does a round of the police cells each morning and picks out the obvious mental cases. The old man couldn't have been too hard to spot after they had pulled him in the night before for trying to strangle his wife. In fact John, who is the Court Diversion Officer, was one of the six people holding him down. I could see that the old man hadn't shaved for a couple of days. He had a thick white moustache and a bald head – a floury kind of baldness unlike the shiny baldness of my Uncle Tony – and he was wearing a crumpled pinstripe suit that looked as if he had slept in it. Nobody likes to be brought into a psychiatric unit against their will. It's an infringement of their civil liberties. The old man's face was blotchy and the only one of his eyes I could see was his right eye, because the other half of his face was pressed against the floor. You have never seen such a fierce-looking eye! It was a perfect blue, like the blazing spearhead of a Bunsen burner flame. And it was staring back at me.

'Hello,' I said, although it must have been hard for him to hear me above the noise of his own cursing and swearing. 'You don't look very comfortable down there. Why don't you stop fighting us and let us help you.'

'Bugger off!' he muttered back at me.

I've seen this rage before and so I took no notice of it. His voice was slurred because half his mouth was pressed up tightly against the carpet.

Then I saw the bowler hat. It really took me by surprise. It was lying on its side about six feet away across the floor and I realised that it must have fallen off his head. I crawled over, on my hands and knees, to pick it up. I had never held a real bowler hat in my hands before and I was curious, that's all. Anyway, I could see that this hat meant a lot to the old man, so I brushed it off with my sleeve and put it down on the floor next

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to the mug of tea – my mug of tea. I took some trouble arranging the mug and hat so they were easy for him to see. All the time he was watching me through that bright blue eye of his. I had to pick up my voice a little, to make sure I was getting through to him. ‘Do you see that tea there next to your hat?’

‘Piss off!’

It isn’t easy trying to communicate with somebody in that situation. His voice was becoming even more squashed as he tried to shout and curse through the dust-speckled bubbles of spit that were dangling from the free corner of his mouth.

‘I haven’t had a sip out of that tea,’ I moved myself closer to his ear. ‘I made it for myself.’ I faced him down, that mad look in his eye. ‘You’re welcome to it if you will just give over all that shouting and swearing.’

I pride myself on being a philosophical kind of person, but you should have seen the glare in his eye! His white hair, what little there was of it, was dishevelled and covered in dust. But I just knew in my bones how much he was dying for that mug of tea.

‘We’re not getting very far, are we?’ I said to him. We were all waiting while Maggie was considering if she needed to give the old man an injection. We prefer to avoid it if we can. And you have to give them a test dose first to make sure the sedative doesn’t cause an adverse reaction. I felt an urgent need to stretch my back at this point because I was half-kneeling in the most awkward position you can imagine, bending down to get close to him.

‘You swine!’ he gargled through his spit.

It was such a comical thing for him to say that I couldn’t help laughing. I know I shouldn’t have laughed and maybe that was why his eye screwed up and a tear came out of it.

‘Hey – come on, now! You’re among friends here.’ I took the clean tissue from Ann and wiped his eye for him. Then I wiped him down over the visible half of his face.

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'I think you can let his head go now,' I said to Alan. 'It looks as if he's calming down.'

You can imagine how undignified it must feel having your face shoved against the floor. Alan let go of his head and the old man screwed it around on his neck so he could take a good long look at me with two mad eyes instead of one. I could hear his neck cracking like an old clockwork mechanism as it turned. That gave me the chance to wipe the dirt off the other side of his face. I was glad we didn't need to inject him.

So there I was, helping him change his clothes while he was drinking my tea and looking very forlorn on the two mattresses on the floor, when suddenly he said to me, 'Young man, my wife is a bitch.'

It sounded strange to hear him speak so crudely of his wife in his clipped middle-class accent. Of course this started me off laughing again. I just couldn't help myself because it sounded so incongruous. 'That bloody woman!' He went on. 'When I get out of here I'm going to murder her!'

'That's cool,' I murmured, humouring him while I gathered up the pinstripe for cleaning. Harry was a short man, maybe five eight, but he was in pretty good shape – surprisingly well toned for his age. I could see that he would cut a smart figure still in his pinstripe and bowler hat. You wouldn't think he was suffering from any physical or mental illness. He was wearing a sweat-stained shirt, with silver cufflinks, under his jacket. Somebody had cut a hole out of the right armpit of his shirt. I paused to ask him about that as I unbuttoned the shirt, making a knot of the two cufflinks and sliding them into the left side jacket pocket. He informed me, in a furtive kind of a voice, that he suffered from terrible pains in his arm after an attack of shingles. 'I can't bear anything to touch me there,' he said, 'not even to brush against the hairs in my armpit.'

'You should try to calm down a little,' I murmured, trying to be friendly. I have a deep voice that seems to soothe some people. 'Why don't you just rest now for a while? Maybe get some sleep. Then, when

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you wake up, things might look different. You never know, things might even start to make sense again.'

Some people manage to do that straight away after they have been admitted. It just seems to click them into focus and they get things sorted out inside their head.

The fact was, Harry – his name is Harold Edward Severn by the way but we like to call people by their first names – didn't even watch as I added his bowler hat to the pile of clothes that needed to go to the laundry. I have been borrowing a book or two from Alan and Michael and I have been learning about the subconscious mind. I see it as an inner landscape in which we each have this deep well, a sort of well of life, and this is the reason why we'll fight like hell to survive. Harry had sunk right down to the bottom of his well. And that was why he didn't give a damn anymore.

I took off his shoes (because of the laces) and his tie and braces for the same reason. The pills – and he had several varieties of them – I put to one side to pass on to Alan when I got back to the nurses' station.

Dressed in ward pyjamas, poor old Harry was looking a little bit shocked. I had another rummage in the bag he must have packed for himself when the police arrived to take him away. I didn't learn much about him from the contents of that bag. Apart from his medication, I discovered nothing except his razor and a toothbrush. I left him the toothbrush and added the razor to the pile I was taking.

I am forgetting – there was one other thing, a single old book with yellowed pages. It was about the size of a Gideon's Bible. I squinted at the cover as I put it down on the mattress beside him. It was the only other thing I could let him keep from the contents of his bag. It was by a writer called Arthur Koestler. The title was *Darkness at Noon*.

Maybe Harry would have felt better if I could have left him on his own for a while. He could have put his head down and reflected on things. Unfortunately, I couldn't just let him do this.

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Doctor Henessy – Maggie – had put him on ‘CNOs’, which means constant nursing observations. CNOs can’t be left on their own even to go to the toilet. And I wasn’t just being inquisitive then, looking through Harry’s personal things. He had been admitted to what is called a ‘Safe Room’ on the first floor ward we call ‘Gerries’. This room has no glass: the window is a double plastic laminate, which is unbreakable, like the panel in the door. There are no plug sockets he could stick a piece of metal into and electrocute himself. The light is also unbreakable and flush with the ceiling. Harry was a ‘DSH’, which means at risk of deliberate self harm. I carried his things out into the corridor and handed them to Michael and then I fetched a chair back out of the dining room and wedged it in the open door, so I could keep an eye on him.

There’s an interesting idea the psychiatrists call a key stimulus, by which they mean an emotional trigger. You could regard it as the detonator on a mental time bomb. For Harry I assumed this would have something to do with his wife. Put him near her, put even the thought of her into his mind, and he wanted to murder her. But now, separated from her and with this calming situation around him, there was a chance that the normal Harry might show through.

3

Let me tell you – and I'm doing my best to keep my language under control – I'm having some trouble with the system right now. And that's why I had to beg ten minutes cover from Michael so I could go and see Brian.

The way we work it, there are two shifts, earlies and lates. Earlies begin at seven in the morning and finish at three o'clock. Lates begin at two and finish at ten o'clock in the evening. There's a half hour break for lunch. On earlies, this is at twelve noon, if you're lucky. On lates, it's at six-thirty in the evening. Of course other people work things differently.

There are day staff, like Anna on Reception, and there are the Night Owls, who work regular nights. I don't know if they get extra pay for that, but if they do, they deserve it.

The problem, for me at least, is getting my fair share of weekends off.

I'm not a whinger. A lot of the work on a psychiatric ward is tedious. It's a funny thing, but I don't mind even the most boring routines. I can't say I like shovelling shit, but there isn't much of that, not like on a long-stay geriatric ward. On the whole I like working on the Unit more than I would have thought when I began here five months ago.

For example, if Harry had wanted to talk to me, I'd have been happy to listen. I've always been a good listener. My Uncle Tony says that it's because I have a curiosity for people like a vacuum cleaner has for dirt. But I prefer to see it as an empathic quality. It's in my nature to empathise with people.

But I can't be doing with losing my free weekends.

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Weekends off are like gold dust. We take it in turns to work weekends and only one of the three Health Care Assistants gets Saturday and Sunday off at a time. Most months I just get a single weekend off but this month, unusually – fantastically – it is two. Enter old Billy Welsh and his very convenient bad back. With just the two of us left working, I lose one of my two weekends – or so Admin would like to think.

That was why I cadged ten minutes off from specializing Harry so I could go to see Brian on the ground floor.

Brian is about thirty years old. He was wearing the usual dark grey suit, a white shirt and a shades-of-red silk tie.

‘I thought you would be pleased to get the overtime,’ he said to me.

‘Not if it means I don’t get my two weekends this month.’ I made no secret of the fact that I was well and truly brassed off with him. ‘I’ve made plans for every single free weekend for the next two or three months.’

In fact I never make plans for anything, but that’s none of his business. It was just another part of my strategy of battering down hard on his head. Letting him see that he wasn’t going to get away with this.

‘When you contracted to be employed by us, you agreed to work with the vicissitudes of the system.’

‘Vicissitudes my eye!’ I said to him. ‘Look, Brian! If you can get by without me, then you can just give me my cards.’

‘There’s no need for this kind of confrontation.’

‘Do you think there will be a queue of people outside your door, willing to work these shifts for the wages you pay me?’

‘It’s no problem,’ said he, somewhat red-faced. ‘We’ll go to the banking agency.’

No problem! Why the hell didn’t he think of the banking agency before he tried to rob me of my second weekend!

Grumpy came to see Harry at twelve o’clock. Grumpy is the name we give to Doctor Alasdair Dury, who is the senior psychiatrist on the Unit.

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He's about sixty years old. You can be sure that he didn't thank me for the way I had helped the nursing staff handle his patient. He doesn't call us health care assistants, or HCAs. He calls us orderlies. Whatever you call us, HCAs or orderlies, we are at the bottom of the heap in the National Health Service. We are the bums of the system. You require no training at all to become a health care assistant, so people like Grumpy can crap on you whenever they feel like it.

Maybe I was still feeling angry from my encounter with Brian half an hour earlier, and it didn't help that Grumpy's lateness was delaying my lunch break. But I have to admit that Grumpy was very patient with Harry.

There are three psychiatrists working on the Psychiatric Unit, and Grumpy is the most old-fashioned. He is what they call a post-Freudian psychoanalyst, as well as being a psycho-geriatrician. Grumpy thinks the main thing is to let people talk to him for as long as they want. Sometimes I think he goes to sleep while they are talking because his eyelids droop and he says nothing. What that means is his interviews can drag on for hours. He grunts a lot, which makes you think he's snoring, and he even belches now and then while he's with his patients. Once I actually saw him lift one cheek off the chair and sneakily fart.

I had hoped to get off the CNOs for my lunch while Grumpy was there but he told me to move inside and close the door. Listening in to the interview I did learn some interesting details about Harry. I discovered that he was a retired businessman, a work-study engineer. It was his dog that had made him want to strangle his wife. The dog was the detonator on Harry's mental bomb.

Harry didn't even deny what he had done. In fact he talked about it as if it were the most natural thing in the world.

'Muriel wouldn't let me do it,' he said in a flat tone of voice. 'She kept slapping my face.'

Muriel, it seems, is the name of Harry's wife. I wouldn't be at all surprised after that if Muriel has a notion in her head to get rid of Harry.

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Anyway, from what he was saying, he tried to strangle her off and on over several hours before she got fed up with him and called the police.

The thing that really did upset him – the emotional trigger – was the fact that Muriel had had his dog put down when he went away to Brighton for a few days' holiday. He wept when he told Grumpy that, because he wished he had taken the dog with him.

'Before she got arthritic,' he said, 'I used to take Nobby with me for company. We'd go down to Brighton in my car. We liked to walk along the beach together.'

