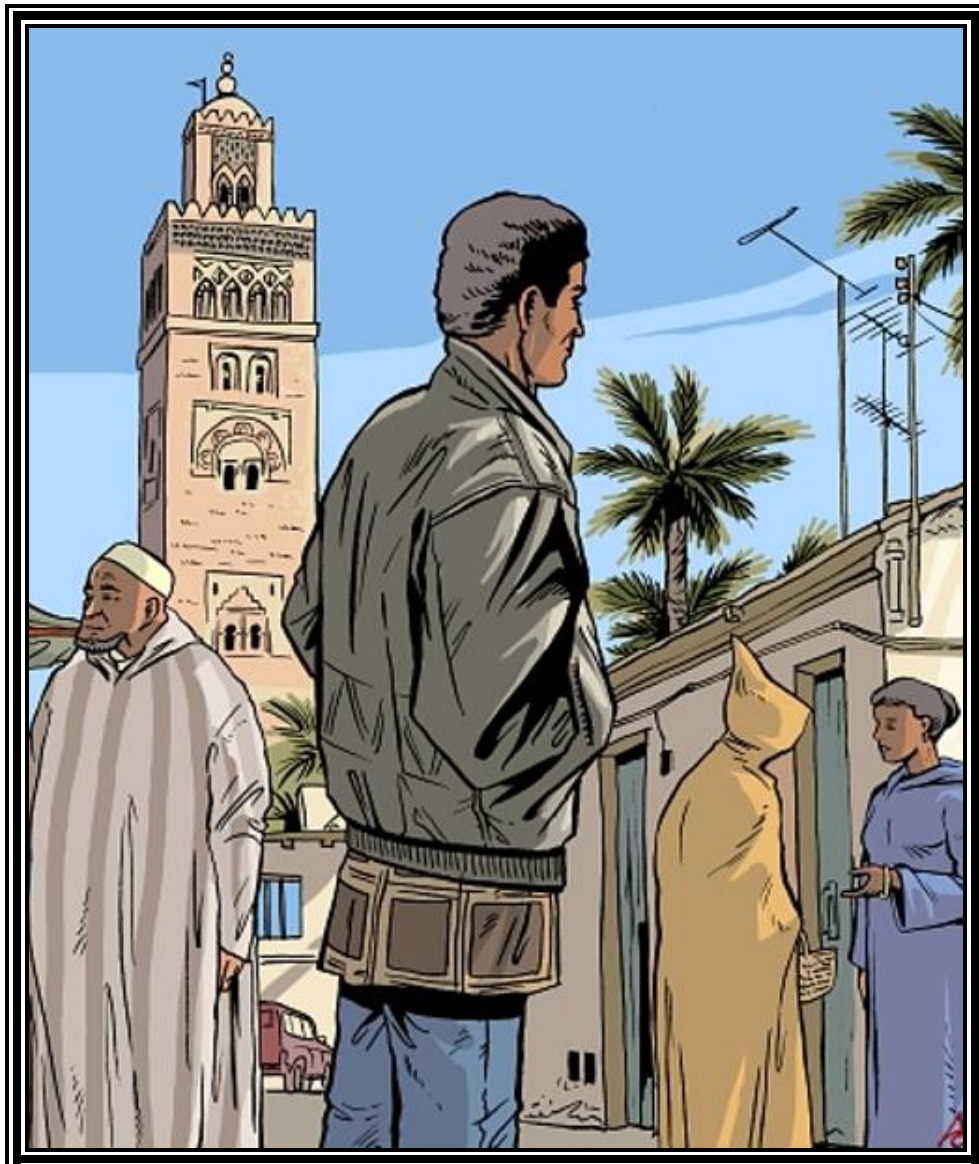


Degrees of Intimacy

Bradley Stoke



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Marrakech

The minaret's shadow was short and distinct in the early afternoon sun. The blackness spread over the pavement obscuring a figure that staggered as if drunk as it dodged past a group of young women dressed in djalabas, their faces hidden under the hoods.

Of course, Hamid wasn't drunk. He'd not had a drop to drink, although this was something he intended to remedy fairly soon. But the conversation he'd just had with his brother had troubled him so much he might as well be drunk. Yet it was difficult for him to be sure exactly why it had affected him so radically.

