

To

Have

Nothing

To Have Nothing

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To Have Nothing

David Milnes

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Chapter One

Please Call Ebbages

Claremont Villas
Lonsdale Road
Notting Hill Gate
London W 11
Thurs 4th Nov '77

Dear Anna,

This must seem odd. He finally takes the trouble to put pen to paper and now you have an opportunity to gloat. I swore that would never happen. For once I was to be truly resolute. I know, I know.

There have been many times over the last few months when I have desperately wanted to come home, to chuck it all in. (Chuck what in? I hear you asking.) Times when the

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sheer physical discomfort seemed just too much. Faintness of heart, lack of grit - call it what you will. But during these bleak spells I always knew it was not enough to turn tail on account of circumstances alone. It would have done little good to arrive back on my doorstep feeling as awful as when I left it. I could only come back when I felt in my heart of hearts ready to come back.

I shall not bore you with the history of my days here. There were a few nights sleeping out, I'm afraid; then a ghastly hostel in Paddington . . . It's not so bad now, though. Tolerably comfortable.

Survival focuses the mind. Oh yes it does, my dear.

I want you to know, completely and without doubt, that I fully forgive you your closeness where money was concerned. You had to protect yourself. Of course you did. I could have wrecked everything. And it was as well that I set out naked and alone, with nothing, no hidden crutch. But please forgive me the things I said at that time. I was desperate. My last throw of the die, if you like. Caution to the winds. The idle winds.

To discover one's whole life has been a lie, a waste, a folly, a wilful delusion - this is a terrible thing. Though I have done my utmost, throughout, to keep

Well, I can't finish that.

The fact is I am over the worst, I'm sure now, and I shall be coming home as soon as possible. If those words bring a modicum of joy to your heart, Anna, perhaps there is a chance of happiness for us yet.

We shall return to our original plans. Please call Ebbages. Put the house in their hands directly. I have no desire whatever to remain in Ipswich - or indeed this country! - a moment longer than absolutely necessary. We'll rent in Manosque until our affairs are settled. I don't mind going West a bit, even to Uzes, if that's what you

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want. I am in a mood to compromise. And to listen.

The move and the travelling will be wretched but once it's over . . .

I look forward to your reply by return. Please. I shan't go back over what I have written. It would be wrong to strive for the exact phrase. Such artifice. I do very much look forward to seeing you again, my dear.

Your loving husband,

Gerry

Chapter Two

A Free Lunch

Gerry had never been a pub person. He knew nothing about Fullers, Watneys or Tetleys, and he had never even heard of all these continental lagers that now slaked the nation's thirst for oblivion. Holsten Pils, indeed. What on earth was that? It flowed from a gold and yellow lozenge embossed with a coat of arms. Gerry sighed and his gaze drifted behind the bar to the wine cabinet, next to a grubby serving hatch. All the wines were bad, though. Very, very bad. Hungarian, Bulgarian and so on. Make Time for Wine, said a slightly squiffy sticker on the cabinet glass.

"I'm buying lunch and all accompanying beverage, Gerald," opened his host. "So what's your poison?"

Gerry had no idea what he wanted.

"I'll have whatever you're having, if you'd be so kind."

His host tried to catch the attention of the barman, a plump, flushed, fortyish fellow in a greasy blue suit, who was wrestling with a packet of Pork Scratchings.

Pink jowls, pink gins, Gerry silently observed.

“Er, two pints of Fullers, Mr Barman!” Gerry's host declared. “And two Today's Specials!”

On the words 'two Today's Specials!' the packet of Pork Scratchings exploded. Rinds were scattered all over the bar and all over the filthy carpet. The barman stood still, staring down at the mess he'd made.

“Fuck'em one an' all!”

Oh dear, Gerry thought. What profane wretch art thou?

The barman chose the largest scratching from the bar and popped it in his mouth. He dusted his hands and set to work. All this without a look, let alone a good afternoon, to his solitary customers. He scribbled the Today's Specials on a slip and stuffed the slip into a hand already waiting on the serving hatch.

Gerry noted that attendant hand: a female hand, careworn, palm up and open, pale and lifeless, as if severed there on the block of the hatch.

Well, one could think of better places for a free lunch, for goodness' sake.

More silence as the pints were drawn.

“A pleasing brew, I think you'll find,” said his host, sliding the first across.

It was a remark that caused Gerry to frown faintly at the mug of muddy beer now in front of him. He'd been only too willing to take up the invitation of his surprise visitor, this well-spoken stranger with the educated and confident air, but now certain expressions, harmless clichés, taken together, had begun to grate, to breed suspicion.

He was led by his host from the bar to a corner seat by the window. Gerry glanced about as he followed, stooping with the weight of his pint mug. They were absolutely the only souls in the place, on a Friday lunch time.

Before sitting down his host stopped and took his first

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sip of beer.

“Cheers!”

Gerry stopped too, straightened and sipped in reply.

“Cheers.”

His host sat, unbuttoned his greatcoat, and relaxed into his cushioned corner seat. He spread himself out as if this were where he always sat in this saloon bar, as if this were his own cosy corner in his local pub.

“I’m sure we’ll come to an amicable agreement, Gerry. You’re a fair-minded chap, if you don’t mind me being old-fashioned.”

You rather like being old-fashioned, don’t you, if you don’t mind me being something or other, Gerry wanted to reply, as he pulled out his chair. But he didn’t say that or anything like it. He sat down carefully with his full mug of beer.

“Given that I’ll be quitting the place very soon – possibly tomorrow, or Sunday – I don’t much care what you do. It’s a ghastly hole and you’re welcome to it. I’m expecting a letter tomorrow morning which will confirm the decision.”

Then Gerry lowered his head and squared his mug on its beer mat, trying to tidy up what he’d just said. He’d already made one mistake about this young man. Beneath the coat was a dark jumper covering a plain white shirt. The collar of the shirt was over-starched and fastened at the neck button, but there was no tie. The coat had been done up to the very top so it rode over the front of the shirt collar, and Gerry had wrongly taken his host to be a man of the cloth.

Gerry’s suspicions deepened as his host removed his spectacles and began cleaning them with a linen handkerchief. A pressed linen handkerchief. And now a gentle frown, thoughtful, concerned, accompanied the

cleaning of the lenses: his host was about to broach a matter of some importance.

“So come on, Gerry - ” holding a lens to the light – “What’s the story? Out with it! A man of your age - and your accomplishment - shouldn’t be shackled up in dear old Claremont Villas, should he?”

Gerry had been used to meaningless flattery all his life, heaps of it, cartloads of it, but there was a strain of condescension in this young man’s manner that was entirely unfamiliar to him. Very original, and very brazen indeed. Quite unforgivable. A voice told him to abandon the free lunch here and now, to go home and hide away in his dark, cold rooms. But another, stronger voice, begged to seize this chance to talk and talk and talk, even to a perfect stranger, even if it didn’t do any good.

At this juncture the barman arrived with the Today’s Specials. Such service! The meal was a steak and kidney pie fresh from the hot shelf and still in its foil dish. There was a low mound of crinkle chips on the side. The free lunch looked rather sorry for itself, Gerry considered. Accompanying sauces and condiments were set between their plates in a lidless tupperware container.

“Ah, great. Thanks awfully,” his host quacked to the surly barman, who, as he turned to retreat, actually farted softly, as if by way of reply.

Gerry scowled. Good grief.

“Steak and kidney pie, Gerry!” His host picked up his knife and fork and tucked in straightaway. “Bon appétit!”