The dog was a little Scottish terrier. It sounded to me as if Nobby had got so decrepit that Muriel must have been waiting for the chance to get rid of her. I mean, it sounded as if Muriel was jealous of Harry's dog.

4

The Unit is part of the District General Hospital in the sense that it shares the same grounds and there is a corridor that links them, but when you go in through those twin glass doors you might as well be landing on the moon.

One reason for this is that people can stay here for up to six months. People come in here to live for a while. This is where they come to escape those flooded burrows down on the ground.

Nobody in the building wears any kind of a uniform, not even the consultants. They dress in ordinary clothes. As far as the nurses are concerned, I'm talking about jeans and sweatshirts or pullovers, so it can be difficult at first to tell the nurses from the patients. The doctors tend to look a bit more formal. For example my favourite, Maggie, always looks smart in a dark skirt or trousers. The consultants are the only ones who wear suits. That's if you regard the double-breasted shaggy jackets with the odd button missing and the crumpled trousers that Grumpy wears as suits. There is a garden where some of the patients work and a gym and a Day Centre, with its own badminton court. So you get the picture. It has to be different, otherwise the patients would feel lost when they went back into the world outside.

There are three wards, one downstairs where you also find the offices, and two upstairs, one of which is for Gerries – which is psychogeriatrics.

The ward on the bottom is Joseph Mallord William Turner, where, according to reputation, the patients are said to be all 'bad'. Upstairs you find John Constable, where they are all 'mad'. And finally, of course, there

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is William Blake, also known as Gerries, where they are both 'mad and bad'.

You enter through a vestibule with big glass windows and on your right is a map of the Unit and a machine selling soft drinks and chocolates. You just walk on through the second pair of doors, inside which you find Reception. This is where Harry was fighting everybody when he came in.

Reception is carpeted in blues and greys. Everybody smiles at Anna, who is sitting there behind her desk. She works the dayshift hours, which are nine to five. Anna is not to be confused with Ann. No way could anybody possibly confuse them, once they had met Anna. Anna is the sexiest woman in the world. She's Dutch, about five eight and has platinum blonde hair to about an inch below her chin.

Even old Grumpy must be lusting after Anna.

Anna is carrying out a staff integration exercise of her own. But we all have to take our place in the queue because she's working her way through the male nurses, giving them what she calls her 'counselling'. I dream about being counselled by Anna so today, as usual, I gave her a bit of a smile when I arrived and passed by her desk.

'Hi, Anna!'

Anna reached out and ruffled my hair.

'Hiya, Antonio Banderas!' she called out, laughing. You wouldn't believe how she gets on my nerves with that kind of thing at times.

Past Reception you find the offices for secretaries, Admin. and the consultants, which are separate from their outpatient consulting rooms. I forgot to mention there's a Computer Office, where some of the records are kept. Then, at the bottom of the corridor just before you get to Turner, there's the Treatment Suite. This is where I spent most of this morning. But first I had to get away from Grumpy, who was on the warpath.

Grumpy is a bit touchy these days because of Dr Boyson's new book. Dr Boyson is Grumpy's main rival on the Unit. He has written a best-selling book called *Choices*, in which he argues the case for his liberal

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philosophy of life. Grumpy thinks liberal thinking like this has given rise to a society that would consider such a thing as euthanasia.

So old Grumpy and 'Choices' Boyson are feudin' doctors, if only in a very English kind of a way. They make a point of not speaking to each other when they meet on the wards.

Anyway, what had set the fuse today was the fact that some doctor had told the papers that he helped at least fifty of his patients to die.

Grumpy was waving his morning paper about in the nurses' office.

'They want doctors to become bloody executioners!' he said.

I hadn't taken much notice of the euthanasia debate before, to be honest with you, but old Grumpy got me interested.

So I read the article after Grumpy had stormed off to his clinic. I also had a good look at the picture of this slate-wiper of patients. To me he just looked like a white-haired old man, climbing out of his car for a routine day at the office. It seems that this doctor had helped a woman suffering from motor neurone disease to die. Motor neurone disease is a really horrible condition where you get more and more paralysed while your brain remains active. This poor woman had reached the point where she could no longer speak or swallow. So the doctor gave her twenty times the normal dose of a sleeping tablet called Temazepam and supplied her with a large plastic bag, known as a 'customized exit bag', which is the size of a dustbin liner and has an adhesive neck seal.

'The patient took an overdose of Temazepam and the plastic bag was then involved,' he explained to the reporter. 'That is a way you can guarantee death.'

No kidding!

I got so interested in reading the paper that I was a little late leaving the nurses office and I had to hurry to help out on the Treatment Suite.

I like working on the Treatment Suite, which is the psychiatric equivalent of an operating theatre. This is where we give some of the really sick patients electric shock therapy. I know that there are people who don't agree with this kind of treatment. They think it's barbaric,

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making sick people have fits in order to treat them. Before I came to work here I probably felt the same because I had never seen people who were really sick in their minds. I had some vague idea they were just a bit nervous or depressed, a little worse than I feel myself with a hangover. It was a shock for me to come face to face with what it is really like to blow your mind.

The junior doctors, who are called Senior House Officers or 'SHOs', give the shock therapy for their consultants, who always seem to be too busy. But there has to be an anaesthetist knocking them out first. This morning the anaesthetist was Doctor Ruth Thompson, who is aged about fifty with dyed red hair, and the SHO was my favourite, Maggie, looking cute in a creamy blouse and black skirt. It often seems to be Maggie who is asked to give the patients their therapeutic shocks. She once told me that she has been through feminism and come out the other side, whatever that means.

'How are you?' she said to me with her busy little smile. Maggie is always friendly to me. She has dark curly hair, cut short, like a boy's.

'Struggling!' I returned the smile.

If it wasn't for Tabi I could fall truly, madly and deeply in love with Maggie. It isn't just the fact that she's an intelligent woman, it's the fierceness about the way she cares for her patients.

There can be as many as three patients on these sessions, which take place on Tuesday or, as today, on a Friday morning. I had to go up to William Blake to fetch an old lady who was waiting there in a wheelchair. She was a really frail person, tiny and thin, with that waxy kind of sweat you notice about them, and there was a dressing around her throat where the surgeons had sewn her up after she tried to kill herself. Her name was Mrs Feinstein – Freda.

I gave her a smile and said, 'Good morning, Freda.' I try not to be too boisterous with people because I want to be respectful, even though I like to pull their legs.

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Freda didn't respond at all. Her eyes were staring. Nothing was moving, not even her eyelids. They had put cellulose drops in her eyes to stop her corneas ulcerating. Maggie, who met up with us at the lift and walked with us along the corridor to the Treatment Suite, told me that if ECT couldn't do the trick she didn't know what would.

She explained to me, in a whisper that caused her breath to brush against my ear, 'Her mind is paralysed, just like her muscles.'

That idea really startled me.

So, along the way, Maggie told me more about Freda's condition, a complication called depressive retardation, when all your muscles turn to lead.

Freda had cut her throat because of a thirty-pound gas bill, when she had thousands in the bank.

'We've tried everything else and nothing has helped her. All the tablets and injections, even feeding her through a central line that goes through a vein in her neck and straight into the right atrium of her heart.'

Maggie didn't need to justify the electric shock treatment to me. I could see that Freda was going to die unless the shock treatment cured her.

It's not entirely accidental that I came to work in the Psychiatric Unit. I'm interested in all aspects of mental illness, including electric shock treatment. That's why I volunteer to help out in the Treatment Suite whenever they want me.

There's a waiting room with walls and ceiling the blue of a summer sky over a carpet the colour of a hayfield. The fitter patients walk into the room and then wait for the anaesthetist in an upholstered chair with wooden arms. Freda sat patiently in her wheelchair. I stayed behind, helping out Maggie and the anaesthetist, Doctor Thompson, until Freda was coming round again after the electric shock had blasted away the depressive cobwebs from her brain.

Then, afterwards, I watched while Maggie wrote the details into the notes and filled in the chart.

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After ECT one of the experienced nurses comes into the recovery room and does a cognitive function assessment, to make sure there is no brain damage. Today it was Karim Patel who arrived to do the assessment. It always amazes me how the patient wakes up within a minute or so of the fit and how soon they are able to start the assessment after that.

Karim helped me to turn Freda over on to her side on the trolley and then I took her through into the recovery room.

When I lifted Freda back into the wheelchair, she wasn't like a statue any more. She was slumped over to her left side with her head down on a floppy neck and Karim, who speaks with a quiet Pakistani accent, started going through the list of questions. All Freda spoke was three words. She whispered in this croaky little voice, 'Thank you, Doctor,' no matter what question the nurse tried to ask her.

So there I was, rolling her back in her chair to the ward, and she said the same thing to me. I was just explaining to her, 'Freda – I am going to take you over the bump into the lift.'

Then she said it to me, without ever lifting her head up from that dropped-down position: 'Thank you, Doctor.'

It really made me feel good. I know it's only a small thing but it made me feel that even the bum of the system could make some kind of a contribution.

5

I parked the wheelchair in the cubicle next to the linen cupboard and then I checked with Michael to see if it was all right for me to go and see Harry.

Michael is the Ward Manager on William Blake. He's positively ancient amongst the male nurses, at fifty years old. He is also gay, with a dozen gold studs in his ears, and his hair hangs down in a wide tail on the back of his neck in the style known as a mullet.

He said it was okay for me to go in and have a few words with Harry. In fact he seemed to appreciate the gesture.

It seems sad to me that not a single friend or relative – Muriel included – has come to see Harry since his admission to the Unit.

Harry has been moved out of the Safe Room and into a side ward, to allow him time on his own to acclimatise to the ward routine. I knocked very lightly on the door before I entered, but he didn't appear to notice me at all. He was dozing in his chair beside the window. That's the trouble when you put somebody on antidepressant drugs. The drugs can make people sleepy. Sometimes they can make patients so confused they are rambling out of their skulls.

Harry had slumped down to the right and I had to prop him up in the chair so that he wouldn't injure himself. While I was doing so I saw that the book had fallen out of his hand. It was lying on the carpet with the pages turned down, still open at the place he had stopped reading.

I picked up the book and I went to put it on top of his locker. But I didn't want him to lose track of his progress and so I glanced at it while I was considering how to mark the page. There was a name written down in faded ink on the blank pages just inside the cover: *R. Giles*. It surprised

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me that it wasn't Harry's name. I began to feel guilty because it all seemed very personal to him. At the same time I couldn't help thinking about this person called Giles, who had written his name inside the cover of Harry's book. It would never have occurred to me to do something like that. So I was starting to wonder if a book would have to have some really special kind of meaning for somebody to write his name in it. I almost put it down right then but instead I still held it in my hands. The yellowed pages looked as if they had been read and re-read. I didn't know if it was Harry or this person called Giles who had found the book so interesting. I had never had the opportunity to read *Darkness at Noon*. But now I saw that Harry had reached page 109, a chapter called, THE SECOND HEARING. My eye caught a snatch of conversation:

'Now do you believe me?' whispered No 406, and smiled at him happily. Rubashov nodded. Then the old man's face darkened: Rubashov recognized the expression of fear, which fell on him every time he was shut into his cell.

The words startled me. I wondered if this was how Harry looked upon his admission to the Unit. I wondered if he also felt as if he was shut away inside his cell.

There was a blue meals menu on top of the locker so I folded this in half and put it into the book to mark the page for him. Then I closed the book, still holding it in my hands. I looked down at the worn cover, which had a picture of the man I presumed was Rubashov, though you couldn't be at all sure what he looked like because the face on the cover had been deliberately scratched out. It was a dark cover, with tones that were all shades of midnight. I couldn't help but wonder about the connection between Giles and Harry. I had been so convinced that nobody but Harry had ever read that book. All that wear, all those thumbed pages. I put it down carefully on the top of his locker.

Suddenly Harry started shouting at the top of his voice, with his eyes staring.

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There weren't any real words to the shout. It was more of a howling, to be honest with you.

He looked like he was taking hold of something really tight in his right fist. He was climbing up out of his chair. There was such a wild look in his eyes. I thought he was throwing something out of his right hand, or at least he was throwing it in his imagination, out of the clenched fist of his right hand.

He was making such a racket that I tried to calm him down and then Michael popped his head around the door to check what was going on.

'It's all right,' I said, chuckling. 'He's only dreaming. Some kind of nightmare.'