He passed a beggar: a young woman with a small child in her lap. Instinctively, Hamid dipped into his jeans pocket to retrieve a dirham which he placed in her open palm. His mind was less on her expressions of gratitude than on his concerns about his brother, to whom he'd spoken so very rarely these last few years. He wasn't even sure where, or even from which continent, his brother had made his phone call.

It was bad enough that the conversation had to be at the post office and at a specific time whose convenience was in no way determined by Hamid's working hours at all. Hamid worked as a manager at their father's factory, so it was somewhat easier to get away. A day off today was scarcely the best timing, but when he'd received that postcard with the American stamp and postmark he had no choice but to cancel the meeting he'd arranged with the supplier and take an unscheduled day's leave. And that for three hours of sitting in a post office anxiously waiting for the call to come through. Typical that his brother was always late, not that he could afford the time to be angry with him in the few minutes they at last talked.

He turned the street corner to face the March sun glaring brilliantly ahead of him. He screwed up his eyes, regretting that he'd forgotten his sunglasses and very nearly bumped into a tourist walking in the opposite direction.

And what had that conversation consisted of? Praises of Allah and his greatness. Curses against Ariel Sharon and the Zionist oppression of the Palestinians. And curses in almost equal measure against the Great Satan, America, and its recently elected president.

So predictable and really rather unnecessary. It wasn't the sort of fanatical conversation Hamid had given up a day's work to have to hear.

And then, just before he put the phone down, his brother said, and Hamid believed him, that he would probably never see him again until their souls were counted, and that he, his brother, would very soon depart the world of mortal temptation. His death, he said, would be a glorious one whose impact would be felt forever.

And then, as if he had said too much already, and with no warning, the telephone connection was abruptly truncated.

Hamid passed by a café in whose window he could see Omar and two of his friends. Although he wasn't in the mood at just that time there was no way he could pretend not to have seen Omar's broad smile and his downward arm gestures to join him and his company. With more care than he usually took, Hamid composed his face into a broad smile and pushed open the plate glass door.

"Salam Allakum!" he greeted his friend.

"Allakum Salam!" Omar replied. "How're you? Taking a day off?"

"A good day for it," Hamid replied, pushing forward a seat to join Omar's company just inside the front door. The rich aroma of hash smoke was all he needed to

guess why Omar hadn't chosen to sit out on the street where most of the café's clientele were gathered.

Omar's friend, Sadik, passed the joint to him under the table.

Hamid could hardly refuse. He accepted the proffered item and took a long toke while smiling at his already distinctly stoned companions. The rush of marijuana to the brain was not as welcome as it normally was, but it helped him to relax.

"Kif from the Rif," explained Omar's other friend. "Good stuff!"

"Allah be praised!" agreed Hamid with a grin, passing it on to Omar.

The four of them sat together in the shade of the café, surrounded by the sound of Algerian rai, while a television burred, ignored, in the corner where a newscaster was detailing some atrocity or other that the Israelis had perpetrated in Palestine.

Hamid's mind was only superficially on the chatter that went on amongst his friends, happy that it was about nothing more than football, while his mind agitatedly replayed the details of his conversation with his brother.

Hamid certainly hoped that they'd meet somewhere less ethereal than the final judgment, but he was troubled by everything about those final words. Since his brother's departure on the Haj, and the occasion Hamid first met the new friends his brother had made on that pilgrimage, it was as if Hamid had acquired a new brother. One Hamid barely recognised as the brother with whom he had played games in the courtyard of their parents' home.

"You look thoughtful, Hamid," commented Omar. "Anything troubling you?"

"Nothing. Nothing," said Hamid, perhaps a little too hastily.

Omar leaned forward, letting his friends continue their blow-by-blow account of

the weekend's match in the stadium.

“Don't be foolish, Hamid. I know you too well. I can see you're troubled. Is it Fatima?”

Fatima? Hamid's fiancée whom he was more and more sure he would never marry. He was thrown by the question into honesty.

“No. It's my brother. I've just been on the phone to him.”

“Allah! I knew it! Where is he now? Is he still in Pakistan?”

“I don't know,” Hamid said with uncertainty, but keeping his voice low. “He might be in Afghanistan. He might be back in Jeddah. He might even be in America.”

“America?” piped in a stoned Sadik. “I've always wanted to go to America. Hamburgers. Hot dogs. And women with the biggest arses in the world!”

“There's no football in America,” Omar reminded Sadik.

“The primitives!” Sadik exclaimed. “But the girls have still got good arses!”

Sadik returned to his conversation, noting the look of urgency on Omar's face.