At the other side of the table Gerry split the pastry of his pie. The gravy rushed out with a noisome, dogmeat stench, enriched by the barman's fart. He put down his cutlery and drank some more beer. It was foul. He put the mug down too, noisily. This was a ghastly lunch. Yet across the table his host was stuffing it away, lapping it up. His full lips

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were glossy with gravy and he was already halfway through his pie. He stopped eating and took a long drink, leaving sizeable flakes of pastry on the surface of his beer.

“So the kids gave you a hard time, Gerry,” his host prompted between mouthfuls, still keen to get a conversation started. “I wonder what such toughies would have made of my own alma mater. I was at Gordonstoun, you know. With Charleyboy, as a matter of fact . . .”

Out of some old world courtesy Gerry began to eat the food, and this depressed effort of will absorbed all his concentration. These days he kept remembering, with increasing bitterness, his headmaster’s farewell speech, in which he was repeatedly and affectionately described as “a deeply civilized man”. He came across a lump of gristle, pale and shiny under the gravy, which even his manners (“Please raise your glasses, Ladies and Gentlemen - I give you Gerry! To Gerry, everyone! - Come on! - Come on, there! - A deeply civilized man!”) could not make him fork and bring to his mouth. He toyed with it, nudging it under one flap of pastry and another, until he found a roomy corner for it. He tried a few of the crinkle chips, which were tepid on the outside and cool on the inside, then decided that he’d done his best and set his knife and fork together in the middle of the plate, like a good boy. He went back to the dark beer.

“Contemporanus with Prince Hal himself!”

Gerry set down his beer mug without drinking. What was going on here? How speedily this episode had soured. Revulsion and impatience quickened to anger. What was he doing in this rotten, rotten English pub, eating its repulsive food, drinking its disgusting beer, with this overgrown public school boy? What was he doing?

“Excuse me.” He got fussily to his feet and stood behind his chair. He gripped the back of the chair with both hands

and cocked his learned head. "I'm afraid I must go home. Not feeling too well."

His host stared up open-mouthed. "Oh! . . . That's too bad, Gerald."

"If you'd care to call again some other time, we can discuss your proposal in more detail, perhaps, if I'm still there. And if I'm up to it."

"What?"

His host wiped the corners of his mouth with his linen handkerchief. He tried to compose himself, resting his arm along the back of the corner seat, his handkerchief dangling from his fingers, soiled with gravy.

"I thought it was all settled, Gerald."

"No it isn't." Gerry's words were clipped. He was up to this. If a confrontation were called for – very well, he was up to it. "I've had second thoughts, you see."

"I must say I thought it was all settled, all cut and dried, Gerald. I've made arrangements to move people in. I told you that."

"Well, you'll just have to unmake them."

There was a pause. His host twitched his soiled handkerchief in surrender, and smiled. "Ah well. No point in rushing things," he said. "Say no more, Gerald. I quite understand. Take your time."

Gerry felt obliged to speak again. He released his chair and nodded an ill-timed farewell. "Thanks for the lunch," he said. "See you again sometime, perhaps."

He turned and left the pub.

Chapter Three

The Errant Baronet

It was nine o'clock in the morning. Gerry had just left his rooms, freshly shaved and in clean clothes. He was going to the Post Office. On hearing his front door tried he stopped at the head of the stairs. He had secured the door with a stout wedge of wood and a folded newspaper. At first it held firm, but after a few more violent shoves it swung free. From his first floor landing Gerry watched his visitor enter and stand a moment in the grey light of the doorway. There was a drizzle outside, the deposit of a retreating November mist.

Sir Alec Webb, who had no umbrella, now stepped inside Claremont Villas and heeled the door to behind him. The door banged shut, unimpeded by Gerry's Guardian or his wedge of wood, then opened again and remained ajar. Such a dramatic entry! Sir Alec stood in the hallway

smoothing his wet hair down into its monkish fringe. He took out a fresh, pressed linen handkerchief, dried his prescription spectacles, and dabbed some moisture from his face.

Gerry waited in stony silence on the landing.

Sir Alec put his handkerchief away and looked up, and seemed surprised – but pleasantly surprised - to find Gerry standing there above him. He bid a cheery good morrow and started up the broken stairs.

Gerry said nothing until his visitor had reached the step below.

“This is the second occasion you've seen fit to barge into my house, Mr Webb.” Gerry announced. “This is my house. It is where I live. You have no more right of entry here than you would at Buckingham Palace. Old chap.”

Sir Alec was in his greatcoat again, fastened to the neck over a high starched collar. To Gerry he looked like a Victorian missionary, standing there so upright on the broken stairs, his hand on the loosened banister. There was something very earnest, protrusive, insistent, about the set of his mouth. His full lips were red raw from the cold outside, but not at all sensual.

At Gerry's icy tone Sir Alec's face had become grave. His eyes stiffened behind his glasses.

“This is a squat, Gerry.”

“This is a licensed squat, and I am the licensee.”

“Oh, for goodness' sake.”

“I am *persona grata* here, my friend. And you are *persona non grata*. The authorities know nothing of your intentions to move in here.”

Gerry presumed that his visitor would take his 'authorities' seriously.

“Gerald, we've been through all this.” Sir Alec's face was strained under his damp fringe, but only by the

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awkwardness of the situation. There was no trace about him of any fear or discomfiture. His voice was a steady drawl. "I reserved these premises long before you ever clapped eyes on them, Gerry. I have been tolerant of your indecisiveness so far, but I will not be tolerant of any deliberate obstruction. The Cooperative is moving into Claremont Villas. That, I'm afraid, is a statement of fact. This very morning I have an interview arranged here."

Gerry scowled. An interview? What on earth . . . ?

Locked eyeball to eyeball he noticed that the prescription spectacles only had the appearance of the same: they were actually shinier and stronger framed, much more expensive.

"Whatever are you talking about?"

"Someone needs a job, Gerry. Someone wants to work. With unemployment figures as they are, you're not going to stand in his way, I trust?"

Behind his fancy glasses Sir Alec's bald eyes had narrowed. It was impossible to doubt his sincerity.

At which point a second person stepped through the front door and into the hallway below. He was a neat, alert looking man in his early twenties, with a thin face and furry haircut. He sniffed the damp air, twitched, and glanced around, as if he'd smelled a rat and wanted to ferret it out. In one hand he carried a ragged carpenter's tool bag, which he held at a slight distance from his person, away from his clean clothes. Despite the cold and damp he wore only a jean suit with a plain white t-shirt beneath his jacket. He looked first at the figure on the stairs, at the tall, sombre Sir Alec Webb, and then at the short, grim, older gentleman standing close by on the landing.

In turn these two stared down at him.

"Morning!" the young man called up breezily, ignoring

their severity. "I'm looking for a Mr Webb. Is either one of you . . . ?"

"I am Mr Webb." Sir Alec nodded down to the young man. "I am he. I am Alec Webb. And you are John Fitzroy, yes?"

"Correct, sir." Fitzroy looked all about Claremont Villas now, at the wrecked stairs, the burst walls and falling ceiling. His gaze slipped down the suspended banister and fell through the doorless door frames on the ground floor. "Is this the place needs the work?" He kicked aside Gerry's Guardian and lump of wood, ready to get started.

"Not immediately," said Sir Alec, with fruity authority. He glanced back at Gerry. "Do come up, John. We're on the second floor."

John Fitzroy picked his way nimbly up the staircase with his bag of tools. Gerry noted his cheap, fashionable baseball boots, done up with tigerish laces in stiff and waxy loops. He recognized, with some misgiving, the outmoded flair of the working class, the brief assertion that had guttered out a year or so ago. This was a suede-head, no less, successor to the brutalized, utilitarian skinhead. The young man's spring up the stairs spoke of energy, vigour, and a brittle optimism that might implode into aggression at any moment. When he passed Gerry on the landing he gave him a cheeky nod. But in fact there was no insolence, let alone menace in his eyes, and the vitality of the young man wounded Gerry, made him feel very old and weak and sad.