Michael told me to wake him up. I made the mistake of shaking his right shoulder, forgetting that this was the side where he had had the shingles. So he started cursing and swearing and muttering, 'Oh, the pain – the pain!'

'Hey – I'm sorry, Harry,' I said, straightening him out in the chair. 'Would you like me to get you something? A cup of tea or a newspaper?'

'Who the hell are you?'

'Don't you remember me?'

Harry has a habit I have noticed with quite a few of the patients. He refuses to look you in the eyes. Even now, in response to my question, he only gave me a sideways glance, when those bright blue eyes barely flickered in my direction.

'The tea wallah!' he barked.

'Yeah, that's me,' I laughed, shifting uneasily on the edge of his bed. 'So you do remember? My name is Mylie.'

'What kind of a name is that?'

'Mylie O'Farrell,' I added.

'Sounds like an Irish name to me.'

'I come from Sheffield.'

'Sheffield?'

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'Yeah, you've heard of Sheffield,' I muttered, because he had said it with that tone of voice I have sometimes encountered with Londoners. 'It's either the fourth or the fifth biggest city in England, depending where you place Manchester. I'm not sure that even Manchester knows exactly where to place Manchester.'

'No need to get touchy!' he said. 'I know where Sheffield is.'

'Yeah!'

'I know all about Sheffield,' he said, making a point of not looking me in the eyes again. 'The Independent Socialist Republic of South Yorkshire.'

I didn't bother to correct him, although times have changed. Sheffield is more of a Liberal Democrat city these days. 'There was a time,' I said, 'when more than half of the quality steel in the world was made in Sheffield.'

'Is that so?' he answered, looking into the distance.

'Yeah, as a matter of fact it is!'

It's the kind of thing that gives you a pretty good feeling, if you were born in Sheffield. What made me mad was the fact that it didn't matter a damn to Harry.

6

South of the Marylebone flyover you find the rich Arabs, who are willing to pay upwards of a thousand pounds a week for a single apartment so they can stay the summer in London and escape the heat back home. North of the flyover is where I live, in a puce-brick terraced house off the Edgware Road, sandwiched between the blocks of Westminster Council flats, and with an entrance off a grimy tunnel. This is the residence I share with my friends, Janus and Rich. Here we pay two hundred pounds a week for the entire house. We call it 'The Palace'.

I was still feeling pretty wound up as I was headed back there on the 98 bus. Along the way, I called in at the Church Street market, where I bought a crinkly lettuce, tomatoes and a cucumber from an Edwardian stall on iron-shod wheels. When I got in, I made myself a bowl of pasta to go with the salad and sat down alone at the scarred wooden table in the living room. Then I made a mug of tea, carried it upstairs to my room and I played Corinne Bailey Ray on my I-pod. Some music sounds better loud from a player, so it fills the room. But the mood I was in was I-pod personal.

Corinne is really going places fast. This is her first CD, which has just her name and her image, looking kind of cute and awkward, in a shoe-string-strap black dress, on the cover. I wouldn't even know how to start to describe her voice, other than to say it is vulnerable-in-trouble-rusty-magical, like Billy Holiday reborn. Although it was just afternoon, it felt like wounded midnight to me, and she assuaged my wound. What I was thinking about was Tabi's father, Doctor Mather, who used to say that Sheffield was an ugly picture in a beautiful frame. I know what he meant

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by it: the beautiful frame is the Derbyshire Dales. But I wouldn't have talked about Sheffield like that. The trouble with people is they have to make boxes so they can put their ideas into them.

To tell you the truth, I was still cursing Harry's existence. It wasn't just the tone of his voice when he had said 'Sheffield' like that. It was the way he had told me I had an Irish name, like it was some kind of a disadvantage or something.

I was born from the union of a Sheffield mother and an Irish father. I don't remember too much about my father, Tommy, because he died from a cerebral haemorrhage when I was eight years old. I remember a lot more about my Irish grandfather, Patrick, because I once stayed with him in Ireland during the long summer holidays. Patrick was the first of the O'Farrell family to come to England. He came over from Ireland during the war and he volunteered to join the army. I don't know why he did that, when he didn't need to. All I know is that he came from a place called Tramore, which is a seaside resort on the southern Irish coastline. After the war he went back to Tramore but later his two sons, Tommy and Tony, followed his example and came to England, and they ended up in Sheffield looking for work. Tommy became a steelworker and married my mother, Brenda, while Tony went into my grandfather's taxi business, back then, when my English grandfather was still alive. So there you have it, the O'Farrell family history, and you can work it out for yourself that I am half Irish and half Sheffield steel.

But this is all getting slightly boring and so I am not going to say any more about it except that I can imagine what my father saw in my mother.

Mum and I have things in common. She is inclined to be very stubborn. That's one way in which I take after my mother. I also take after her in my looks. Mum is dark enough to be Italian. That's the reason I tan easily and why I have a thick head of blue-black hair.

People think it's a big deal having black wavy hair. I know they talk about the ideal man as being tall (I am six-one) and dark and handsome. I have the dark bit all right, but I don't think I'm quite there on the

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handsome. And being dark has its disadvantages. For example, if I really want to look clean-faced I have to shave twice a day.

I used to think I was what they call an angry young man until I met Janus.

I don't know why I got on to talking about Janus. I really don't want to talk about that madman right now, to be honest with you. Instead I would like to explain some of the great influences in my life. These are the people I call my stepping stones. The people I am talking about are Bob Marley, Bertrand Russell and Leonardo da Vinci. Now I know this might seem a peculiar kind of a list to you, but there are good reasons why I picked them.

For example, I like da Vinci because in spite of the fact that he was such an arrogant man he had a really inventive mind. It's funny, when you think about it, how many of these geniuses were also a little bit crazy. I am thinking also of Bertrand Russell, leching after his housemaids, and Isaac Newton, who worked out the exact date of the Day of Judgement.

Of course, most of the time I don't bother to shave twice a day. The only time I ever did was when I was going out with Tabi. She was my girlfriend back in Sheffield. She's about five nine tall, with straight brown hair. I don't know how it is now but she used to have long hair about halfway down her back.

Most people would think she is beautiful. I know I certainly do. I get wound up when I am thinking about Tabi, so I have to be careful what I say.

I'm not going to say anything more about her right now except to explain that there were people who didn't like the fact that Tabi and I were seeing each other. To a certain extent I can't blame them. Tabi comes from the Ecclesall Road and I come from the Abbeydale Road. The lawyers and doctors live in Ecclesall and the taxi drivers live down in Abbeydale. But there was another and even better reason why they didn't like our going out together: I had a bit of a reputation when it came to girls.

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Tabi went to the same comprehensive school as me. She was always in the top two or three of the class and I was usually somewhere near the bottom. I'm not blaming the teachers, who were mostly all right, but they have to teach what they are told to teach and I suspect they are as bored with it as I was. I must have been a great disappointment to my mother, who hoped I was another Einstein. That's mums for you, I suppose.

Once in my life I wrote an essay that got ten out of ten in English. It was when I had a probationary teacher you could have a bit of a laugh with. I got along with him really well. He told me I could just go ahead and write about whatever interested me for a change and so I talked about Sheffield and the stupid way my father had died and about how my Uncle Tony sold his house and brought his family to live next door to us. He did that when he was really short of money. I thought it was a nice thing to do when my mum was going around the bend with grief.

The truth is I was always in some kind of bother at school. I didn't do criminal things – nothing like that. It was just the fact I wasn't interested.

I suppose it's also true that I came down to London because of Tabi, although I haven't ever tried to get in touch.

Tabi is a first year student at the Queen Mary and Westfield College, which is one of about a thousand colleges all over London that are connected with London University. Before I met her, I had had quite a few girlfriends, or half a dozen anyway, that my friends used to say were dogs. I think that's a tragic way to talk about anybody. One of these girls was Alison Morley. She was two years older than me, a sixth-form Art student, who made casts of her body for her A-level project. I walked her home one night after a disco. We had both knocked back our fair share of lager and the walk to her place was too long for my bladder to wait. In my embarrassment, I had to turn down a small alleyway to get relief. I knew nothing about girls then. I didn't know if she would be disgusted, or even if she would wait for me. You can imagine how surprised I was when I returned to find her pirouetting, a little bit unsteadily, under the street

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light, her hands stretched out to either side and her eyes and mouth wide open to the rain. She was laughing like a maniac.

She was a bit of a wild case, was Alison, and she soon had me laughing with her. We did it behind her house, up against the backstreet wall in the rain. I had never had sex with anybody in my life before but she showed me what to do.

What I am saying is that neither of us made a big deal out of it. It seemed like a perfectly natural thing to do, like the logical conclusion to the two of us walking home together. And don't get any big ideas that I skanked her, pretending that I loved her or anything. Nothing like that at all. Alison was a really nice person, no matter that some of my friends made barking sounds whenever she walked past at school after that. I was in my final year for GCSEs at the time, so I'd have been about sixteen years old. Okay – so she wouldn't have won any Miss World contest but she had a truly creative way of looking at life.

Those clever friends of mine, what they failed to grasp is that you can enjoy sex with an intelligent women, even if she isn't a film star. To tell you the truth, I remember Alison with a good deal more affection than I do those 'woof-woofing' friends.

Tabi of course was different.

I must have known Tabi just about as long as I can remember. She went to the same junior school as I did although we were never in the same group of friends. There was no kind of needle there, nothing like that. We just had different circles we moved in because Tabi's father was a doctor.

Everybody calls him mad Doctor Mather.

He had lost his wife years before, just as my mum had lost my dad, and he didn't bother to look after himself. My Uncle Tony said he was a sarcastic Scotch pig because he told him that his bones weren't filled with red marrow but with black ingratitude.

Tony can be a bit of a nuisance at times, when he's worrying about his heart. He's always thinking he's about to have a heart attack, when he has

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lost a bundle on the horses. Of course he doesn't ever come out and say that he's worrying about his heart. Instead he lies down on the couch saying he feels dizzy, or he has this pain that is killing him around his left nipple.

Doctor Mather has been my family's doctor ever since I was a baby. He runs what is called a one-man practice.

Everybody wants him to be their doctor, in spite of the fact that he's sarcastic. You should hear the way he curses you if you call him out at night! Tony was always calling him out with his complaints. I remember a time when Tony got into a panic about three in the morning and my mother sent me with him to Doctor Mather's house. Tony made me throw pebbles at the window. He was groaning and rolling around the place and whining that he was having a heart attack. I can still see the doctor's head poking out of the window on the first floor and I can hear him cursing down at my Uncle Tony:

'You've just about given me a heart attack, you hypochondriacal Irish shite!'

Doctor Mather is only crazy in the way people sometimes lose the plot of it as they get older, and he thinks the world of Tabi. He'd let her do just about anything she wanted to do, because he trusts her. I think it's cool when a father trusts his daughter like that.

I have often wondered why Tabi and I hit it off in the way we did – whether these things are Karma, as some people believe, or whether Karma is just another word for the chaos theory, which is a great favourite with my friend Janus.

Tabi has one of those beautiful faces, with a high forehead. She looks like a model with tits, to be really honest with you. I'm ashamed to admit that that was the image I had of her at that time.

With my being tall and shaving from an early age, I was spending most evenings with my friends in pubs and discos while Tabi, who is actually two months older than me, was working for her A-levels. Now and then, on the occasions we'd meet, it was clear, from the friendly

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banter we had between us, that she found me easy to talk to. She must have fancied me more than I thought from what she told me later, but of course I didn't know that then. Naturally I thought that her opinion of me was the same as everybody else's.

The reason we first got together in a deeper than friendly way, was accidental. It was during the Easter break, after we had taken the A-level mock exams, and we happened to meet at the rave where most of our year were getting bladdered. I must have thought she looked like she needed somebody to see her home. It was no bother since we only lived at opposite ends of the same road. We had to walk about three miles out of the city centre but it was a nice cool night in early April, if a little breezy. There was a pleasant kind of a feeling between us, although we didn't hold hands or link arms or anything. I can remember how the air felt like frost congealing on my skin and the sycamores were like columns of marching soldiers, swaying in the wind because they were only marking time.

Along the way we talked about how Stone Roses had paved the way for Bands such as Oasis and The Verve. At some stage Tabi let me know that her father had gone on his annual pilgrimage to Scotland, with the intention of drowning in Glenmorangie whisky.

So there we were, just the two of us, when we got back to the big stone house where she lived, and I found myself throwing my leather jacket across the dining table in the cavernous kitchen. Then she surprised me by taking a cigarette out of a twenty pack she had brought back with her in her handbag.