“I always liked your brother, Hamid,” Omar continued in a low voice. “But last time we met he was so weird. He's got Allah big time! He's not joined the Muslim brotherhood, has he?”

“I don't think so. It's another outfit. One based in Saudi Arabia. But it's got links with the Taliban.”

“Allah!” Omar swore. “They give Islam a bad name. I heard they don't even allow music. And the women! You can't see their arses. You can't see their hair. You can't even see their faces!”

“Afghanistan's worse than Saudi Arabia. It gives me the shivers.”

“So, is your brother a Talibani?”

“I don’t think so.”

“He doesn’t shave. He doesn’t drink. He dresses like some kind of peasant. And he’s always going on about Allah. I mean, Allah be praised, I’m a Muslim. Although I don’t go to the mosque, I observe Ramadan like the best of them. But there are limits, aren’t there?”

“I don’t understand it. My brother never used to be so devout. It was weird him even going on the Haj. I thought it was just because he liked the idea of being a Hajji. And now...”

“Have you spoken to him recently?”

“Just now.”

“And how is he?”

“I don’t know. I don’t know,” muttered Hamid in anguish. “I just wish he’d come home, leave all those fanatics behind, and take up his duties in my father’s firm.”

Hamid badly needed some air. The hit from the kif was probably not what he needed just now. He made his excuses and pushed open the door of the café, leaving the air-conditioned interior for the warm March air.

What he needed now was a drink.

And more than that, a woman. That would take his mind off things.

And where better to go than a tourist hotel bar where the higher quality whores worked? A bit more expensive than those in the medina, but well worth the extra few dirhams; though he knew he’d never have to pay as much as a tourist would for their services. Especially, the French, German and American tourists. They always had to pay

that little bit more for a taste of North African sex.

Hamid wandered off, still staggering, but now with the excuse of a few well-inhaled tokes, glad that there was at least a mile to the Chems which was the only tourist hotel he was certain of both being allowed in and finding a woman who would sate his inappropriate lust.

Hassan, the doorman, greeted him like the old friend he was as Hamid sailed through the entrance into the plush reception area where several young Dutch tourists were struggling with their motley collection of suitcases. He waved an open palm at Khadija at the reception desk who was struggling to understand a Russian's complaint and strolled into the hotel bar, a huge room facing onto the hotel's swimming pool and next to various small boutiques selling carpets and the appalling tourist tack that no Moroccan would ever buy.

Hamid looked around him. Where were the whores?

The Chems had a fairly discreet policy with regards to prostitutes plying their trade at the hotel. As long as they were not obviously on the game and tipped the hotel staff generously, their presence, if not explicitly welcomed, was at least tolerated. In fact, only the most observant tourist would guess that the smartly dressed Moroccan women who looked more Western than Islamic were anything other than the hotel guests they pretended to be.

Normally Hamid would easily have spotted a Chems whore. She'd either be sitting by herself at the bar, seemingly bored but with eyes glancing about agitatedly, or she'd be sitting with her friends laughing and joking but still keeping an intent gaze on the comings and goings around her. Hamid could see two women who were almost

certainly engaged in business, but he'd lost his opportunity. They were both laughing and giggling in the company of two very fat middle-aged German men.

Hamid sighed. Well, a drink would have to do. But at several times the price he would normally need to pay, he was rather peeved that this might after all end up as being all the Chems had on offer tonight.

He warmly greeted Ahmed, the barman, and ordered a bottle of expensive German lager. In the style of a Westerner, he accepted the bottle as it came with a slice of lime squeezed down its neck. Then he sat on the barstool, swivelled it round and surveyed the world about him.

His thoughts were beginning to sink back to the morass of worry about his brother, recalling again and again those final apocalyptic words, when he noticed, hidden behind the menu and cocktail list placed at the corner of the bar, a woman his brisk survey had earlier not taken in.

He stood up and strode towards her, pleased to see she was unaccompanied. She was older than him, perhaps in her early thirties, wearing only a one-piece swimsuit and smoking a recently lit cigarette balanced in an upturned hand at the end of a slim and lightly tanned arm.

He hesitated slightly before making his move. What language did she speak? Was she German? French? She certainly wasn't American. No American would seem so at ease sitting by herself. Perhaps she was Russian. They were such mysterious people, with a similar half-amused expression on their faces. And the women were famous for their enthusiastic sexuality, although having only once tasted foreign flesh, and that a slightly podgy Belgian girl he'd picked up at the Jemaa El Fna, he had nothing with which to

confirm this theory.