Curious, because this morning he had left his rooms full of a new hope; not an excited, agitated feeling, but a serene confidence about the future. The letter he'd written to Anna before the weekend had confirmed something within him. But now he saw how fragile his mood had been, how easily his sensibilities were shaken. Just the

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speed in this young man's step on the broken stairs, in his new baseball boots, brought the whole world crashing down about his ears again. Doubt. Depression. Alienation. His three sisters. Three sirens.

But why be so upset? Why? Whatever for? How ridiculous to be so susceptible, so suggestible.

It was true, though. When he had left his rooms, freshly shaved and in clean clothes, his empty shopping bag rolled in his hand, he had been ready for the world, he had had his own purpose, which had seemed meaningful and positive. He'd been going to the Post Office to see if any mail had been held back there, in case this were no longer a registered address, in case the Council had not rescinded its notice that no mail should be sent here not unless – but what utter nonsense! Of course every letter sent from all over the world if addressed here would arrive here, just as the bills did for the gas and electricity. What futility and stupidity and what abject hope was in this visit, to dally an hour or two in various queues at the Post Office in order to establish beyond doubt that which was perfectly obvious. Lunacy beckoning again. Anna's reply would arrive by the afternoon post, or certainly tomorrow. And if it didn't then he would telephone. He did not want to telephone – it was the last thing he wanted to do - but he would. After first post tomorrow morning he would seek Anna's answer on the telephone line. It was most unlike her, though, not to reply to a letter by return, particularly a letter of such import. She was punctilious about such things.

Gerry now found himself in a quandary. By his own hand he had taken away his principal reason for going out this morning. There was no urgent shopping to be done. Yet he would not, could not go back in, not with Mr Webb and his young guest now occupying the second floor. An interview? Why? What was that about, for goodness' sake?

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He felt paralysis taking hold. Old demons worming their way in under innocent speculations. He took the broken stairs quickly, two at a time, helter-skelter, to escape himself. He must get out. He would go early today to the library. He'd read the papers. He must distract himself from himself.

Sir Alec Webb already knew which of the second floor rooms of Claremont Villas was to serve which purpose, but the room he wanted for interviews was in no fit state for occupancy. He was obliged to use the lighter and more spacious room at the end of the corridor, which he had assigned to be his Office. However, at the moment this room too was virtually unfurnished. There was just a couple of kitchen chairs that he had gathered from odd corners of the house.

"I do apologize for the décor," Sir Alec said, leading the young carpenter into the room. "We've only just acquired this property. Not had a chance yet to do much to it."

The carpenter looked about the room. The rotten sash windows, bloated skirting, uneven floor boards, handleless door.

"Developer, are you, Mr Webb?"

Sir Alec nodded and smiled broadly. "If you like. Of human resources."

The carpenter frowned at this cryptic answer, but pressed ahead chirpily.

"What's it all about then, this Cooperative? Caring and sharing is it? You scratch my back, I scratch yours?"

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Sir Alec offered the young man a kitchen chair and sat down himself.

“Would you like to put down your tools?”

There was a brief silence, and then, as if lowering his guard, the carpenter set his tool bag on the floor and sat down. They faced each other, interviewee and interviewer, across the bag of tools. Sir Alec made no attempt to answer any of the carpenter’s questions. Instead he smiled benignly and knitted his hands behind his head.

“I mean, can you put me in the picture? What’s it all about?”

“Two Strong Arms?”

“Yeah,” the carpenter nodded. He shifted in his kitchen chair. “What’s it all about?”

“It’s about Two Strong Arms, John.”

Sir Alec’s repetitions and silences unnerved the carpenter. He was full of doubts and tensions. He crossed his legs now, having had them set firmly on the bare boards of Sir Alec’s ‘Office’.

With the invitation to say a few words about Two Strong Arms, Sir Alec now assumed command of the interview. He unclasped his hands and lowered them to rest humbly in his aristocratic lap.

“I’d be delighted to respond most fully to your questions, or as fully as you require me to, John. I am myself the originator, the progenitor, if you will, of Two Strong Arms. Mine were the first biceps to be leant to the cause! . . .” Sir Alec allowed himself a mild chuckle at this self-serving play on words. He’d used this line many times, usually with some success. But not a flicker of amusement crossed John Fitzroy’s face. If anything, following this remark, the carpenter’s features became grimmer and sterner. “I started the organization a few years ago,” Sir Alec resumed, “in response to what I saw

as a bit of a national emergency . . .”

Sir Alec left space for some response. A question about the national emergency, perhaps. But not a sound came from his interviewee, nor did he make a movement of any kind.

“It seemed to me perfectly obvious, John, that there were scores of young people such as yourself - highly skilled, highly talented - who were not getting an even break in the job market, despite the best efforts of our friends in the Labour Party.” Sir Alec leant forward. “Now, no matter what the unemployment statistics might indicate, there’s stacks of work to be done, don’t you think? Stacks of work. I mean real work. Such as fixing up this house. Redecorating it. Restoring it . . .” Sir Alec cast an expert eye around the empty, dirty room. “Restoring it to what it was originally meant to be, a residence of some standing for a large family, I should say. Really quite a respectable piece of Edwardian architecture. Part of the national heritage, if you like. So there’s bags of work to be done. Anyone can see that. There are big jobs - like this place - and there are small jobs too, of course, that are more charitable, perhaps . . . Poor old Mrs Jones of Hampstead Garden calls up one afternoon. Can’t get out so much these days. She wants a cat-flap thingy fitted in her front door - ”

On this second example of the work to be done to address the national emergency, there came a movement, at last, an interruption from the carpenter -

“Er - not my line, Mr Webb. I don’t want any of that, if that’s what we’re talking about. Cat-flaps. Mickey Mouse. If that’s all you’ve got we’re wasting our time.”

The young carpenter’s tone was final. He seemed to want to draw the meeting to a close already. Be done with it. He had lost faith in why he had come here this morning.

“I was merely demonstrating the variety of work which

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needs to be done,” Sir Alec said stiffly. “Big jobs or small jobs, they’re all jobs that need doing.”

“Right,” the carpenter said, suddenly knowing how to proceed. “Let’s have a look at your order book then, Mr Webb, and we’ll see what we can do, shall we?”

Sir Alec sat back. Clearly, in the interests of sustaining a civil dialogue with this impatient young man, this rude young man, he was going to have to sacrifice much of his introduction. He considered himself pragmatic. So be it.

“The system is this, John. We advertise to undertake any job which can be done by the personnel currently in our employ.” Sir Alec was now determined to impress the young carpenter with the size and scope of Two Strong Arms, with the breadth and strength of his Cooperative’s embrace. The allusion to Mickey Mouse had been galling. “At the moment, for example, we have bricklayers, electricians, decorators, we have removals outfits, fly-posters, garbage shifters, mini-cabbers, pest-controllers, dog-catchers - ”

“Hold it!”

This second interruption from the carpenter was more forceful, and was accompanied by a gesture, a raised flat palm, almost a fascist salute.

“Dog-catchers?”

Fitzroy’s eyes narrowed. A nasty side of his nature was coming through: aggressive, vicious, snapping, uncontrollable. His lips thinned, baring disorderly and neglected teeth.

“Each to his own, John,” Sir Alec resumed, treading gently, warily. “There’s good work to be done catching strays, you know.”

Fitzroy was blunt and angry now: “Get out of it!”

“I beg - ”

“Get the fuck out of it!”

Fitzroy brushed away the dog-catchers and all the rest of Sir Alec's personnel as if they were so much sawdust on his jeans.