I was surprised because it wasn't the kind of thing I would have expected from Tabi. Cigarettes were not the thing among the smart set in my year. It wasn't even a spliff or anything. It was only a Marlboro – the first out of a virgin pack. I suppose I wondered what was going on.

'Can I ask you something?' she said, while she was making a mess of lighting her cigarette off the gas ring on their huge old range.

I thought, *Oh, shit!* I just don't fancy it when somebody starts a conversation off like that.

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'You're so laid back. You just don't give a damn.' Her voice was slurred, but not all that slurred.

'What I am, Tabi, is stupid.'

'Oh, come on! You're only stupid in the way you want yourself to be stupid. I've been watching you, Mylie. Some of the girls have been talking about you.'

You have no idea how things like that irritate me. I hate it when other people, especially girls, talk about me.

'I mean – God! You don't care what anybody thinks about you.'

I couldn't be bothered to argue with her. I was still thinking about what she had just said, about talking about me with those other girls. I felt a wave of anger come up out of the pit of my stomach. I must have looked less than grateful, accepting a cigarette from this girl who didn't really smoke and taking a couple of drags, leaning my arm on the kitchen table.

'I wish I could understand somebody like you, Mylie,' she pushed it, squinting against the smoke. By now her perfume was all over the place. You couldn't escape it. And she has these big grey eyes that never seem to really look at you. They focus somewhere at the back of your head.

If she thought I was going to talk about myself with her, she didn't know me. I didn't say anything at all. The truth was I was getting twitchy. She had found a Ray Charles CD that belonged to her father, and while I was seeing to the coffee we sat and smoked, listening to tracks like 'You Are My Sunshine' and 'I Can't Stop Loving You'. It would be hard to find any music of quality that I couldn't enjoy. Honestly – you'll find it difficult to believe that I wasn't all that suspicious, even then, but that's how stupid I can be. I made the coffee and I found some milk in the old boneshaker of a fridge.

'You know what some of us are thinking of doing?'

'What's that?' I slid the mug in front of her.

This was the time when miniskirts had come back into fashion, with splits up to their hips, and she was wearing one. The smoke was making

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her eyes water so her eye makeup was starting to spread out over her face, like spiders' webs. She had taken to half leaning on the table very close to me, so her right breast was pressing against my arm.

'Wouldn't you love to take a year off after A-levels?' she asked me. 'A group of us are planning to chill out for a while before university. We thought we could buy a minibus cheap in Australia and do it up for a laugh and drive all over the Nullarbor Plain.' She laughed. Tabi has a delicious low-pitched kind of laugh. 'You don't need to look at me like that.'

Of course I knew she would never go to Australia, but I didn't tell her that. What I was thinking was that I wouldn't have minded getting lost in the desert of Australia with her myself. Drinking beer and getting laid every night wouldn't be half bad.

Tabi was saying, 'I really hate even thinking about going straight to university after this. I know I'm going to have to work like hell to get the grades I need.'

I wondered why she was talking like this. You don't know her – I mean, you don't know the image she had, up to this point, projected into the world. I was thinking that I wouldn't have minded going to university if they had some course that I was really interested in. Psychology hadn't yet occurred to me, although it interests me now. I think now that I might be happy studying psychology. I could get a kick out of sitting around just thinking about the mind and all that. Janus doesn't half mock me when I say things like that to him. He says, 'You should be hung up by the bollocks, old boy, to get the circulation back to your brains!'

I suppose I was shaking my head or something because Tabi suddenly started crying. I mean, weeping real tears.

She was saying something to the effect of: 'Oh, shit, shit – shit! Don't listen to me, Mylie. I'm drunk.'

I couldn't believe that she was as drunk as she was making out. I was taking careful swigs of my coffee to hide the fact I was getting horny from the way she was looking at me. Women know how to do that out of

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instinct. I just couldn't help myself. I reached out and brushed one of those tears that were running down her face.

So that was how we ended up climbing the stairs to her bedroom.

She never told me she planned it but later on I realised that she had. I should have suspected it there and then, and maybe I did too and didn't mind. Maybe it flattered me that this middle-class girl with the nice clothes and the long brown hair was lusting after me.

7

'Hello, Gorgeous!' Mary growled at me, as I was wheeling the laundry down the ward.

Mary is Lesley's friend. These are our escapologists, a couple of people who have been coming in and out of Constable ward for years. Lesley is little and thin with mousey brown hair cut like a boy's and Mary looks like Desperate Dan. This is one of the surprising things about the people here: they wear their minds on the outside. You get to know them a lot better than anybody you meet in ordinary life, better even than you know your own family and friends.

Lesley is twenty-eight years old. She's one of those people who eat things because of their illness. You are not going to believe it when I tell you that Lesley will even eat light bulbs. I'm not joking.

Lesley, like Harry, is a 'DSH', which means that she does things to herself that cause deliberate self-harm. She does this because she was sexually abused when she was a child. Lesley is the gentlest person I have ever met but she has a fragile sense of her own reality.

We have about twenty of these young women who are all DSHs and every one of them has been sexually abused. It's absolutely tragic.

You would recognise them straight away because they all look about thirteen years old. This is because they dress like children. They sit around all day curled up into themselves, like kids who have just had the hiding of their lives. As you might imagine, they're really damaged people. They can't live a normal life. They abuse themselves all the time. Their arms are all slashed with scars from glass or razor blades. Some of

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them have scars across their throats. All of them have taken countless drug overdoses.

To prevent them doing this, the doctors have an arrangement whereby they let them come into the ward for a limited period every month – something we call ‘respite care’. The consultants, like Doctor Mehta and Doctor Boyson, will offer them this as a way of supporting them when they leave the Unit. I have even heard Doctor Boyson put it to Lesley in a way that is ponderously obvious.

He said to her, ‘I’ll let you come in four days a month, Lesley, provided you promise me that when you go home you won’t harm yourself.’

So Lesley has made that bargain with Doctor Boyson about her good behaviour.

He has also worked out a strategy of treatment for her that is aimed at helping her regain her self-confidence. You are beginning to see why they take so much trouble to make the Unit look more like home, with the staff all dressed and acting like friends who care about you.

The problem with people like Lesley is that when it comes to the time to leave the Unit, they don’t want to go home – not to those flooded burrows down in the ground.

Lesley isn’t content just to be on the ward. She likes to be on Constant Nursing Observations. When a patient is on ‘CNOs’ there has to be a nurse or Health Care Assistant with her twenty-four hours a day. All day yesterday the nurses were doing their best to try to stop Lesley getting herself put on CNOs because it gives them extra work to do.

This week I am back working on earlies. The first thing I knew about it was when Barry, the charge nurse on Constable, called me into his office about eight o’clock to tell me. He said that he wanted me to keep an eye on Lesley. They had had to call out the SHO during the night because she had swallowed a load of drawing pins.

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Lesley had gone around the wards taking the drawing pins out of the notice boards, but she hadn't swallowed them all because she didn't want the posters to fall down.

Everybody just assumed that what she would have done was to bend the spiky bit flat. That's what she's done in the past. But this time she had left all the spiky bits sticking out. They had just got the X-rays back when I got to the office and Barry showed me the drawing pins. I'm talking about dozens of them, in her stomach with the spiky bits sticking out. She had also swallowed three sewing needles, which she must have nicked from OT – big sewing needles, about two to three inches long. I could see the eyes of the needles very clearly on the X-rays. They had still refused to put her on CNOs by the time it came to early morning but then she swallowed one of the light bulbs. Of course she didn't just swallow it whole. She isn't an ostrich. What she did was to take a bulb out of one of the bedside wall-lights and smash it on top of her locker and swallow the broken glass. She was careful to scoop up every piece of broken glass and swallow it, so that nobody else would cut themselves on it.

She won that one.

Lesley got herself put on CNOs. And that means she has had to be put in the Safe Room.

So Mary was left without her best friend. Mary can be a bit of a pest when that happens. She's about forty and a lot bigger than most men. It's fortunate for people such as me, who have to look after her, that she's so gentle.

She first came to her doctor's attention when she said that children were following her around the streets, hitting her and calling her names. You can imagine they would because she looks absolutely bizarre. She wears her hair hanging all the way down her back, a kind of mazy auburn hair with a lot of grey in it. It's long and straggly and she ties it together in a single plait. She has a crimped fringe that starts halfway back on her head and sweeps forward over her eyes to hide the fact that she's balding. It sticks out several inches in front of her face like the peak of a baseball

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cap, only much thicker, more like a ski-slope than the peak of a cap. And then she has glasses and huge dangly earrings. Tons of necklaces all different colours. She wears brightly-coloured clothes and the colours clash. She also wears a red and yellow and green top. She came back into the Unit this time when the police found her in a telephone box shouting and beating up somebody who wasn't there.

The strange thing about Mary is that she's actually a man. She's a massive, awkward-looking man who thinks he's a woman. We have accepted that Mary should be regarded as a woman because she really does act and think like a woman. In fact she believes she's the most beautiful woman in the world. I sympathise with her because she has to shave twice a day. When she's really upset, like when Lesley is bad, she doesn't bother with shaving her chin. She fancies all the male nurses and doctors and they hate it.

Mary has developed quite a crush on me. She wanted somebody to take her to see *Cabaret* and so the nurses told her I was the only one who could take her into the West End.

So now she says, 'Hello, Gorgeous!' in this deep, growly voice, every time I see her.

It's a bit of a pain, but I don't mind.

Mary is the ringleader, always trying to escape from the ward. She pretends to be getting better so that she can get away from observations and then she makes a run for it.

When she first came back this time under a compulsory detention order she was trying to escape every thirty seconds. That was a real drag because the wards aren't locked. The doctors think it's important that the patients know that the wards are never locked. Even the Safe Room is only locked when it absolutely needs to be.

Poor old Mary never gets very far. Sometimes she makes it out into the garden, or even as far as the car park, but somebody always catches up with her and brings her back to us.

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Once I asked Mary why the children were following her and she said to me, 'It's because I'm so beautiful.'

The reason Mary thinks these things is she is also suffering from schizophrenia. She hears the voices of these children following her about and even when she's on the first floor ward she thinks they're knocking on her window because they're jealous of the fact that she's so beautiful. The nurses don't want Doctor Mehta to treat this delusion. They think it's a really lovely delusion because Mary is pleased with herself all the time. So the nurses tell her that the doctor is pleased with her and she comes up to me with a big smile on her face and she says to me, 'Doctor Mehta is very pleased with me.'

That's the wonderful thing about Mary: she's always smiling.

Let me tell you, it isn't just the patients who are worth studying. The staff are all sleeping with one another. They have to keep moving wards as they fall out with each other. It's really hilarious.

I've already told you about the gorgeous tanned five feet eight blonde-haired blue-eyed Anna on reception, who doesn't half give me the horn. The thing that counts against me with gorgeous Anna is the fact I'm only nineteen years old. I complain it isn't fair and keep dropping the hint that I'm nearly twenty. I'll be twenty this coming September.

A lot of the nurses are married men but Anna still works through them at the rate of a new one every two months. Everybody knows about it. Anybody on the ward could give you the list in the right order. She's actually an incredibly nice person, not bitchy to the other women or anything. She once told me a story about when she was eating at a pavement restaurant in Soho and one of the Italian waiters annoyed every other customer because he gathered up the roses off all the tables and made a bouquet of them so he could go down on one knee and propose to her.

Anyway, by the time it got to the tea break, I decided I would call in and say hello to Harry.

These days I often call in to spend a few minutes with Harry.

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Harry and I have got over our differences about Sheffield and my Irish name. Not, I suppose, that Harry ever gave a damn really. I just think he deserves to have somebody call in and see him since his wife hasn't been in to see him at all in what is now three weeks since he was first admitted. It isn't easy to get the time because the wards are short staffed and they have me running around like a train. But I think I should keep an eye on him because he isn't doing so very well.

He's suffering from a severe depression. Only Grumpy doesn't call it depression, he calls it melancholia. That's some term, *melancholia*. I like the sound of it better than common-or-garden depression.

Grumpy is a little bit puzzled about Harry. He hasn't been able to find any definite reason why this melancholia should have come over him. Often when somebody gets really down there's a very obvious reason for it. The psychiatrists will try to wrinkle this out because if they can put the cause right the patient is more likely to get better.