When you don't know, try English. All foreigners speak English.

Fortunately English was a subject in which he'd excelled at the expensive private lycée he'd attended, so Hamid relished the opportunity to speak the language of the American R&B singers he enjoyed listening to.

Where to begin?

Hamid noticed an empty bottle of Stork just by her half full glass of beer. He smiled and caught the woman's eyes.

"I see you like our Moroccan beer," he remarked.

The woman started at being addressed by a stranger, but she quickly regained her composure. A supercilious smile returned to her reddened lips.

"Yeah. I'll try anything once."

Hamid stood next to her. He didn't recognise the accent, but he guessed she was English. Most of the least identifiable accents came from England.

"Have you tried any Moroccan wines? They really are excellent."

"I wouldn't say that, love. Most of the stuff I've drunk here has been distinctly unremarkable."

Hamid persisted. "Most tourists, especially English ones, don't realise what a great wine-growing country Morocco is."

The woman smiled again and brushed a hand through her light brown shoulder-length hair. She raised her cigarette to her mouth and puffed out a cloud of smoke.

"They say that when the French were here, they considered North African wine to be better than their own vintage."

“Well, it wasn’t the shit I’ve had to drink they were talking about,” she commented, flicking the end of her cigarette into the ashtray. “Are you hitting on me?”

Hamid blanched.

“Hitting on you? I don’t understand.”

“Don’t act soft. You obviously speak good English. Are you hitting on me? In fact, that’s a bloody stupid question, isn’t it? You obviously are. You Moroccans are so fucking obvious.”

Hamid was quite suddenly downhearted. This wasn’t the sort of conversation he was hoping for. He looked down at his bottle of Heineken.

“Don’t look so bashful, love. I don’t mind, I really don’t. Why don’t you pull up a stool and don’t be so fucking wet? I’m quite flattered really. You’re not a gigolo, are you?”

“No,” Hamid replied, alarmed at the directness of the question, but sitting down nonetheless on a stool that had been previously placed at a discreet distance from the English woman. “I’m a manager. I work in my father’s bottling factory.”

“I didn’t think you were. Shame, in a way. If Moroccan men are like Moroccan women they’d be well worth the expense.”

The woman leaned over to shake Hamid’s hand. He was uncharacteristically nervous with this woman. Her handshake was firm. Not at all as limp as he’d expected.

“My name’s Phillipa. I live in Camden, North London, but I originally come from Manchester.”

“Manchester? Where Manchester United come from?”

“Yeah. You follow football, do you? Everywhere we go everyone’s heard of

Manchester United. It's as if that's all Manchester ever had going for it. What's your name, love? You're not another Mohammed, are you?"

"No. Close. It's Hamid."

"Hamid, eh? Nice to meet you, Hamid. So what are you doing here? You're not trying to persuade me to buy a fucking carpet, are you? I've had enough of carpet shops and mint tea to see me for the rest of my days."

"No. Not at all. Though a friend of mine does work in a carpet shop."

"And you'll take us back to see him, will you?" Phillipa laughed.

Then noticing Hamid's downcast face, she sighed.

"Look, love. I don't mean to be rude. It's just you get sorta wise to the game when you've been in this country a few weeks. You're just after the talent, aren't you? And there's some good looking girls here, aren't there?"

"Well, yes. Moroccan girls are very pretty."

"I'll say! David and I sampled one of the local business girls last night. She's not here now. Maybe we wore her out, poor thing."

Hamid coughed. What was this strange woman saying? Perhaps he should change the subject. He studied Phillipa, his eyes opening wider than he intended as he looked her up and down. She'd clearly not been wearing a swimsuit to enjoy the pool where a huge man was paddling backwards and forwards on his back like some species of whale, his stomach round and bulging in the bright glare of the chlorinated water. Her mascara was unsmudged and there was no lankness in her straight hair.

"Relax, love. David and I don't believe in just sampling your beers and your grotty wine. Or your tajines, kif and mint tea. We like more intimate pastimes as well."

“And David? Is he a friend of yours?”

“He’s my husband. And talking of whom, look who’s just made his way from the sunbed!”

Hamid turned his head to see a man wearing only baggy swimming trunks, with a cloth bag slung over his shoulder. He was a tall, thin man, about the same height as Hamid, with a freckled complexion and relatively short hair. He smiled at Phillippa and Hamid as he approached.