"I want the bottom line, Mr Webb. What you can offer, or I'm out of here. I've heard enough of this. For one morning."

It might have been expected that Sir Alec would be confounded by such an attack, but not at all. He had heard this kind of thing so many times, and much worse than this, much more personal. He'd seen the signs. It was no surprise.

"I can offer you work, Mr Fitzroy, and plenty of it."

He now had the young man's attention again.

"We have no carpenters at the moment and there's a backlog. We're also short of plumbers and glaziers, if you have any friends that way inclined. Before you interrupted I was going to tell you about our system. We man the telephone at the hours in the advertisements. Orders are logged in the register. We have a register. We have a roster."

The carpenter was lighting a cigarette. Exhaling the smoke, he threw in lightly, without thinking:

"Bully for you, m'lud."

As so many had done before him, John Fitzroy had slipped into rudely mimicking Sir Alec's accent. But Sir Alec's was a genuine accent, ingrained from infancy. There was little he could have done to change it even he'd wanted to. Which he did not. That would have been going too far. And Sir Alec was indeed an Old Gordonstounian, and had spent his formative years in the company of royalty, and he carried the airs and graces still that were his birthright. In fact, there was many a jape he could mention, touching on royal persons, that he liked to recount during these interviews: it was sometimes a weakness, sometimes

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a corrective duty, sometimes an acid test. But right now he pressed on - no anecdotes today, not with this fellow.

“Every worker - including myself - ” Sir Alec resumed, “mans the switchboard once a fortnight for four hours. The system’s simple, John. It’s effective. It works. From there it’s really down to you. Workers can call at the office at any hour of day to pick up jobs. The early worker gets the worm. Earlier workers get more worms.” Webb leant forward earnestly again, pressing home some impalpable advantage. “Competition is fierce, John, as it should be. Once the job has been signed out from the order book, it is up to the individual worker to get on with it as soon as he or she possibly can. We want a quick turnover. I lay great stress on that.”

Fitzroy looked sceptical about these laissez-faire conditions of employment.

“You mean I make up my own rates?”

“You make up your own rates, John.” Webb sat back again. “It’s your work. Your livelihood. Overcharge and people won’t give you any work. Market forces, you see, John. Market forces.”

Having given this answer Sir Alec smiled with a curious smugness, as if he’d been obliged to remind the carpenter of a fact of life the young man might find distasteful.

“The eternal verities apply,” Sir Alec continued, with an open handed gesture, as if they were surrounded by them, the eternal verities, in this empty, dusty room. “And there’s a seven per cent surcharge on your net profits which goes into Two Strong Arms.” He wagged a finger. “You must remember that when totting up. It pays for the advertisements and the telephone.”

The carpenter finished his cigarette and rubbed it out on the bare boards.

“Fair enough. So . . . What if I bodge it? What then?”

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What're the comebacks? Who's in charge? Where's the foreman? Who's the gov'nor?"

"Don't you even think about bodging it, John," admonished Sir Alec. "I'm the foreman. I'm the gov'nor."

Fitzroy snorted at this. He laughed openly in Sir Alec's face.

"You're fucking joking!"

"I'm the foreman." Again Sir Alec held steady. "I get rid of people if I have to, if they're bringing the organization into disrepute. I have that power and I have that right, as leader of Two Strong Arms."

The carpenter weighed up this idea, the pros and cons of it, finding his own angle.

"I see," he said, more to himself than Sir Alec.

Sir Alec smiled his complacent smile once more. "So, John, are you interested?"

"What's on the books?"

"Firstly, a few educational details, please, John."

The carpenter sighed and lifted his foot onto his knee. He inspected the sole of his new baseball boot. Discovering his cigarette butt lodged between the treads, he leant down and flicked it into a corner of the room. The soft tap of the butt hitting the skirting drew attention to the silence, to the dusty emptiness of the room, to the silence all around in the empty house, and in the damp November street outside. He looked up again at Webb and sighed, still very much inclined to take his leave.

"St. Jude's, Walthamstow. After that, did an apprenticeship for a year. Couldn't hack it. Decided to give it a go on my own. Life story."

"And how's it gone so far, John?"

"Not too bad at all. But there are always lean spells. That's what I don't like. That's why I pricked up my ears when my mum showed me this. Looked steadier."

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“It can be. It can be.” Sir Alec sat back expansively. “You know, I’ve often heard people like you talk about their education in that way, John. As if it meant nothing to them. It was a waste of time. Mine was rather different.”

Fitzroy scowled. Where was this leading?

Sir Alec adjusted his spectacles, leant in towards his interviewee.

“You see, John, what I wonder is, did all that soft soap and kindness really do you much good?”

“Of course it did. What’s that got to do with the order book?”

Sir Alec looked irritated. His voice took an impatient edge: “You see, John, I wonder if it really did do you any good. You didn’t learn a great deal about manners, did you? My own school days were rather different, I’d have you know. Tougher, I should say. No half measures. No giving anything up. No room for anyone work-shy. If you didn’t get on with things you were beaten by your fellows. And they beat you hard - believe me. I myself was beaten many times, John.”

Frowning, the carpenter raised a hand again, half arrest, half surrender –

“Er - what’re you telling me this for, Mr Webb?”

“There’s a comparison to be made. Please do not interrupt me any more, John. Anyone work-shy was beaten. With a cane, a slipper, whatever came to hand - ”

But John Fitzroy was on his feet.

“Now I get it. Now I got you.” He pointed down at Sir Alec. “Not me, mate. Matey. I got you now. I’m out of here. I’ve had a bellyful of this.” He picked up his tool bag and in a trice he was out the door. He shouted back at Webb from the landing.

“What a fucking waste of time that was!”

At the front door he met Gerry coming back from the

library, which did not open until eleven-thirty on Mondays, a fact that had slipped Gerry's shifting and shiftless mind. The young carpenter threw his bag onto his other arm and thumbed up the stairs. His face was red and angry.

"Who is that wanker?"

He shook his head as if trying to break free of the humiliation he'd just endured. He looked out to the grey street and muttered a stream of abuse under his breath. Gerry only caught a few words of it. The carpenter turned and seemed about to say something more to him, but did not. Some speculation had stalled him. He looked Gerry over with jumpy, puzzled eyes, struggling to make a connection. Then, without another word, he brushed by and set off down the pavement.

Gerry hesitated at the front door, watching Mr Fitzroy walk down Lonsdale Road. A neat, brisk, blue figure in the grey street, with his bag of tools held away from him, threading between some shabby vehicles standing in the gutter, and crossing the road to the corner shop.

No van, Gerry thought. Or van broken down, maybe.

The carpenter turned the corner and was gone. Forever, presumably.

Gerry's curiosity about what Mr Webb could have done to so get under this young man's skin was displaced by a need to do some mischief himself. He had a Guardian in his hand. He furled it and tucked it under his arm. This he could not resist. He eased the front door to, tiptoed up the stairs, and made his way stealthily to the second floor.

But on the landing the bare boards creaked and gave him away. When he arrived Sir Alec was already drawing himself up from an attitude of defeat at the filthy window.

"Ah, there you are, Gerry . . ."

Gerry stopped just inside the doorway. "How did it go? Your interview."

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“Very well,” Sir Alec answered gamely. “Very well indeed.” He glanced about his Office with an air of detachment. “We shall have to do something about this place. I’ll get some help.”

“From the Cooperative?”

Sir Alec turned again to face Gerry.

“Yup . . .”

“Perhaps Mr Fitzroy can help too, eh?” Gerry said. “Good grief! So you’ve given him a job? Just like that? Terrific! Who’d have thought it? Out of work one minute, gainfully employed the next. Pension. Paid holidays. National insurance - ”

“No, Gerry.” Sir Alec jutted out his jaw. “It didn’t work out. Can’t use him, I’m afraid.”