The problem is that some people get depressed for no reason at all. Grumpy knows that Harry does have one or two physical problems to worry about. He has a kind of diabetes that is treated with pills and he has a cancer of the prostate. Of course Grumpy has looked into that – but it seems that the cancer is no big problem. I mean, it isn't slowly eating away at him like you would expect of a cancer. His cancer is keeping itself to itself. In fact the biggest physical problem Harry has to suffer is that pain he still suffers in his right arm and shoulder from an old attack of shingles.

It's the weirdest pain you ever saw. One minute he'll be sitting there, quiet in his chair. And the next thing he'll be screwing his body over to his right, almost touching the ground, groaning, 'Oh, the pain! The pain!'

One thing I have discovered about Harry is the reason he was swearing so much when he first came in.

Harry is an old soldier. He was once an army officer, a major. He didn't mention it to Grumpy during the interview, so, for some reason, he must have decided to keep quiet about it. When you work in a place like

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the Unit, you wonder about things that people leave out. All the same, now that we know about it, it's really obvious. It isn't just the swearing or the sort of clipped way he talks. You'd spot it straight away from the way he swings his arms when he walks.

'Hello, Harry!' I say to him, sitting on the bed next to his armchair so I can talk to him.

Harry doesn't even look at me.

I like to hear him talk, because Harry has an interesting kind of voice. Actually, now that I know he was a major in the army, I can see his voice fits him like his bowler hat.

'My grandad', I continue, 'was a soldier in the North Africa campaign. I just wondered if you could have been in Montgomery's army. That would mean you could have been fighting in the same battles.'

Harry still doesn't say anything, but I can tell he's listening.

'I don't know. I mean, I'm not even sure you're old enough to have fought in the Second World War.'

Of course I know he's old enough. I am just trying to get a reaction. But it's no good. He just won't talk about it at all. Old Harry is still down there at the bottom of his well.

Sometimes I talk to Harry about my friends, Janus and Rich. He doesn't really have much to say. Today I go on to tell him a little bit about Tabi, which he listens to with his right shoulder down and his head turned towards the window. You don't need to tell me that this is a really stupid thing to do. I mean, why the hell do I have to do a thing like that after Tabi and I haven't even seen each other for so long? I have decided that I'm never going to repeat that mistake.

But I hate it when Harry sits there in his chair with his head turned towards the window all the time. It's the *way* he looks towards the window. I know what he's thinking when he keeps looking towards the window. There's nothing to see because it is dark outside.

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I'm not saying that Harry has altogether deteriorated. There are some aspects to his melancholy that have improved.

For one thing, he doesn't have those rages any more. But you can never take anything for granted. I have seen other patients who seem to get better very quickly but all the time they're playing tricks with you and as soon as they get home they top themselves.

It upsets me to have to leave him looking like that and so I start telling him more about Tabi than I planned to. It just slips out, to be honest with you. Anyway, I end up talking about the fact that her father comes from Scotland and the fact that she is into dancing.

'Dancing,' he mutters. It is the first word he has spoken to me in nearly a week and it comes out in this croaky voice. His voice has dropped so low I have to listen carefully to tell that he is saying anything at all.

It's the fact he has spoken this single word that makes me go into it more than I should, telling him how things ended up in a pathetic way between us and how she came down to London to get away from me.

'To get away from you,' he echoes.

That's one of the things people do when they're not well. They copy the words you say to them. It's enough to get on your nerves at times but you just have to be patient with people like Harry.

Hey, but now I am really going to town, telling him all about the way things just didn't work out between us in the end.

Can you believe that I'm doing a stupid thing like that?

It seems to interest him because his head comes around and he has a little spell of groaning under his breath, but then he fixes me with that fierce glare out of his clear blue eyes.

'Young man,' he says. It kills me the way he says that. 'It's no good asking my advice about women.'

Well, that started me laughing all right. It looks to me as if Harry and I have that same problem when it comes to women.

8

Today turned out to be a free Saturday, my first hard-earned weekend off this month, in between finishing on earlies and starting the despised lates again. So, in spite of the fact it was raining down in buckets, I intended to enjoy it.

The first thing I did when I got the job and the agency found me this place to live, was to go out and buy a brand new stack. I put myself into hock for two years to buy the best kit of separates I could afford. I started with a Marantz CD-63 MKII KI Signature, which puts out voices like silver magic and has a monumental bass that is positively scary. I put it together with a pioneer A-605R amp and Tannoy Profile speakers, saving a little money on a still excellent Yamaha KX-390 tape deck and Rega Planar record player.

So after a lunchtime breakfast, I didn't care that it was raining. I loaded Bob Marley's *Legend* CD and I lay on my bed and soaked it up, with a bottle of Bud Ice perched on my sternum, and I thought about Harry.

There is something very interesting about Harry.

It isn't at all unusual for patients to be brought in by the police as CDOs. It isn't even unusual for them to refuse to talk to us at first. Most of these patients are schizophrenics and they don't even know they're ill, so the admission comes as a bit of a shock to the system. But after a few days on treatment the delusions and the voices settle down inside their heads and they come round and start to make some kind of sense.

Harry appears to be different. I've been calling in to see him off and on and I have the impression he is not trying to get better.

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So it was Harry, mainly, that I was thinking about while I was lying on my bed under the black and white poster of Bob and drinking iced beer and listening to 'No Woman No Cry', the live version from the London Lyceum concert.

I could see him really clearly in my mind. Harry. The way he just sits there quietly brooding, or sometimes reading his book. That book seems to be a very important thing to Harry. He treats it like his bible. I was beginning to wish that I had read Arthur Koestler's *Darkness At Noon*. It was only my gut instinct, but I had a feeling that the book might open up the doors to understanding Harry.

Then I thought to myself, *Ah, to hell with it!* I mean, I was feeling so incredibly laid back. There was that warm feeling sinking deeper and deeper into my soul as I drank the beer and let the music take me. I unscrewed a second bottle just to make a point of not thinking about it so much.

But it was no use. I was still feeling so damned good about myself that it seemed the most natural thing in the world to go out and buy the book.

I put on my black leather trench coat and I legged it through the rain to the underground station at Marble Arch, where I took the Central Line eastbound. I realised it was a mistake as soon as I re-emerged into the light on the Tottenham Court Road, because the traffic was atrocious. It was mid Saturday afternoon and still raining down in buckets. A black Mercedes limousine tried to take my legs off while I was making a dash for it across St Giles Circle.

'Ya bloody lunatic!' I shouted at the driver. But he didn't notice me through his tinted windows.

I found a Waterstone's on the Charing Cross Road, with a poster in the window announcing a signing by Doctor Boyson of his book, *Choices*. It really shook me to see his face, with its groomed white hair, staring out at me. There was a steady stream of late afternoon shoppers going into the shop and I joined them, heading down the wall of shelves labelled

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'fiction', and looking for the 'Ks'. I found a copy of Koestler's book, a paperback priced at £6.99. But it looked very different from the book Harry was reading.

Harry's cover is positively evil. This was neat and shiny, a surreal montage of a phrenology head and an eye peering out of the face of a clock. I wandered to the counter, undecided. I was still deliberating at the till, with a queue of impatient customers building up behind me and the girl on the till already red-faced. So I handed her a tenner and pocketed my change before leaving the shop with the book, in a plastic bag, dangling from my hand.

I needed to get back to the opposite side of the road. I was about thirty yards away from the lights and doing my best to negotiate some stationary traffic when a cyclist in a red tracksuit ran straight into me from behind. I felt the blow and I tripped over the front wheel of her bike and fell down into the road. I felt absolutely stupid, caught out there in the middle of the impatient traffic. And there was a pain starting up in my wrist.

'Why don't you watch where you're going?' she said to me as I was struggling back on to my feet.

I couldn't believe that she was blaming me. I was so taken by surprise I didn't know what I was doing. I was rubbing my arm and looking under the wheels of the cars, where my book had fallen down next to the railings.

Then a busker came out of nowhere and helped me get back on to the safety of the pavement. I was covered in crap down the sleeve of my coat, but at least it wasn't torn.

'I saw what happened, mate, and it wasn't your fault,' the busker said, glaring at the disappearing cyclist. 'She was dodging and weaving between the taxis.' He somehow managed to rescue my book, which had fallen out of the plastic bag. The thing was half ruined because about half a dozen vehicles had rolled right over it.

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'One of 'em tried to take off my legs,' I groaned. I was getting really mad by now, clenching my fists as he took me over to his doorway.

'You're nawt from Landin,' he observed, wiping the book down on his sleeve.

'Nah – from Sheffield.' By now I was also grinding my teeth.

I noticed that he was shivering. He was obviously on withdrawal from something pretty potent. He had been playing a saxophone in his doorway here on the corner.

'Sheffield!' he said, offering me a sip of his vodka. 'Two footbowl teams. When wahn goes up the other goes dahn.'

'Yeah!' I muttered. I was rubbing my wrist and shaking my head at the vodka because he looked as if he needed it more than I did. I added the three pound coins from my change to the collection in his cap.

'Fanks, mate,' he waved, taking a swig himself from the bottle. Then he started shouting after me, 'I see it oll the tahn. Those drivers – they're fahkin' animals.'

I found myself back on the edge of the Charing Cross Road, glaring at the traffic, smelling the fumes, my ears hurting from the squeal of brakes, the blaring of some distant horns. By now the plastic bag that had wrapped up the book was still further out into the road, where it was being chewed up by every passing car.

9

It was just past eight in the evening, a little congested because people were coming out of the common room after *Coronation Street* and heading in a chatty little cavalcade up to the Smoke Room.

Jock “the Heron” was pacing up and down, his bulging eyes frantic in his skull-like head, which was jerking forwards and backwards on his horizontal neck. Jock likes to prowl the corridors, with his shoulders bent and his head pushed out before him, talking away to himself in a whisper. But he was held up by the same obstruction that was stopping me getting past with Freda. I had to help her out of the wheelchair and hold her hand as she threaded her footsteps over the legs of Ursula, who was straddling the doorway on the landing on Gerries, thinking she was a gate.

William Blake is in a very artistic mood at the moment and Ursula is one of the actors. She suffers from a condition of waxy flexibility that causes her to make kinetic statements from her body postures.

Then Freda had to say goodbye to Donald, our manic-depressive dressed in baggy cream cords and a string vest. Donald, who exhibits pictures at the Royal Academy when he is well, was drawing one of his fantastically detailed graveyard scenes in red and black crayons on the flipchart near to the nurses’ station. Donald wanted to hug Freda. While he was removing his unlit cigar from his mouth and his Panama hat from his head, I listened to Alice, the Jamaican nursing assistant, singing Ursula back on to her feet so she could go back to her bed and pose in comfort.

‘You’ll miss us, won’t you, Freda?’ I asked her, wheeling her towards the lift.

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'Yes, I will, Mylie,' she said.

We went out through the reception area to get to the main corridor. Here I turned left, so I could take Freda out through the direct exit from the Unit, which opens off an L-shaped corridor on to a tarmac path that runs between rose gardens. Our breath came out in white clouds that trailed us through the icy air. Freda suddenly shoved her right hand out to the side, as if she wanted to touch the roses, which were looking different shades of orange in the electric light.

She called out, in an amazed voice, 'Oh, look – there's almost a full moon.'

'Come on, Freda,' I said to her. 'Don't tell me you've never seen the moon before.'

'I haven't seen it look so lovely,' she laughed, and her laughter was so contagious that I stopped pushing her for a few moments to look up at it.

'Hey, Freda,' I laughed, 'if only I were fifty years older!'

To be honest, I was remembering little Freda, with her almost-bald head, stiff as a statue, coming down for ECT. It was great to see her so much better. I took a deep breath of the icy air, which smelled of nothing but freshness in my nostrils. Freda's two daughters, themselves grey-haired, were waiting by a silver Renault Clio, with the back door open to spill its light out into the falling dark. Freda and I had come to a secret understanding. I put on the brakes and helped her out of the chair when we were still ten feet away so she could walk to the car. Freda wanted to walk on her own.

Her daughters were embarrassed by my presence but they clucked around Freda, wrapping a scarf around her neck so they didn't have to look at the scar on her throat. Then each of them took an arm to help her into the car. I thought it was nice to see her two daughters fussing around her like that but Freda had other ideas. She scolded them in a piping voice. 'You don't need to treat me like an invalid,' she said. 'I can manage very well for myself, thank you.'

I was biting the tip of my tongue to stop myself laughing.