“You don’t waste your time, darling,” he said before kissing his wife tenderly on the lips. “Who’s the young man? Such a splendid looking fellow!”

“Hamid,” said the object of his praise, proffering an outstretched hand.

David shook the hand warmly. “Pleased to meet you, Hamid. I see you’ve got to know my darling wife. You’re not selling carpets, are you?”

“Not this one, Dave. He’s been hitting on me. Isn’t that sweet?”

“Saves you making the effort, dear. What would you like, Hamid? Another Heineken?”

Hamid nodded. What had he let himself in for?

The three of them settled together on some sofas by the window, looking out onto the pool where the fat German was still paddling back and forth, while some children kicked the water with bare dangling feet at the pool edge.

David worked as a producer for a television station in Central London and was now between projects. Phillippa was a children’s story writer who was able to fit her work around her other interests. And these interests were now taken up by a tour of Morocco in a hired four-wheel drive the two of them had driven from Tangiers along the

coast, past Rabat, Casablanca and El Jadida. They were now taking in the cooler, more desolate landscapes of the Atlas, having enjoyed days in Meknes and Fes. Although they were only tourists with just a smattering of French between them and as good as no knowledge at all of Arabic or Berber, Hamid envied their ability to navigate around the kingdom and facilitate themselves of the sensual pleasures for which the Westernmost reach of the Arabic world was famous.

“India’s more spiritual, but the sex is more one-sided,” David opined. “The girls just lie there while you fuck away. Moroccan girls have got a lot more spirit!”

“I’ll fucking say!” Phillipa agreed. “I’ve almost learnt a new thing or two. And it’s not as if your shit’s any more potent than the charas we sampled out there amongst the maharajahs and saddhus.”

Hamid knew there was plenty of vice and hedonism in the West. He’d seen the movies, and envied the Americans and Europeans for the ease they always had in availing themselves of drugs like cocaine and ecstasy, not to mention alcohol. And if women were quite as easy in real life as they were in the movies, there’d surely be no need to resort to prostitutes. But this couple seemed to find their hedonistic thrills in countries like India, Thailand and Eastern Europe that Hamid had never before been aware of as centres of drugs, sex or even rock and roll.

“The parties in Goa!” exclaimed Phillipa. “Made me feel like a teenager again! Maybe not as wild as Ibiza, but fuck! the trance stuff is so fucking sexy. And the Westerners there in the hippy communities, there’s no fucking limit to their imagination!”

It seemed inevitable after a few beers that Hamid should accompany Phillipa and

David to their hotel room, which was rather more plush than any Hamid had ever stayed in his business trips to Casablanca or Agadir. And as soon as the door was shut, out came a selection of sachets and CDs about which Hamid really had to restrain himself from betraying his relative ignorance. There were several types of hash and grass, not to mention some powders that may have been cocaine, but might have been other more mysterious compounds not normally imported into Morocco. And Hamid was treated to some very strange swirling percussive music that after a few tokes off Phillippa's expertly rolled joints came to seem peculiarly beguiling and intricate. There was surely a great deal more to Western music than the songs he heard on the radio.

Hamid's head was humming, while his foot stomped rhythmically on the thick pile carpet to the beat coming from the portable stereo David had set up below the television. And this television was broadcasting images that were surely only accessible from the huge satellite dishes outside the hotel and provided admittance to a world of relatively impartial news and flagrantly un-Islamic images normally denied him.

When the sex began, it seemed as wholly natural and inevitable as the last joint had been when Phillippa passed it to him or the last line of white powder David had chopped out with his credit card on the mirror they had taken off the wall. It was just another episode in an escalating series of sensual pleasures.

Hamid didn't recall seeing Phillippa slipping off her swimsuit to stand naked in front of him as he perched on the edge of the hotel bed. But there she was, slim and nude, her pubic hair shaved off and a small chain dangling from a ring threaded through her labia. Her nipples were pert and hard. The areola merged into her suntanned skin. She bent over, pressed her lips against Hamid's, and grabbed his erect penis through his loose

trousers.

Soon Hamid was as naked as she was, remembering this time to kick off his cotton socks. He stood above Phillippa as she took his penis into her mouth and gobbled at it with long deep thrusts of her neck, saliva seeping out of the corners of her mouth and sticking to his circumcised glans. And behind her was David, also naked, freckles on his shoulders and a patch of dark brown hair on his chest. He nibbled her ear while also pinching a nipple between a finger and thumb.