“Oh no. Why on earth not?”

“Inflexible. Won’t adapt.”

“Really? But he struck me as a most amenable young man. Salt of the earth.”

“That’s why it went well, Gerald,” Webb replied, his voice now a confident drawl again. “We got beneath all that.”

“I see.”

Sir Alec looked again out of the window and squinted at its dusty light. Some weak November sunshine was breaking through. “I’d have liked to take him on, but I couldn’t. One has to be realistic.”

“Indeed,” Gerry echoed, “one has to be realistic.” He tapped his Guardian on his thigh. “Have you any more interviews today, or is that the lot?”

“No more today, Gerald. I’ll leave you in peace.”

Sir Alec approached the doorway where Gerry stood tapping and furling his Guardian. When he was just a step away Gerry spoke again.

“I met our Mr Fitzroy on the way out. Do you know

David Milnes

what he called you? He called you a wanker. A wanker. What do you make of that?"

"One gets hardened to it, Gerald." Sir Alec smiled and passed by. He called back again over his shoulder as he negotiated the broken stairs: "One soon gets hardened to all that!"

Chapter Four

The Prodigal

Gerry was reluctant to burn his bridges and quit his lodging altogether. It was tempting to do so. It would have been very pleasing to inform Alec Webb, if he met him at the corner now, that he could move into Claremont Villas by all means, with or without his Cooperative, with or without Gerry's cooperation, whenever he pleased, and good luck to him. And to add, moreover, that having been through his little late-life crisis, having done his penance, endured his trial by ordeal, he, Gerry Delaporte, the lost soul of Claremont, the down-and-out of Claremont, was going on holiday to Provence, where he also proposed to spend a long and happy retirement. Yes, to imagine speaking to Webb of these matters and in that tone was indeed alluring. But the memory of three months past,

when he had actually spent a few nights without a roof over his head, was as fresh and vivid and distinctly unpleasant as yesterday's encounter with Webb himself. That salutary exposure to the elements, and they had been the elements of August, not November, had made Gerry a more wary man.

And he had changed in other ways. His attitude towards money had changed fundamentally. This came from necessity of course, living on state handouts, but he also saw the relativities around him in a different light these days. As he walked the streets of Notting Hill and Kensington and West Kensington, it now seemed to him that the English bourgeoisie - in whose class, until recently, he would have counted himself, of course - these ordinary middle-class souls that he encountered on the pavement, or at the Belisha beacon, strolling about in their warm clothes, or driving about in their warm cars - it seemed to him that these people took their good fortune rather too readily for granted. There was something quite impenetrable about the English middle-classes, Gerry had decided. It was in their eyes, a certain steadiness and solidity of gaze, an impenetrable assurance, a smugness. They seemed to regard their world, and everything in it, as an entirely personal accomplishment. Out of some habit of mind the rôle of provenance, providence, luck, best of British, was not admitted. Gerry considered that in contrast he had learned some humility. The gamble he had taken in casting himself out had been reckless, no doubt, foolhardy even; but it had been the right thing to do *for him*. No one else he knew would ever have had the guts to do such a thing. When, at his wit's end, quite in despair, he'd mumbled something about 'chucking in his hand' to his GP, or 'doing away with himself somehow or other', the good doctor had just laughed. Laughed in his face. A soft

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and fruity, rich and mellow, serve at room temperature kind of laugh –

“Oh I say, now really, my dear chap, one doesn’t want to do anything rash now, hmmn? . . .”

This, even when he had reached a point where something had to change, to give, a risk of some sort had to be taken. And he had brought that change about himself, he’d taken his own wild gamble. Why should he not feel proud of that, of what he had done? Without pills, without expense, without burdening the taxpayer or taking up anyone’s precious time, he had seen off his dark night of the soul with just a little honest-to-goodness, commonsensical, hair-shirted self-denial.

Anna would indeed find him a changed man. To her what he had done would still look like heartless folly, but he would return vindicated. Purged. The gamble had paid off. That much was self-evident.

He had tried telephoning her but without success. Directory Enquiries said the number was out of use. More than that they were not at liberty to say. Of course this provoked speculation: no reply to his letter; telephone number changed - What had happened? Was everything all right? But his confidence that Anna *was* all right, safe and secure in the house he had left, surrounded by the goods and chattels they had accumulated over thirty years’ middle-class husbandry, thirty years of childless married life, that basic confidence was unshaken. Solid as the house itself. Given a moment’s thought it was quite understandable that she should have changed the telephone number, gone ex-directory, perhaps. There must have been some fuss after his departure, once the news was abroad: calls from neighbours, calls from colleagues at school. The Head, no doubt, and maybe his old Head of Department, would have telephoned to pass on their token concern,

before relapsing into indifferent silence. There would have been a visit from some cub reporter from *The Eastern Daily Press*, no doubt. It would all have been far too much for Anna, who had always found dealings with his colleagues distasteful, and with the world at large fatiguing, enervating. Getting rid of the old telephone number must have been an immediate necessity. It had been stupid of him to imagine he could just pick up the receiver in a public telephone booth, put in his two pence piece, and dial back to the old life. There had to be some changes, for goodness' sake.

But that said it was equally certain there could have been no major change. Anna enjoyed good health and he had left her fit and well. She was given to her irritable moods, but she was not one for sitting around feeling sorry for herself or getting depressed. She'd always been most intolerant of the least sign of that sort of thing. *There's many a soul in this country a lot worse off than you are. You've a decent home, a good job and you'll get a fair pension at the end of the day. You should be grateful for all of that.* Thank you, Anna. Yes, Anna. By some means or another she would have passed the time - just as she had all his working days, all his working years, his working life. Waiting for things, passing her time, was something she was good at. She most certainly would not have gone anywhere. She had always been an unwilling traveller, particularly on her own. And there couldn't have been any terrible accident, God forbid, because if there had some effort would have been made to find him, which would not have been at all difficult. A morning's elementary detective work would have traced him to Claremont Villas. He had made no attempt to hide himself or cover his tracks. In fact, during his first few days of homelessness, he had experienced a quiet disappointment that no such effort to

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find him had been made. He had actually drifted into a police station once, but had drifted out again in a mood of bitter self-contempt, without turning himself in or making any enquiry about himself.

Observing what he knew well to be an unnecessary, even neurotic precaution, he locked up his bedroom in Claremont Villas as usual and protected that little refuge. It was sweet to imagine that tomorrow morning he might find this key on the dressing table in his real bedroom, this petty symbol of a different world. He would stop and frown at it, no doubt. He would toss it in the air and catch it again, then throw it away, be done with it. But no. In the event he would hang on to it, not as sentimental memento, nor as salutary reminder, but as something which bore witness to all he had been through. The keeping together of body and soul these last few months had been no mean feat. Dealing with the vagaries of the state benefit system, into which he must have poured God only knew how many tens of thousands of pounds over the years, for a quite derisory return in his hour of need, had been a challenge of labyrinthine complexity. Survival of the fittest. But at least he knew now what it was like at the bottom of the heap. Scroungers? Not really. They had a terrible time of it. A bloody awful time of it. He would no longer, with that wry humour which had won him so much admiration in the staff room, make those tiresome jokes that began, *Come the revolution . . .*

No. He could well see the point of a revolution now of some description, so long as it didn't spread to Ipswich before he got home.