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She stopped when she was halfway through the car door, turned her head to the side to look at me and said to one of her daughters, 'This is Mylie.' She turned to wink at me. 'I've been telling him all about you.'

That, of course, was really wicked.

'Just make sure you arrange for the gas bills to be paid by standing order in future,' I said, with a playful wave of my fist.

But it only seemed to increase the daughters' embarrassment as they closed the door of the car behind her.

They were the reason she was leaving the Unit so late in the evening. One of them lived in Stratford and could only get down to London after work. Michael had talked them into an arrangement: Freda would only be living in her own home for two weeks out of every month. Each daughter would take it in turns to have Freda in her home for one week. That was why they both had to be present, since neither seemed to trust the other. They didn't say a word to me, not even thank you, before driving away.

I thought I might have caught a single small wave, Freda blowing me a kiss out of the back window of the car.

On my way back to Gerries, I looked up at the second floor and I saw Harry. He was standing there, looking out of his window. It made me realise that Harry had come into the Unit just two weeks after Freda, and she had been a damn sight more depressed than he was. Yet here was old Freda on her way home and all Harry could do was look down at it happening from his window.

I knock on the door, as usual, before entering the side ward. Harry hasn't moved from his place by the window. He is wearing a white shirt, with a dribble stain down the front, and grey hospital trousers over blue and brown tartan hospital-issue slippers.

I can smell him when I get up close. There's a smell about patients when they are really down. I can smell that smell, mixed with a linament

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he rubs around his shoulder and under his arm. He has what I would call a pouchy face.

There is a second face, made up of muscle underneath – you can tell that in his prime Harry must have had a really strong, muscular kind of a face – only now the muscles seem to clench away there between his jaws independently of the loose skin of his face. Sometimes I get the impression that underneath the pouchy skin there is a different Harry, in the bones and the sinews and muscles, trapped in there under the old skin. But I don't want to give you the wrong idea about Harry or the way he looks. He has a strong face, a very expressive face. Not too many lines so there is something slightly moonish about it, and a look in his eyes of vagueness, of infinite distance. I know that I must try to drag his eyes back out of that infinite distance to get him to focus on me, so he will really talk to me.

I say, 'Hello, Harry.' My voice seems to echo around the room.

There is a sound from him, nothing more than a grunt.

There is a strange feeling entering Harry's room. It's different from all of the others in that there is nothing personal in it. No flowers, no cards wishing him to get well, no photographs, not even a newspaper thrown on the bed. I suppose the only ornaments in Harry's room are the curtains, which are a single tone of blue, two shades darker than his eyes.

I get up close to him. I am standing next to him. I tower over him really. He isn't tall to start with and he seems to be shrinking into himself.

I glance out of the window and try to imagine what he would have seen. Me wheeling Freda along through the flower beds. Freda's balding head, reflecting the orange light. Her hand reaching out towards the roses, her face turning upwards, one moon looking at another.

'Why do you watch the car park all the time?'

'No reason,' he says.

'You must be looking for some reason.'

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He maintains his silence, irritated at my intrusion but still standing there, slightly hunched about his shoulders, looking down in the direction of the car-park. Of course he doesn't look me in the eyes.

'A man has been coming in here,' he murmurs, 'asking me for money.'

'What does he look like? Does he look like this?' I imitate a mean and half-crazy face with dewlap cheeks, making barping sounds every few seconds.

Harry looks at me a moment, assessingly, before replying. 'Comes right up to me. Stares me in the face. The same thing, over and over. "I want my money. Give me my money!"'

'It's only old Barney Silkes. If he's really upsetting you, I'll have a word with Michael.'

Harry sighs. 'I have no money to give him.' He shakes his head. 'I've had no money for weeks on end now. No money to spend on anything.'

'Have you asked the nurses? They have a safe on the ward, for small amounts.'

'They wouldn't give it to you, unless ... unless your situation was different. I haven't a penny to go out, even if I wanted to – even if I was able to. I couldn't buy a paper. I couldn't buy blades for my razor. Not even a packet of cigarettes. When I could kill for a smoke.'

I hesitate, because I detect a calculating intelligence beneath the surface confusion.

'Maybe they're just worried that your memory is confused by the medication. You might put the money down somewhere and forget about it.'

'No. No – I'm not quite that bad. For seventy per cent of the time, I may have been a bit muggy. What do you call it ...?'

'Forgetful?'

'Yes – forgetful. For seventy per cent of the time I have spent here, I have had a bit of a problem. Nothing serious. Just something I had to look at myself and think, "Well – you had better just carry on anyway!"'

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'You seem a little better to me,' I say encouragingly, giving him a pound coin, which he accepts with a sideways glance at my boots before he tucks it into his grey hospital-issue trousers pocket. 'Soon you'll be able to walk around. You'll be able to go to the Smoke Room and damage your lungs to your heart's content. But you've got to cooperate with Vera and go and get back into things. Join the others in OT.'

I know that Harry has been saying no to occupational therapy.

No reaction.

'You can't just go saying no to things that might help you to get better.'

'And then you'll come along and take me out for a drink?'

I have to laugh. There is a sense of humour in there, somewhere down in the deep dark well, below the blue membranes of his eyes.

I feel oddly nervous about what I am about to say. I've been working towards it, picking my moment. This has to be the moment. I can't help the way my voice falls so it's just a husky whisper. I say to Harry, 'Do you want to talk? I mean, do you want to talk about what's upsetting you?'

No response. Nothing. For a moment I think he hasn't heard me, but then I notice that he isn't breathing.

There is a horrible silence that seems to chill the room. It's more than just a silence, it's a stillness that congeals like ice on my skin. But then I hear him breathing again.

He is breathing slowly, noisily. There is a whistling sound as he inhales breath through his nose. I can smell that smell about him, even stronger. I see the way his hand is trembling, the hand that is holding the book.

He mumbles, so low I can't make it out.

'What did you say?' I'm feeling pretty uncomfortable in this terrible atmosphere that has continued over from the silence.

'I said', he squeezes the words out bitterly, furiously, through his teeth, 'that you have no right to ... to ask me that.'

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My head is shaking all of its own. I'm grinning a hopeless grin, feeling foolish. 'I'm sorry.'

I can hear how useless the apology sounds, echoing in the room. I assume that it's because the room is so bare of ornaments. A slightly odd effect, amplifying the deeper notes especially. Harry is quiet again, just standing there, trembling. That's all he is doing – staring out of the window, trembling. Those blue eyes, lost within themselves in the pouchy face with its bunched up muscles underneath. I notice the freckles on the dome of his head. His head is a beach of small pale freckles, freckles like stones in the pale white sand. I don't know why I haven't noticed them before.

'I didn't mean to upset you even more. I just thought that maybe you wanted to talk.'

The tension between us has reached such an unbearable intensity I feel jerky, slightly faint, as our eyes meet, but not in the flesh.

I am looking into the reflection of Harry's eyes in the window. The face in the reflection is whiter still but the eyes are not blue. They are black, all-black. It feels as if I am looking down into the bottomless pit of his melancholy, into the darkness that has taken hold of his soul.

Then he speaks in a voice I haven't heard him use before. It isn't his clipped army officer's voice. It's a much gentler voice, hardly above a murmur.

'What about you? Do you want to talk to me about yourself?'

'I don't mind. If that's what you want.'

'Well – go ahead then!'

'Yeah – well ...' The truth is I am thinking that this is a dirty trick that Harry is playing on me because I cannot think of a thing to say. I don't lead a very interesting life.

The sound of rain on the window. The rapping of fingers out there in the dark.

'Why', he demands, 'are you so eager to know about me?'

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A hesitation on my part now. This conversation isn't going the way I had anticipated. A lot of patients just love to talk. They will tell you every secret of their lives without a second thought.

I say, 'Because I'm concerned about you.' Then I just shrug my shoulders and shake my head. 'Because I want to understand you.'

A further leap in the tension between us. Those black eyes no longer meeting mine. The head averted. The real eyes, the blue eyes, not daring even to turn around to look sideways into mine.

I talk about Freda. Harry must have come across Freda, since he has spent all this time on the same ward with her. Everybody meets everybody else on the wards. I talk about her going home. 'She's really happy about it,' I say. 'I think you saw her leave. Her relatives came to fetch her. Her two daughters.'

'Yes,' he mutters.

Of course he knows all this. He knows that I have seen him watching, from up here in his window.

'In time, you'll get better too. You'll go home.'

His left hand is rising slowly. It reaches his right shoulder and it begins to rub at it. The shoulder seems to writhe around under the touch of the hand, to twist within itself, beginning to move down. There is something wounding about the way this happens. Something that reaches out towards me and moves me profoundly. It is so uncontrollably unconscious.

'You live near here? In a flat in the hospital?'

I have told him half a dozen times where I live. I say, 'You remember, Harry, I live in Kensington, the house we call "The Palace", which I share with my friends.'

'With your friends ...' he echoes, as I watch the hand rubbing, massaging relentlessly.

'Yeah,' I nod. 'I've told you all about them. Janus, who is out of work. And Rich, who is a Crusty, with a ring through his nose.'

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He's shaking his head, as if it's the first he's heard of them. It is the shock still. The reaction in him. I can feel it, smell it from the pores of his skin. I can taste it on my tongue.

'You get along with them, these ... these friends of yours?'

'We hit it off really well.' I'm talking again with my normal voice. I'm calmer now, maybe a little bit resentful. But I realise I have to be extra patient with him.

'I know what you do,' he says. 'You go out at night and you all get good and drunk together.'

I laugh to myself because he's got it right. He has hit that nail right on the head.

But old Harry is standing there with tears in his eyes. I reach out my hand to touch his good shoulder, but he will not accept the touch. He surprises me with the vigour with which he shrugs me off, the shock still unsettling him, the shock of intrusion, of discovering – I hope – that there is this door of communication that is just opening. I sense it too, in my own way. That's why I avoid mentioning Muriel, his wife, whom he tried to strangle.

'Out there ...' his voice is a little more forceful, as if in the rejection of my comforting him, he is rediscovering strengths within himself. 'You asked me that question.'

'That's right,' I say. 'I just wondered what you were looking at out there.'

'I'm looking at them.'

'But why? What's so interesting about them? People are just people.'

'No,' he says. 'Out there, those are people. In here, we are patients.'

10

When I got home I lay on my bed and I thought about things. Patients are amazing – the way he just said that. It really made me think about Harry, how he must feel like a prisoner on the ward. Yet the only thing that is keeping him prisoner is his own mind.

It is the mind that is truly amazing.

And that got me wondering about the fact that people like Doctor Boyson talk about how the mind is the metaphysical product of the brain.

Take Freda, for example. I recalled the way her brain was affected when Maggie passed the electricity through it. It was as if the disturbed programming in her mind had been wiped clear by a bolt of lightning. It makes you wonder if the brain really is like a computer, as Dr Boyson is always telling us.

I am very interested in the human mind. I have been thinking quite a lot about it since I started work on the Unit. For example, we all know that the mind is the expression of the brain. If you had no brain, you wouldn't be able to think at all. So the mind has to be the product of the brain. But anybody with any kind of a brain knows that your mind is a lot more complicated than you would expect a computer to be. When you really think about it, when you lie back and think about the human imagination, the way we have harnessed the power of the atom, our ability to create music for example – the way we *feel*. There are people who still think that we feel through our hearts but that's just bullshit. We feel through our minds, we love and care for people through our minds. We even hate people and do terrible things, all through the perversion of our minds.

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That's what makes it so hard to believe that the brain is just a computer. Would a computer make doctors want to cure diseases or Picasso paint or Mozart write music? Would it take us to the moon?

So then you find yourself thinking about it in a whole different kind of a way. You begin to wonder if Grumpy is closer. I have no doubt that he believes in the notion of an old-fashioned God. And that makes me wonder where he thinks the soul might be – for example, if he thinks that the soul is another way of talking about the mind.

So you see the kind of territory you get into when you start thinking about psychiatry.

To me it means that when the mind is sick in some way, disturbed to the extent that we see in our patients on the Unit, it is all the more interesting than a physical illness, such as a heart attack or a cancer.

11

'Well, this woman, now ... this woman ... I would say that she is a very shrewd person.'

I was getting to know Harry. Recognising his need to come up for air, to rise out of the darkness of his well and into what must still appear to him a kind of twilight.

'What woman are we talking about, Harry?'

'This woman ... this woman, who came to talk to me.'

I shrugged my shoulders, to show Harry we had the time. To reassure him there was no need to hurry. 'What was she like? Describe her to me.'