David's attention wasn't only focused on his wife, even as she grabbed his erect penis and pumped it up and down in slow leisurely strokes, each time cupping its tip and giving it a slight squeeze. He bent over and kissed Hamid on the mouth, glad to see their Moroccan companion reciprocate.

This wasn't the first time Hamid had made love to a man, although never before in the company of a woman. He and Omar had played together several times when they were young boys who shared classes in the lycée. Although he and his closest friends no longer pursued this physical affection, or even made reference to it, there had been several other men with whom on occasion, usually after a heavy session of kif or alcohol, he would tumble together on the bed and they would enjoy the pleasure of their commingled bodies.

This affection had gone a great way, although he had only once before practised anal penetration, and then not as a recipient. He realised, with very little experience to compare it to, that a man's arse was not the same as a woman's, being tighter and more taut. And, furthermore, the degree of pleasure his partner expressed was rather more genuinely ecstatic than the few prostitutes whose anus he had penetrated for an extra

premium.

Hamid almost exploded with ejaculation as David's tongue licked his anus and Phillippa pumped his penis with her mouth, but, recognising what was about to happen, Hamid felt David's fingers pinch him between the penis and the anus, and this threat of premature release passed without incident.

Soon the three of them were on the bed, three bodies entwined, in a mass of conjoining flesh, sometimes with Hamid's penis in Phillippa's vagina and sometimes David's. Bit by bit the passion brushed away all remaining inhibitions. David entered Phillippa's anus while Hamid continued to ply at the front, their testicles bashing against each other as they did so. This was a curiously stimulating experience, a little like, but much more arousing than, having a woman flick at his testicles with her fingers. Just as that also hurt, but in a stimulating way, so did this, somehow pushing up his penis into a hugeness Hamid had never been aware his rather ordinary penis could attain.

It was no surprise to Hamid when David entered his anus. After all, David had prepared him by dripping saliva into it, while Hamid pushed into Phillippa who lay on her back gasping "Fuck! Fuck! Oh yes! Fuck!" over and over again. It was a tighter and more painful entry than Hamid had imagined it could be. It initially made him feel slightly sick as, thrust by thrust, David's similarly ordinarily proportioned penis penetrated deeper and deeper into him.

And then an experience he'd never imagined before. Something inside him, a physical thing like the woman's G-spot he'd once read about in an imported men's magazine, was responding with genuine pleasure to each slow and painful thrust.

Hamid didn't know whose cries of ecstasy were loudest. Was it David, as he

growled and gasped while thrusting away, one hand on Hamid's back and the other fondling his wife's bosom? Was it Phillipa who was slippery and damp from the perspiration of intercourse, a sheen of sweat reflected from the flickering television screen? Was it the female voice accompanying the heavy contorted techno beats with an undecipherable cry that came from the stereo? Or was it Hamid, who experienced an intensity of passion and ejaculation he'd never believed possible, feeling that until that time he had in truth been a virgin? A cry stimulated as David pushed against his prostate gland and Hamid pushed his penis deep deep inside Phillipa's vaginal canal. And marked by a double explosion of semen. One inside Phillipa and dripping out of her vagina onto her labial rings. And the other inside Hamid, a sudden squelch of warm creaminess deep inside where normally the only soft bodies were those Hamid excreted.

"Fuck! That was magic!" exclaimed Phillipa as the three sated lovers lay naked on the huge hotel mattress, sharing cigarettes and a huge joint that Phillipa had prepared on an earlier occasion, sweat and semen stains now drying on their skin.

Hamid nodded. He glanced at David's slack penis, which rested on the carpet of hair on the man's thigh. There were small brown flecks at its tip where the foreskin was crumpled and a small tear of semen was slowly easing out.

Then the room was filled with another sound, louder than the techno thumps, which came from the muezzin's amplified evening call to prayer.

"*Allah Akbar! Allah Akbar!*" it announced, stretching the name of Allah so long that the final declaration of His greatness was almost an afterthought.

Inevitably, thoughts of Allah brought Hamid's mind back to his concerns for his brother. At this moment, if he was on the same time zone, though he most probably was

not, his brother would be prostrating himself on the floor of a mosque or on a prayer mat and proclaiming his own praise to Allah.

Hamid wondered what his brother would be asking of Allah at that moment. Would it be a prayer for success in whatever mad apocalyptic mission he had hinted to Hamid on the telephone? And what would this madness be?