So he felt very differently leaving Claremont Villas this morning, not setting off for the library or on some circuitous walk, but on his way *home*. Home! He had not allowed himself to savour some of the delights ahead until

now. Sleeping in his own bed. Drinking freshly ground coffee. Eating decent meals. Cooking! . . . He was a good cook and knew an impressive range of Provençal dishes. He'd always cooked the weekend meals, while Anna had provided during the week – microwave stuff, more often than not, in more recent years. She'd never liked the kitchen. Too small, she said. She kept out of it all weekend. Out of his way, she said. But could he still remember all his dishes? All the herbs and spices? A pinch of this and a soupçon of that? Or would he be forced back to fumbling through the recipe books? Of course he could remember them! All of them. He would go with Anna to Sainsbury's and buy the plumpest free range bird in the store and cook a chicken Provençal they'd never, ever forget.

He crossed Lonsdale Road and stopped to look back at Claremont Villas for the last time. He looked at the front door, slightly ajar and badly scarred around the lock where it had been jemmied by Webb or one of his strong armed henchmen; he looked up at the windows of his floor, which were reasonably clean, except for his bedroom window that he couldn't get at from the outside. His makeshift curtains, thin and shabby, hung from nails he'd hammered into the moulding. Above, on the second floor, now Webb's floor, the windows were filthy and bore the cross of the condemned building. That was rather sad, because even up until the fifties, perhaps, until it had been chopped up into bedsits, Claremont Villas must have been the source of much pride as a family home.

He dropped his head and sighed. Well, thank God it was all over, anyway. This episode. He was indeed, at last, *ready* to go home.

He could have enjoyed an Inter-City from Liverpool Street, with perhaps a royal cooked breakfast in the buffet

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car to boot, such a treat was just about affordable given this was a one way ticket, but the coaches were less than half the price of the trains and this kind of economizing was now ingrained in his nature. So he went to Victoria. He would not be extravagant, even on a celebratory journey of this kind. What a change Anna would see in him! He'd been wont to spend money wildly at times. It had been a way of distracting himself, of releasing the anxiety work generated in him. When the torments of school became intolerable he would insist they went away to some hotel in the Lake District for a weekend, or that they buy some wretched gadget that he would fiddle with right through until Sunday evening, when the storm clouds gathered. Ah, all those Sunday evenings. Good heavens, how had he endured – how many? - a thousand, or so? Thirteen hundred? But was that all? Thirteen hundred Sundays and one's career was over? Absurd, in a way, the whole thing. Ridiculous, the small sad waste of time.

At Victoria he made an effort to dispel both gloomy reflection and optimistic fantasy and apply himself to the practical matters in hand. He went to the public toilets to check his appearance. Did he look different? Did he look a new man?

The toilets were beneath the concourse. There was a turnstile. More expense. And he didn't even need the toilet, just a mirror.

With so many secondhand clothes stalls and charity shops in London these days it wasn't difficult to fit yourself up if you took the time and trouble. His schoolmaster's Harris Tweed, complete with leathered cuffs and elbows, now dry-cleaned, was as respectable as it had been when it formed part of his uniform. He had on a pair of decent light brown trousers, of a rather inferior material, it must be said, and rather too light, almost beige,

if the truth were told, but perfectly acceptable. They complemented the all-leather brogues he'd picked up in a Sue Ryder gift shop for a couple of pounds. He was clean shaven and he'd invested in a cheap haircut from a traditional barber's. He had worn his hair long for a while. The bulk of it had taken away the shape of his head. With this unfussy haircut his face had its neat, triangular outline once more, and his forehead was clear of the stray locks he'd put up with for far too long. He lifted his chin and looked himself up and down in the full length mirror. He buttoned up the Harris Tweed at the middle and tugged down the hem of the jacket.

There had been some weight loss. So much the better. He was an altogether leaner, fitter individual. *Leaner, fitter* - he liked those comparatives. They were Mrs Thatcher's new words. *Leaner, fitter*. She was making ground with them too, against the flabby Callaghan gang. There stood before him a respectable and presentable man in his late fifties. A man whose features were sensitive, delicate even - but not weak. He was confident, self-possessed.

One or two other people were trying to use the mirror now. A young black with fearsome dreadlocks was edging his way here and there into the spaces of the glass Gerry left spare, but Gerry did not move for him, nor for anyone else. He remained exactly where he was, full square in front of the mirror. He conceded nothing. He stared into his own brown eyes. Stared long and hard. Here was the chief change.

"Move over, pops."

The young black was getting impatient.

"Come on. Get lost."

But Gerry did not move over. He would not get lost. His eyes were no longer the soft, brown, vulnerable eyes which, off guard, were shot through with anxiety and self-

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doubt. These eyes were firm, clear, direct. That haunted look had gone. These were the eyes he should have had throughout his career, eyes that stopped misbehaviour with a look, no accompanying words required. He tried out a haughty, overbearing glance on the young black fellow in the mirror, and said out loud:

“There have been some changes all right!”

The young man seemed unsurprised.

“Sure there have. Now get lost.”

Gerry brushed past him, slipped the turnstile and seized the stairs two at a time.

Leaner, fitter.

At Ipswich he stepped down from the coach with a lightness that suggested the confidence he'd felt at the beginning of the journey had not deserted him, but Ipswich town centre had always been a place where, for as far back as he could remember, Gerry had felt ill at ease, anxious, afraid even. Over the years there had been several occasions when he had been out shopping and there had been 'incidents' with boys from his school. Boys had barracked him from across the street, or hailed him from across a store. “Hey! Delaporter! Where's yer daughter?” Oh, his ghastly name! His horrible, pretentious, bourgeois name! What a curse it had always, always been, and what a gift to those brutes. If Mrs Delaporte were with him, rather than temper their abuse she would excite it. They were quick to drag her in: “Out with the old Mrs, eh? Gonna buy her a peep-hole, eh?” It was no use ignoring it, trying to pick through another row of Harris Tweeds or Clydellas or Vyellas, pretending that the abuse was directed at someone else. He would be the only one trying to ignore it. And of course, after the first few taunts, his

tormentors moved on to their chants, their declensions from the rude and lewd to the obscene:

“Delashit!”

“Delatit!”

“Delaprick!”

“Delabollocks!”

“Delafuck!”

“Delacunt!”

Leading his wife by the arm Gerry would seek a quick exit from the situation. A scene such as this had been enough to stop him returning to the town centre for several weeks. There would be another weekend in the Lake District and after that Gerry would be housebound. In his boredom he would find odd jobs around the house; fiddling, unnecessary improvements which he loathed doing and which resulted in things not being improved but impaired, because he was not a DIY man.

As he was retired now, any encounter with such jobs could be dealt with on his own terms, and was no longer anything to be feared. He would give them as good they gave him. He'd match them obscenity for obscenity, as loud as they liked. He'd enjoy that. He'd soon fix *them!* And yet, to be back in this place, Ipswich bus station, was still undeniably just a little unnerving. Gerry was thirsty. He would have liked to stop for five minutes in the bus station cafeteria, but he did not do so, could not do so. He pressed on and sought out the bus stage for his district, only to discover that he had just missed a bus - yet still he did not turn back to the cafeteria. And he was thirsty, very thirsty. But that bus station cafeteria had always been a favourite hangout for a particular kind of youth. Cursing the bus service as unreliable anyway, he decided to walk. He was used to long walks and the secondhand brogues were a good fit. He had to keep on the move. If he stopped

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for a moment some vital momentum might be lost.

He had tried several times to formulate what he would say to Anna. It was reminiscent of trying to prepare a lesson at school, something he'd always postponed until the time was upon him, and then accomplished, despite its pointlessness, in a state of abject panic. What on earth would he say to her? After the initial emotion, the outpourings, the turmoil, the huggings and clingings, for which he must be prepared - after all that, when it was time to break the impasse, the emotional deadlock, what would he actually say to her?