Harry described a tall young woman, with fair hair tied up on to the back of her head. 'I was able to smell her perfume,' he said.

'Ah!'

'Yes – her perfume.' That slow blink of his eyes. The struggle for concentration, the two deep lines biting deeply into his brow between his eyes. 'I don't remember her name.'

'When did she come to see you?'

'Today. She came to see me today.' His eyes were suddenly brightening. His head was becoming erect. 'It seemed to be important.'

I nodded. I was perched once more on the edge of his bed and he was sitting in his chair. 'What did she ask you about?'

The pause was shorter.

'Personal things. Concerning myself and Muriel.'

There was only one woman on the unit whose perfume Harry would have noticed and who would have asked Harry in a professional way

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about Muriel: Claudia, the social worker. Claudia, with the Sloane Ranger voice, who was currently being serviced by Lane 'Choices' Boyson.

I had forgotten to ask Harry the brand he smoked, so I had bought him twenty Benson and Hedges. Now I handed the pack over to him. I explained that there was an official ban against smoking in any of the ward sleeping areas, including side wards, but he could enjoy them to his heart's content down the corridor in the Smoke Room. Then, after a slight hesitation – reassuring myself that Harry was not going to set fire to himself – I handed him the small box of red-top matches.

'Is Muriel coming to see you?'

He looked down at the cigarettes and then shoved the packet deep into his trousers pocket. 'I don't know.'

'But this woman, the social worker, is going to go and see her for you?'

'I think so. I hope so.' His eyes moved around to regard me, giving me that furtive sideways look. 'I said to her, "Could I go out, perhaps at the weekend, and see Muriel for myself?" I promised her I would be no bother. No problem.'

'I'm sure Claudia will look into that for you.'

'Do you think so?'

'Yes, I do.'

Harry spent a few seconds considering that, sitting quietly in his chair. It was great to see how he was looking a shade brighter, his skin a better colour, a little less puffy and white.

'I'm not getting my hopes too high. I'm not expecting to go out soon.'

'You'll go home, all right. Don't you worry.'

He lifted his head and looked at me, another of his sideways glances. There is an incredible shyness in those glances of Harry's, like a timid little creature poking its head out of its burrow into an uncertain landscape. I noticed that the book wasn't on his locker, so he must have hidden it away somewhere, perhaps in the drawer underneath.

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'I'd be most grateful if that could be done. The people here don't talk to me. I have been going out into the corridor. There are all these men and women about the place, sitting around or talking to themselves. They don't talk sense at all. They don't talk back to me.'

'Does this upset you?'

'I can't stand it.'

'I can imagine that. It must be really frustrating.'

'Loneliness is a killer. Now that I have lost my family, it's a terrible thing.'

That didn't make sense to me. I didn't think of Muriel as a family as such. It was the first time that Harry had ever mentioned his family to me and I waited to see if he would say any more. But he said nothing.

I was careful not to put him off. I kept myself still, just sitting there, having a sip of my tea. 'Would you like to talk about it – about Muriel?'

'No,' he said, 'I would not.'

He wasn't looking at me. His eyes were moving here and there – the window, the blue curtains. Eyes that had become something other than eyes. Eyes that had become unseeing. He hadn't put down the matches. Instead his right hand played around with them bemusedly, twirling the box on his lap.

'She's your wife after all,' I prompted. 'And she hasn't been coming in to see you.'

'No,' he said.

'I think that's a bit much. Not coming in even once to see you.'

A small hesitation. 'You can't blame Muriel.'

'Well, I can see that she might be feeling very angry with you after what you tried to do to her.'

A longer hesitation. His voice low, hardly a human sound at all, the sound of a breeze through dried-up autumn leaves. 'No – no, it isn't that. There are other things. Muriel was good to me. I was the one who did it. It was my fault.'

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'What is happening between you and Muriel is very sad,' I murmured, shifting slightly.

'No, you don't understand. Muriel is not my wife.'

'Not your wife?'

'My wife, my real wife, Elizabeth, is living in Australia.'

'Your real wife?'

'Yes. With my son, Teddy.'

I had to edge my feet around on the floor. The thing is, people like Harry can get confused. They think that what they have been dreaming about, their delusions, are real.

'You didn't tell Dr Dury about that.'

'No.' A little agitatedly.

I still wasn't sure if I believed him. 'You can't just go not telling the doctors things when they're trying to help you.'

'I don't have to tell them everything.'

'Yes, you do. If you want to get better.'

'I'd rather you didn't tell anybody else.'

'Don't talk daft!'

'Do you hear me now? Not a word. I want your word on that.'

Now I was the one who had to come up for air. I believed him. He seemed too intense to be anything other than factual about it.

'I can't promise you that, Harry.'

Suddenly there was ice in his voice. His face was the officer's face, hard and as cold as marble. 'You must give me your word, son.'

'Okay.' Though I didn't know if I could honestly keep it. 'So who is Muriel then?'

'Muriel is the woman I have lived with for twenty-seven years.'

I thought, *twenty-seven years*.

'Well,' I said, choosing my words, 'it's not so unusual these days.'

'I know. It's a bit of a mess.'

'It's not such a big deal. These things happen to a lot of people.'

'I feel so ashamed about it.'

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I sensed something more. Something Harry was not telling me. I was watching that hand twirling the matches round and round. Watching his head falling. I had to get him away from this subject, which was obviously very painful to him.

'I've tried reading your book. I went out and bought a copy for myself.'

'You've been reading *Darkness at Noon*?'

'Well – I'm only part way through. I haven't managed to finish it yet.'

'Why? Why are you reading it?'

'I think I might be able to understand what you see in it. I mean, there's a feeling you might be glimpsing something – how can I put it? Like you're looking down through the surface of the ocean and you catch a flash of something really deep and terrifying.'

He screwed up his eyes, shook his head. Opened his eyes again, blinking into the light, but he seemed unable to look at me directly.

'It's okay if you don't want to talk about it.'

'No. It's just difficult for me to find the words.' Still shaking his head, his eyes blinking more slowly, his eyes lost in their distance. 'It's not so much what I see in it. Not seeing ...'

'What then? Searching?'

'I don't know.'

'I would imagine', I encouraged him, 'that it's the sort of book that you pick up and read and you can tell from the very beginning that you are learning something new about people.'

'Perhaps that's it,' he replied.

But it wasn't a very convincing performance. There was something more, something he wouldn't or couldn't tell me. Restlessly, I shifted my feet again, resisted the urge to stand up – do something, anything, to break the tension.

Then he spoke more softly still, addressing his words to somewhere else, somewhere deep and secretly internal, as if curling into himself.

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‘With you, must I pay for ever for righteous acts? Did the righteous man perhaps carry the heaviest debt?’

His words sounded like a psalm or a prayer, but I knew, although I didn’t recognise them, that they were words he remembered from *Darkness at Noon*.

He had surprised me again. I didn’t know what to say for a moment or two. I was thinking back to that time when I had interrupted him in a dream, or a nightmare, when he had tried to jump up out of his chair with his right fist clenched.

‘Who was R. Giles?’

Suddenly Harry was tensing, his reluctance showing. ‘Somebody who recommended the book to me.’

‘And you kept it? His copy?’

‘I suppose I did.’ Hostile now. Wary.

‘Why?’

He inhaled, stiffening, and there was that musical sound from the narrowing inside one of his nostrils. A flush invading the beach of his head, like a tide washing around the pebbly freckles. ‘It was such a long time ago.’

‘During the war?’

His eyes came over then and he looked at me, eye to eye. There was that fierce brilliance of anger in his eyes again. The hydrogen flames. He said nothing.

‘He died, didn’t he? This R. Giles, who lent you his book.’

Harry’s face had turned to stone. He didn’t shake his head or even so much as nod.

‘He was one of your friends? Another soldier?’

‘He was ... an officer in my regiment. He wasn’t very much older than I was.’

That hesitation before Harry called him an officer. It seemed significant, although I couldn’t imagine what its significance was. ‘How old were you?’

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'Twenty. I was twenty years old. He was five years older than me.'

'He died though, didn't he?'

'A lot of people died.'

'Do you want to talk about it? You don't have to, if it's too painful for you.'

He glanced at me and smiled again. 'The army ran in my family. My father fought on the Somme and at Ypres in the First War.'

'Was that why you became a soldier?'

'Everybody who was able to fight was called up. I volunteered anyway. In the same way my father volunteered for the First War. Even though he came back coughing his lungs up from mustard gas. Maybe that was why he felt he had to explain it to me. The only time he ever explained anything important. How you make yourself go over the top. He explained that to me – you have to bite the bullet.'

He chuckled. It was the first time I had ever heard Harry laugh.

'My God!' I was still trying to imagine it. I was trying to imagine somebody just my age going over the top of a trench into a hail of machine gun bullets. I just couldn't imagine it.

But Harry could see it clearly. There was a luminous glow in his eyes as he was talking. 'It was the closest we ever got to intimacy. A few minutes of advice. It was the most precious thing my father had to give to me.'

I was silent again for a little while, struggling to grasp what Harry was telling me.

'Something happened? Back then, during the war. Something that made the book special to you?'

'Oh, yes,' he said.

'You don't want to talk about it!'

He hesitated. And then he smiled. 'You're very clever, young Mylie O'Farrell from Sheffield. You see a man caught in the rain and you persuade him to let you borrow his hat. But now I am asking for my hat back.'

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‘What hat are you talking about, Harry?’

He was still smiling. ‘The hat a man wears when another man has to do the talking. I’ve had enough of standing in the rain. I think it’s your turn.’

I jumped off the edge of the bed and found myself standing in front of Harry’s window, scratching my head.

‘What do you want to know?’

‘Why this doctor’s daughter was attracted to the taxi-driver’s nephew in the first place.’

‘Shit!’ I muttered, under my breath. I couldn’t believe that he had remembered that.

I say, ‘It’s boring to talk about.’

I know that there are forsythias out there, through the window, little bonfires of yellow blossom, but I can’t see them now in the dark. Instead, in my reflection, I am looking into the dark pools of my own eyes. I can’t bring myself to look at him, to see if he is still smiling. I feel no desire whatsoever to talk about Tabi with Harry. But I don’t think that I can refuse him, not after he has opened himself up in that way about himself.

‘I’m sorry,’ I hear him say. ‘I can see that I’ve embarrassed you.’

Embarrassment isn’t an adequate word for it. I just can’t talk to him while facing him directly. It’s easier for me if I look out at the grounds and the car-park through the window.

‘Once she told me – Tabi told me – what it was about me that had interested her.’ It’s so difficult for me that I hesitate although I have no problem at all in remembering it clearly. I can hear every word, see every gesture. ‘I couldn’t believe that she had remembered something that had happened about two years earlier at the school.’

‘Ah! You were in the same class, then?’

‘We were in the same class for GCSE English literature. I remember having a blazing row with my teacher. His name was Mr Carr.’

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I hear what could be a chuckle from the chair behind me. 'How old were you at the time?'

'I was sixteen years old.' I inhale in a sniff, then blow on to the glass, rubbing a hole in the condensation to look out through it. 'Anyway, this Mr Carr, he said I had an attitude problem that was not conducive to the proper study of English Literature.'

'And did you?'

'I don't know. Maybe I had at the time. Tabi, who was keeping her head down in the same class, was impressed by what she called my moral stand. Or at least that was what she told me later. She said she could never have stood up to a teacher that way.'

'Were you making a moral stand?'

'The truth of it is that I got mad with the teacher because of something he tried to make me say that would have been a lie. The whole class was asked to write an essay on a play by Willy Russell which is called *Blood Brothers*. In this play there are twin brothers, Mickey and Eddie. Eddie is given away to a rich family at the beginning, and grows up rich, while Mickey stays with his parents and grows up poor. The idea is to show how these two different social backgrounds give them very different philosophies of life. Eddie's philosophy, for example, is that we shouldn't take life too seriously. When Mickey tells Eddie that he is unhappy at being unemployed, Eddie reacts by saying, "Why is a job so important? If I couldn't get a job I'd just say, Sod it!, and draw the Dole, live like a Bohemian, tilt my hat to the world," and so on.'

'And you didn't go along with that?'

'There was more to it. I've just given you an example. I was being honest when I said to Mr Carr, "I really like the play in a lot of ways but I don't like it in other ways." For example I thought that the simple language Russell used to outline the plot worked pretty well as a contrast to the complex ideas that he was presenting. But I was disappointed with the plot. I thought the plot was a bit predictable. The problem was, I

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wasn't supposed to have opinions of my own. I wasn't allowed to say that I didn't actually agree with everything that Willy Russell was saying.