Hamid shivered.

This was one thing he was sure he would rather never know.

Whatever it was that his brother was intending to do, Hamid was sure it would not be good.

Taroudannt

Phillippa flicked the ash at the end of her cigarette onto the dusty earth outside the window. She watched it fall from where she sat on the passenger seat of the rented four-wheel drive and contemplated its dispersal in the slight breeze.

She inhaled another centimetre of cigarette and reluctantly tossed the butt onto the earth where it smouldered. It burnt off its final centimetre of ash before extinguishing itself. She regarded it sadly and wondered whether she might have to light up another to fend off her boredom. She glanced up at the people in the walled town. Some of them wore djalabas. Some wore jeans and tee-shirts. And one wore the very stiff and awkward-fitting uniform of a hotel porter. Phillippa was still not sure whether his services might be needed.

And then David emerged from inside the hotel foyer. Phillippa could see it wasn't good news.

"They're fully booked, too!" he announced as he jumped into the driver's seat.

"Fuck! You're taking the piss, aren't you?"

David sighed. "I wish I was."

"This is the fourth fucking hotel in this fucking town! And that was only a fucking two-star. We've done the five, four and three stars. What's left? A fucking manger?"

"I dunno," David sighed. "Anyway, there's no other hotel in this town with even one star. I don't know what it is. Maybe, the fucking package tours have taken all the rooms."

“I can’t fucking believe it! What do we do? Drive to the next town?”

“I don’t think we can. We’re fucking miles from anywhere. And anyway it’ll be after midnight before we get anywhere. All that’s left is that hippy place mentioned in *Lonely Planet*.”

“Hippy place!” sighed Phillipa. “You’ve got to be out of your mind. I don’t want to sleep in a room full of cockroaches and a bog that doesn’t flush.”

“The choice is we sleep in the car.”

“Fucking hell! You’re kidding, right?”

David sighed again. He gripped the wheel. It was obvious to Phillipa that after that long drive over the mountains, the last thing he relished was to drive to another town. Shit! If they’d left Marrakech a few hours earlier, they might have stood a chance of making it all the way to Agadir.

“Okay!” she relented. “The hippy place, it is. Surely they’ll have some rooms vacant.”

David pushed his key into the ignition and backed the vehicle out of the parking bay. Working as a team, the couple navigated to the Atlas, a place that was described by *Lonely Planet* as funky but basic, but after having taken a few of the guidebook’s recommendations in the past this testimonial did not fill either of them with any great hope.

It was all Hamid’s fault. Well, not so much his fault as theirs for not wanting him to leave so soon after this their third night together. Hamid had really come into his own when he’d lost that weird melancholy of his. Phillipa still relished the memory of his prick in her arse with David’s in her mouth. She’d just about got used to the taste of his

circumcised penis with that strange hardness that the fully exposed glans had developed.

“Well, this time there must be some rooms,” Phillipa commented outside the Atlas as David readied to get out of the car. “No one would want to stay in this dump unless they had to.”

Indeed, the Atlas really wasn't at all prepossessing. It reminded Phillipa of those places she'd stayed in India when she'd gone backpacking in her student days. Those were dives that only an enormous amount of dope could make tolerable. They were worse even than those shitty places in the Australian outback, and without the certainty of a huge amount of dope and beer to lessen the discomfort.

“We're in luck!” announced David when he emerged from the hotel foyer, this time with no stiffly suited porters in visible attendance. “They had several rooms free, actually, but I slipped the girl at the desk a few dirhams so we might just get a decent one.”

“I fucking hope so!” Phillipa snorted. “I'm fucking knackered!”

If this was the best room in the house, then fuck knows what the others were like, Phillipa groaned as she plumped herself on the sagging mattress whose springs twanged under her weight. The en suite toilet and shower were divided from the rest of the room by a thick curtain. The framed portraits of badly painted mountains didn't disguise at all the dinginess of the plastered walls. Like everywhere in Morocco, the floor was covered by cold tiles, but these were cracked and almost certainly infested with the most disgusting germs. Phillipa knew that any moment now, one of those horrible cockroaches would appear, probably from the shower, and scamper noisily across the floor, its antennae flickering cheekily as it did so. She opened her packet of cigarettes,

only three left now, and lit one up.

“What do we do now?” she asked blowing a cloud of smoke about the room.

David sighed again.