As he drew closer to home, to his cluster of terraced streets, any misgivings he had were expunged by an intoxicating and boyish excitement. He realized that the future was much more valuable to him now than it had been when he retired in the summer. And how distant did his life in London suddenly seem, its petty nuisances and anxieties, with these solid and familiar streets before him. Alec Webb, indeed. Good grief! Was there really such a fellow? Two Strong Arms! Was all that really still going on in the nation's capital, the seat of government, just a couple of hours away by Express coach? Webb's was a face of England to be swiftly forgotten, and yet how much more thankful he was for the prospects before him because he knew that face of England now, and the face of England's poor, and he'd seen through all that awful class-bound nonsense that held everything in place. Such was the buoyancy and excitement he felt about these insights the idea came to him that Anna was to be thanked - yes, thanked! - for allowing him his petty dénouement to the tragi-comedy of his career.

And here he was, at last, at the head of good old Rosebery Road, that which hath the antique spelling. Here he had to stop and be still. Halt. Check the excitement. A

distinction had forked his thoughts. This road he stared down, where he had spent more or less all his working life (he had refused to climb the property ladder so that he and Anna could afford their summers in Provence), this road where he had existed for thirty years, that poky terraced house where he had gone through the functions of life, where he had eaten his sacks of muesli, drunk his barrels of coffee, tea and wine, where he had bathed and showered his ageing body year by year, where he had excreted his tons of faeces and tankers of urine, where he had had sex (though never enough, and not at all in recent years: somehow Anna had persuaded him this was the lot of all men), this house where he had returned each evening with his briefcase full of scruffy exercise books, and from whence he had left the next morning without opening a single one of them, this house, this road, this England - good grief, this was no place of fondness, just disaffection pure and simple, just the site of one more endless, meaningless struggle for the pay cheque. No. All the excitement he had felt on approaching this place was to do with prospects beyond it, not the place itself. Surely that was a sobering thought, that no memory of joy or even contentment could be attached to this Rosebery Road. Good heavens, the misery of paying one's way! He looked down the road and it seemed to darken under the cast iron November skies, and that tunnelled darkness was the prevailing truth of the place. He had spent his life fleeing down tunnels of anxiety, briefcase in hand, towards a light that had never been better than dull, dull, dull.

There was a stiffness which came from anger in his walk as he started down the street towards his home. Suddenly he did not feel like talking. He did not even feel like meeting his wife. He did not want all the emotional excess. He wished he could simply open his door, go into

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his living room, and sit down on the sofa, and just be quiet for a very long time.

In this mood of absorption he stepped up the path to the front door, found the key on the ring, inserted it, turned it, and pushed the door wide. He stepped over the threshold and closed the door gently behind him. He could hear movement in the house. It was from the kitchen. The sound of the cutlery drawer being pushed shut. The clatter of the green plastic tray shunting in the drawer. Then nothing. Silence.

Anna.

A tap started.

Stopped.

Washing her coffee mug after elevenses. Pensively shaking out the drips.

“Gerald, is that you?” He could almost hear it. Prepare yourself, Gerry, he told himself. Prepare yourself, old boy. The turmoil. The huggings, the clingings. They had never been the most demonstrative of couples, but perhaps on this occasion . . .

A small, dark woman, shoulder length hair, about forty, not unattractive, appeared at the end of the hallway. She had a dish towel over one arm. On seeing Gerry standing on the doormat, the front door closed behind him, she looked shocked. She muttered something in another tongue - Spanish? Portuguese? - and retreated to the kitchen again. He heard her open the back door and call into the garden.

Gerry stood silently, his keys dangling in his hand. His mind was in wilful suspension. He refused to speculate about what this meant. The explanations, nothing too untoward, of course, would pour in from outside, not haemorrhage from inside.

A stocky, middle-aged, swarthy man, the husband presumably, came to the kitchen doorway and stopped

dead. He stared at Gerry, looked him up and down. His gaze lighted on the keys dangling in Gerry's hand and he frowned. The woman, still standing in the kitchen doorway, just behind her husband, started saying something, softly, discreetly. But her husband waved her into silence and came forward himself. He stopped near Gerry and gave him a neutral nod, then passed him by, turned and went upstairs. Halfway up he stopped again and looked down at Gerry:

“Un momentito, eh? Okay?”

Gerry nodded courteously. All would become clear. In a minute. A momentito. All would become clear.

There was some exchange in broken English upstairs and Gerry heard a young man's voice up there, from right above him. He looked up to the ceiling, to the yellowing whitewash and the plain moulding. The voice came from his bedroom. A young man's voice, from inside his bedroom. It was a brusque voice, cutting the other man off, and then there was a smack of some sort - a *smack!* - the sound of a hand smacked down on a table, perhaps.

Then: “All right, all right! I'll deal with it . . . I'll *bloodywell* deal with it! . . . For goodness' sake what's fucking next!”

The sound of steps on the landing above.

A tall, curly-haired, heavily built man in his late twenties or early thirties came down the stairs. He was doing up a pair of crumpled grey trousers. He wore a plain white shirt, open at the neck to several buttons down. A pair of ancient sandals exposed his knobbly ankles and large yellow heels. He was unshaven, his hair was tousled, and his face was lined on one side as if just lifted from the pillow. He came down to within four steps of the foot of the stairs and stopped there, leaning on the banister. Gerry noted a tongue of white shirt trapped at the top of his fly.

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After he'd stopped, after a noticeable time lag, two or three seconds perhaps, a very powerful and oniony stink of body odour rolled down the last four steps into the hallway. It was so extraordinary, this stink, the power of it, that Gerry had to stop himself yielding to it, taking a step backwards. Nothing less than a stench. Quite ghastly. And it was intensifying all the time. Oh my word - how it intensified! It belonged to this young man, yet he was so blithely unaware of it, and so unashamed - standing there, nonchalantly leaning on the banister, *his* banister. It was like some kind of gesture from him, a salutation, something he offered perfect strangers, like Gerry Delaporte, without a thought, whenever they called, whenever they came home. So hospitable. My home is your home.

Well, thank you very much, sir!

The young man stood still on the stairs. A big fellow. A big slouch. But haughty. He stood there, and his haughty smell stiffened in the silence of the hallway until it had a presence of its own, a permanence, a shape, a form, a formality.

The other man, the dark man – so many strangers in his house! - had stopped halfway down the stairs, and remained there, upwind of his smelly emissary, stooping and crook-kneed and looking rather sorry for himself for some reason.

At last the young man spoke:

“What is it, pops? What’s the problem?”

Move over, pops. Get lost.

But I am lost, Gerry thought. I am lost in my own home. He opened his mouth and emitted a pant, the start of a laugh that could never be laughed. But he said nothing.

“What’s up, pops? Out with it. Come on. You can do it.”

“I live here.”

“No you don’t, mate. We live here.” The young man now noticed the keys in Gerry’s hand. “Where did you get those from? Did you find them? Did someone give them to you?” His voice was gentle and a touch patronizing. Gerry felt as if he were perceived as someone infirm. All his grooming had been to no avail, then. The dry cleaning of the Harris Tweed. The polishing of the brogues. The beige trousers. The haircut. All to no avail. He was seen as infirm and he felt infirm. He wanted to put the young man right, set the record straight, but his mind had seized. Down to his side was a new telephone table, a mock-antique affair with curved legs of stained wood and a green leather seat, hemmed with shiny brass tacks. Pretentious rubbish. It was not his. There was no telephone on it. It was completely unfamiliar to him. Yet the rest of the house was entirely familiar. The wallpaper and the curtains were unquestionably his. This was his house. But the telephone table, that was not his. And there was something on it that drew back his eye. It was an elastic-banded bundle of letters. The uppermost letter of the bundle was addressed to his wife, and - ah, the pity of it! - it was in his own hand!