'Mr Carr said, "Somebody who is only doing GCSEs is not mature enough to say things like that." He told me he would downgrade me if I didn't rewrite my essay.'

There is the faint sound of Harry taking the twenty pack of Benson and Hedges from his pocket. The crackling as he tears off the cellophane. 'But you needed the good opinion of your teacher to pass your exam?'

I take a deep breath. 'I was so angry about it that I talked about it with my Uncle Tony when I got home.'

Tony was in his living room drinking a beer and watching a video of *The Godfather*. It was the first of the godfather films and the best. I think Tony must have watched that video about as often as Tabi watched *Truly, Madly, Deeply*. I remember the way he put his bottle down on the little side table and shook his head. I could see that he was trying to pouch out his cheeks like Marlon Brando when he said to me, 'Ah, sure – to hell with it, Mylie. That's what the teacher is telling you to do. If you went to one of them public schools, they'd tell you the working class is scum. So you can just do what the teacher tells you.'

I tell all this to Harry, minus the colourful language. And Harry, who must have gone to one of those public schools, is patient with me afterwards, during my contemplative silence. He makes no comment about Tony.

In the reflection in the window, I catch a movement of his hands, tapping the cigarette out of the packet. I hear the scratch of a match on the box. I smell the sulphur. I wait until I can smell the smoke of his first exhalation.

Tony could see I was really upset. What Tony did was, he went out into the kitchen to open the fridge and he came back with two beers, one of them for me. It was a bottle of Stella but I didn't want it.

'I had to sit down and I had to take away the criticisms and praise Russell like a genius for the excellent way he exposed the way your

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upbringing gives you your whole philosophy of life. I got a grade A for that heap of crap. But I didn't feel like studying much after that. To be honest with you, I stayed on to do my A-levels but I didn't do any real work after that because I thought that the curriculum had nothing much to teach me – or at least nothing that I felt it was worth my while to learn.'

Harry is smoking silently. Puffing away steadily, enjoying his first cigarette in over a month. I sense the wheels of his mind turning, at that same considered pace as he likes to read his book.

'So that was what she liked about you, this doctor's daughter? You were a bit of a rebel and she wasn't?'

'Maybe.'

'But you didn't go through with it? You gave in?'

'I needed the grades to pass my exam.'

'Your uncle was right. Your teacher was only doing what he thought best for you.'

'I suppose so.'

'Maybe you were wrong – in your criticism of the play?'

'How do you mean?'

'Your girl ... Tabi? She didn't agree with you. And the doctor's daughter subsequently went to university. The taxi-driver's nephew did not.'

I was shaking my head. Shaking it violently, surprising myself with the violence of my disagreement.

'So what is it? It aggrieves you now, the fact that you gave in on a matter of principle?'

'You didn't listen to me. Not really.' I couldn't hide my anger or my disappointment. 'Or if you did, you still don't know me very well, Harry. Not if you think I'm one for giving in.'

12

I am lying on my bed, still thinking about it. About the way Harry has of getting me wound up while also getting me to talk about myself.

What was he really asking me? I think I know. But I didn't tell Harry what he really wanted to hear. I'm not that stupid. There are things you can't easily talk about, even with somebody you like. Things that are so deeply personal you don't want to talk about them with anybody.

For example, I know that sooner or later I just have to face the truth about Tabi. I have been avoiding doing that all of the time I have lived in London. I know that makes me the biggest wimp who has ever lived but I can't help it, it's the way I feel about her. I'm not even sure I know how to describe to you the person that is Tabi.

I mean to say, how do you get round to really describing a whole person?

The answer is you can't. Not a real person. They are just too complicated. What we call a person, what we think we know well as a person, is like a bundle of things that we get to associate with them. That's what we recognise. We remember everything that happened, that maybe felt good about that person, that we felt were typical and we liked about them, but even all of that is a very small piece of the whole person. Do you remember that film, from quite a while back, called *Truly, Madly, Deeply*? Well, Tabi must have really liked it when she saw it on television because she recorded it on video, and then we watched it a lot. She must have made me watch it with her a hundred times.

It has Juliet Stevenson in it, playing a woman called Nina, who is grieving after the death of her husband Jamie, who is played by Alan

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Rickman. They have been so close, they have been head over heels in love with each other. So when Jamie dies, and Nina can't believe it, she just can't let go of what it was they had together. Tabi used to cry at the end every time, no matter how often she had watched it before, when Jamie tricks Nina into letting him go. He makes all these ghosts invade her house until she gets fed up with them. And then at the end Jamie's ghost watches her kiss her new man out there in the dark through the window.

Ah, Jesus!

The thing I am struggling to explain is difficult to put in words. It is so personal to her and to me that it hurts like hell even to begin to think about it.

It isn't just that I am being a pain or being secretive or anything, although I probably am, just a little. I could say it was indescribable, but that's the biggest copout, and the whole world would know it. It's the fact that I have to describe in words what I never really thought about in words. Things that we both felt. Embarrassing things.

So I'm just feeling my way towards it, doing the best I can. I am going to start by describing some of the things about her, some of the things that happened, and at least I can hope to get the simple things right.

Her full name is Tabitha Angela Mather. I think I might have already told you that she has long chestnut-brown hair, combed straight. Let me tell you that she is also very intelligent. She managed nine A's at GCSE and three A's at A-level. I know people who think you can get those grades if you work like hell, but you need intelligence too. What I am saying is that I don't think that somebody who wasn't very intelligent would get all those A's, no matter how hard they worked. There is another thing you would probably need to know about her, but you would have to know her well. That is the fact that she has this place inside her that she can go to. I mean a kind of spiritual place, or at least spiritual is the closest word I can think of to describe it.

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That spiritual thing about a girl doesn't make it easier when you first get down to making love to her. It really doesn't make it easier for you at all.

There are all those books about love and films about it and all that. You know the sort of thing I mean, where this character gets his girl into bed for the first time and it's all good old rock'n'roll. Okay, so do you know what is the most painful confession I have to make? The painful thing is that with those girls, like Alison Morley, it was more like that. It really was closer to fun, up against a backstreet wall in the rain. I mean, girls like Alison took all the scariness out of it because they knew a lot more about it than I did. They have the same thing in mind that you have and they know exactly how to go about it. But Tabi hadn't done anything like that before. Tabi was a virgin.

That was something I discovered that night after I walked her home from the class party and we ended up climbing those stairs together.

I find myself asking her, 'Have you never done it with anyone before?'

And she is looking at me with these huge grey eyes, shaking her head and leaning against my shoulder.

'Bloody hell!'

So here we are, standing inside the door to her cold bedroom, surrounded by the black and whites of James Dean and the one huge colour poster from *Fantasia*, and she is actually trembling. The skin of her arms is covered in gooseflesh.

The bedroom is a regular dustbin, with clothes and stuff all over the place. For all of her intelligence Tabi is incredibly untidy. And I can smell those smells. There is nothing as powerful as smells in my memory of things. So I am smelling those smells reminiscent of my mother's bedroom – the smells of talcum powder and scent, and pot-pouri in the bowl on the dressing table. This only makes me more aware than ever of how nervous Tabi is feeling, of the struggle she is going through herself. I don't want to think about that at all. Now I wonder if it is Tabi I am

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smelling. I wonder if I can smell her more than the room, beyond the carelessness with perfume I noticed in the kitchen. I really believe I can smell the real woman. If I lick her skin, the skin I can see trembling against my shoulder, the skin of her face, her neck, her hands and wrists, her crotch – I know I will taste what I am smelling of her. It is her femaleness that is drawing me in through the smell of her skin.

Now I see the true reason for the tears a few minutes earlier. She isn't just excited, she is petrified. Her muscles are knotting up and jerking when I hold her, even as I am taking my first look around the room, surprised at the untidiness of it. Then turning back to look down into her tear-moistened eyes.

'It's okay. You don't have to do this, Tabi. It's no big deal.'

Shaking her head at this. The grey-blue eyes seem darker now, because the huge black caves of the pupils are swallowing up the irises.

Only later will I come to understand what is really happening here. That she has not travelled to Scotland with her father, although he must have pressed her very hard. That we will lie here, that we will literally sleep together, in the intimacy of her bedroom, that in an act of deliberate choosing, a seed has been sown in the deep instinctive female rhythm of things. That she, only seventeen years old, knows this better than I do as she puts on the Shola Ama CD, and she is sitting on the edge of the bed and starting to take off her clothes.

I have never seen a woman take off her clothes before. Certainly not purposefully like that. Not for my benefit.

I watch her in absolute amazement. That first glimpse of her determination. And the fact I can see the child in the woman, or maybe the woman in the child. I sit on the bed too and take off my top things and my skin is a ruck of gooseflesh. We are both shivering, waiting for the electric blow-heater to take the chill out of the air. At first I refuse to take off my jeans.

It will tell you something about Tabi when I explain that she still has two worn Teddy bears in her bed. I have to kick them out – slyly, so she

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won't even be aware of what I am doing – one by one as we are fooling around, before making love.

Tabi has a lissom feel to her body, that comes of having a swan neck and double jointedness. Her skin is white and downy although I have to admit she has a few small moles on her back. She doesn't often smile but when she does her whole face lights up into a surprised look, a look of wonder and giving. By nature she is every bit as secretive as Janus, but in a female kind of way. I suppose that what I am saying is that with Tabi there is a feeling, even on this first awkward occasion, that it has to be total, something she demands of me, as well as absolutely life-or-death secret.

It bewilders me that even in this first act of making love she is hungry for something she thinks she knows about me, maybe even desperate.

No girl has ever loved me before, so there is something wounding about it, something hurtable in its intensity. It is so cold we have to snuggle together under the bedspread. I have to guide her hand down there and then I shudder when her cold fingers close around it. But she has no idea what to do. She is too nervous even to explore. Her fingers are gripping too hard but I don't know how to tell her to ease up. I am too caught up in the clumsiness of it myself.

Shola Ama has got round to singing her cover version of the Randy Crawford song, 'You Might Need Somebody'.

There is such a look of concentration on Tabi's face. Not a word is spoken. It has gone beyond words and down to instinct. She never even asks me if I love her, so I don't need to lie to her. She doesn't tell me that she loves me. But that's okay – I know she loves me. One of the few things that men have an instinct for, I suppose.

But even for me there is something there already that goes beyond lust. A birth of something, quick and alive, like a hatchling bird's first spring into flight.

The only light is the bedside lamp and it throws shadows over our faces. She jerks or shudders every time I touch her. We laugh like idiots.

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Her shoulders, her belly, the small of her back. Her breasts, when I kiss the skin, feel as hard as wetsuit rubber, all grated with gooseflesh. And then, down below, I have begun to explore the sensitive valley within a valley, while she is playing this game they all play with you, of pushing my hand away at first, even though it is clearly for this that she has led me up those stairs in the first place. It isn't easy to enter her. We keep sliding up the bed and having to wriggle our bodies back down again, because she can't take the pain.

I look down at the top of her head, wondering. I ask her again, a whisper this time, 'Are you sure you want to do this, Tabi?'

Her answer is to bite the lobe of my ear.

Both her breasts are pressed against my ribs and her nails are like claws, gouging blood out of my shoulders.

And then, driven half mad by frustration, I push a brutal, desperate push and I feel it give way as she shrieks, and holds.

Tabi is still moaning afterwards, not just from pleasure but from the gradually lessening pain. And then, as I feel I should withdraw, she kisses me on the lips, kisses me hard, urging me onwards with her thighs. I can't believe it when she sighs. I have the wits to withdraw, hoping she is on the pill or something, because, of course, we are not using condoms.

Then she surprises me by asking, by whispering in my ear, by her sensitivity through all that has happened to my need. She takes over the reins then, finding the rhythm of it, until I sigh in my turn, my kiss devouring her kiss.

She slides out of bed to go to the bathroom. When she returns, she crouches over the CD to return it to that special track. She makes a point of choosing the track we will both remember, before curling around me, her hand below my neck, and whispers, 'Thank you.'

There is so much going on here. I know there is something going on that I don't understand as I lie there in Tabi's bed, smelling the smell of her, now mixed with the smell of toilet soap on her hands. We lie utterly

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still and silent for the few minutes it takes Shola Ama once more to sing,
'You Might Need Somebody'.