Now Gerry corrected himself, for the enlightenment of anyone who might understand in the assembled company.

“I used to live here.”

The young man’s mouth opened and he nodded. Now he could begin to deal with the situation.

“You used to live here.”

“That’s right,” Gerry said. “I lived here for more than thirty years. I lived here for all of my working life. For my entire career I lived here. I went to work from this house in the morning, and returned from work to this house in the evening. For thirty years. From and to this house. To and from this house.”

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“Ahh . . .” The man nodded again and puckered his lips thoughtfully. “I get you, now . . .”

“I hung that wallpaper,” Gerry added, encouraged, raising his hand to point at the wallpaper above the stairs. The house keys dangled and jangled in the silence of the hallway. “That wallpaper. With the motif of violets and cornflowers.” But no sooner had he said this than he knew this kind of assertion was both meaningless and uncalled for. He lowered his hand.

The Spanish couple, if that’s what they were, were frowning from their different vantage points, but seemed to have grasped the essence of this slow, repetitive exchange. Gerry decided that the young man must be a tenant of this couple, must be subletting a room from them, and that the couple were émigrés, not from Spain or Portugal but from South America; they’d fled some military regime in one of those ghastly Latin American countries, and had come through all manner of horrors and indignities, but had now found a haven of peace and asylum here, in his house, in *his* house, at 13 Rosebery Road, Ipswich. How extremely fortunate!

The tenant’s eyes narrowed and he frowned too. Then he cocked his head: “Are you . . . Mr Delaporter?”

“Yes,” Gerry closed his eyes and nodded. “Yes. I am Mr Delaporter.”

“There’s some mail for you.” The tenant came down the last few stairs, stepped across the hallway and picked up the wad of letters from the telephone table. His sudden movement, close to Gerry, his bending down, disturbed fresh currents of his awful smell. He peeled back the first letter to read the name on the next (a typed, official looking letter) then let Gerry’s letter flap back. “The first one’s for your wife. Or your daughter?”

Delaporter, where’s your daughter?

Gerry shook his head. "We had no children."

"For your wife, then."

Gerry said nothing. Lost in sliding introspection.

"Or your mother? Anna?"

"No. My mother is dead. That's my wife's name. I wrote that letter, as a matter of fact."

The tenant ignored this unnecessary complication, as if he knew Gerry were telling a lie. "But the rest are for you. Six or seven of them."

He offered the bundle to Gerry, who took it from him. Gerry stared down at his own handwriting on the uppermost envelope. The pity of it.

"We couldn't forward them because there was no address, you see. Some of those were marked urgent. I phoned the agent but he said there was no forwarding address."

"The agent?"

"The estate agent."

"You rent the house?"

"No. They bought it," he said, with a nod to the couple behind him. "I rent from them."

There was a moment's deafening silence, absolute stillness.

"But they could not have bought it," Gerry glanced at the foreign couple, who stood side by side in his hallway now; the man had come down the stairs without his noticing. They looked different. The danger had passed and they were losing interest in Gerry, in his life, which had its history here. Gerry looked at the tenant as if he were being obtuse, a dunce in the class. His tone became stern. What the tenant had said was absurd, laughable: "They could not have bought this house, sir, because I never sold this house. It is my house. My house!"

The young man shrugged. That was beyond him.

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“I don’t know anything about that. You’ll have to take that up with the agent. We don’t know anything about that.” He nodded at the letters. “Maybe they’ll explain something for you. You go down and see the agent, see what he says. Ebbages. North Street. Look, sign’s still outside. Sort it out with them.”

Gerry turned. Through the frosted glass of the front door he could indeed make out some blurred bands of white and yellow. A signboard. For sale. Sold. How could he have missed that on his way in? How? Quite simple, really. By means of the same subliminal shuttering device that had stopped anything too ugly, momentous or true ever troubling his retina for the whole of his stupid, pointless, useless life! Oh, come on! Enough of this! Sold? Sold! *Sold!* It was preposterous!

But when Gerry looked back at the tenant he knew that the young man, for all his obtuseness, for all his stink, was absolutely right, it was time to go, there was nothing further to be gained from this visit.

“There’s been a terrible mistake,” Gerry said, “and your position here, I regret - ” he looked past the tenant to the foreigners – “all your positions here - I mean to say, that is, *none* of your positions here - is at all safe. Is secure. I’m afraid. No matter what horrors and indignities you may have suffered, no matter what unhappiness and loneliness you may have endured.”

“What?”

“There’s been a terrible mistake, you see.” He faced the young man again. “But you’re right. You’re quite right. I shan’t trouble you any further. I shall go to Ebbages. I shall take my leave. For the moment. But I’ll be back shortly. You can be certain of that. But for now I take my leave.” He turned to go but as he did so he felt the tenant’s heavy hand on his shoulder.

David Milnes

“Would you mind giving us the keys, pops?”

Gerry turned again and looked into the tenant's eyes. They were mild. He didn't mean to harm or offend. He was only doing what was reasonable under the circumstances. With him standing so close, hand raised to receive the keys, Gerry caught his smell full on. Something beyond body odour, too sharp for sweat. Something to do with rot. Foot rot, flesh rot. Fungi. And he was stinking up his house. *His* home. Quite unforgivable. But Gerry nodded and surrendered his keys.

“May I trouble you for a glass of water?”

The tenant, keys in hand, gave a one-sided, concessionary smile.

He led the way past the landlord and landlady, who looked about to protest.

“Quiet!”

Inside the kitchen he took a glass from the draining rack, filled it, and gave it to Gerry. Gerry drank, and looked around as he drank. The draining rack was laden with his old crockery: the willow pattern, plate after plate of it, but some plates chipped now. And there was his coffee mug, the fancy one from Clough Head. Eleveneses, good god. The kitchen itself was exactly as he'd left it. The sagging oatmeal units. That expensive microwave she'd egged him on to buy - the first in Ipswich, if not the whole bloody country! - that stalled his plans to replace the single sink with something in white enamel, the French look . . .

On this side of the dull stainless steel drainer was his wooden-handled fruit knife, out of its block. Without a thought he snatched it up - but the tenant's hand was instantly on his wrist -

“*IT'S MY KNIFE!*” Gerry screamed. He smashed his glass on the floor and tried to push and punch the tenant off him but the tenant was far too strong for him, and

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squeezed and banged his wrist on the sink edge until he released the knife. It clattered in the empty sink. He pulled Gerry round by the wrist and whipped his arm behind his back -

“That's enough of you!”

He frogmarched Gerry past the landlord and landlady, now standing at the kitchen door, and down the hallway.

“It's all right,” Gerry muttered. “No need for this. No need.”

At the door the tenant hesitated, apparently unable to manage the next manoeuvre single-handed. He relaxed, let Gerry's hand drop, then stepped back out of range.

“Out you go. Now.”

Without turning Gerry opened the door and stepped outside, then shut the door behind him in that ordinary, habitual way, as if he were going out to buy a newspaper or a pint of milk. He walked slowly to the end of the path, past the unmissable white and yellow Ebbages signboard, with its loud red SOLD sticker slapped diagonally across the middle.

This was a wholly new feeling.

To have nothing.

This was very new.

To have *nothing*.

He stopped on the pavement the other side of the picket gate. His wrist was throbbing and his shoulder hurt, but he was unharmed. He shut his eyes and thought of Anna, his wife. But no, he could not do that, not yet. Opening his eyes again he sensed movement at the net curtains of the front window behind him, the only movement in the still and silent street, but he did not turn.