“We unpack. We smoke a joint. And we see what’s going down in the bar.”

“Bar? Does a shit-hole like this have a bar?”

“Yeah. I saw a sign pointing to it when we came in.”

“I didn’t see it.”

“Well, it wasn’t obvious. It was kinda painted on a bit of old wood, you know, fashioned into an arrow. But it showed definite promise.”

“Okay. Sounds promising. But if it’s crap, I vote we go to the five-star for a beer. Or even one of those crappy Moroccan wines.”

“I’d rather have crappy beer than crappy wine,” David replied throwing a suitcase onto the bed and watching it bounce up and down.

“Whatever!”

When they arrived in the bar, slightly mellower after their shared joint, they found they weren’t the only people there. Several of the clientele were Moroccan men. No Moroccan women, so not an obvious place to find a prostitute. Most of the people gathered around on the battered banquettes in the dingy shadowy light underneath the fading tourist tat nailed to the wall were clearly Western. And yes, judging from the ethnic clothes many of them wore and the plethora of facial jury, if not hippy exactly, certainly in that tradition. Despite having once been not too unlike them herself in appearance, Phillipa felt quite ill at ease.

Four battered cane armchairs of the type Moroccans seemed to like so much

surrounded a couple of empty wooden tables. One of those chairs was occupied by an attractive young woman. Perhaps this evening wouldn't be such a dead loss, after all!

“What are you having?” David asked, gesturing his head towards the bar where a Moroccan man with untypically long hair was serving.

“A beer. Any kind of fucking beer. And try and get some cigs as well.”

As David strode off, Phillipa approached the table she'd previously spotted. Although she and David had dressed down in relatively casual clothes, she couldn't help feeling almost overdressed in this place. But sod them! She wasn't in her twenties any more!

“You don't mind if we sit here, love?” she asked, as she plonked herself in one of the cane chairs.

The young woman she addressed was intent on writing a letter and was visibly startled to be spoken to. She nodded her head.

“Yes. Why not?” she said in a distinctly North European accent, and then bowed her head and returned to her writing.

Phillippa snarled. What was the point of seeking company if it just ignored her? She lit another cigarette, her last, and hoped her husband wouldn't disappoint her with regards to her nicotine requirements. She flicked the ash into the huge pottery ashtray in the middle of the table and regarded the young woman. She had long hennaed hair that fanned over her shoulders and wore an interesting mixture of ethnic clothes that Phillipa could see included only a few Moroccan items. Indian beads, a West African tie-dyed tee-shirt, and a brightly coloured ankle-length skirt that could have come from anywhere in the developing world. She wore flat-heeled sandals and her toenails were painted in

crude red enamel.

“Where do you come from, love?” she asked.

The young woman raised her head. She must have been in her mid-twenties with freckles that spread out and merged on her richly tanned skin. There was a ring through one of her eyebrows and another through a nostril. She wore no make-up at all and huge dangling ear-rings fell out from underneath her bush of reddened hair.

“Excuse me?”

“Which country do you come from? Are you Dutch?”

“No, I don’t come from Germany. I am Danische, er, Danish.”

”Danish? Copenhagen?”

”Kristianer,” she nodded. And then she lowered her head again to continue writing.

Shit! Was that all she had to say for herself, Phillippa wondered.

David wandered back carrying two bottles, two small glasses and, Phillippa was pleased to see, two packets of Marlboro Lite.

”Well, it’s better than Casa Bleu,” sniffed Phillippa taking the cigarettes off her husband, who didn’t smoke. ”Or worse, Gauloise.”

”They make shit rolling tobacco,” affirmed David. He bent his head towards the young woman and raised a querying eyebrow.

Phillippa shrugged.

Then David touched her gently on the knee and pointed at the bar behind her. Phillippa turned her head, but the smell already alerted her to what he was referring to. The barman was sharing a joint with a couple of Moroccan men, one quite old in a

djalaba, who were standing at the bar. Phillippa smiled.

She dug into her pocket, and pulled out a sachet and a packet of king-size Rizlas.

"At least we don't have to go back to our room," she said with a smile.

As she busied herself in assembling the joint, she noticed the young woman watching her fingers as she crumbled some of Morocco's finest into the pulled-thin contents of a Marlboro cigarette.

"It's from the Rif," Phillippa said.

"The Rif?"

"Hash-growing area of Morocco. Somewhere in the North. Never been there."

"I've been there," the young woman remarked. "But that looks very good. Better than the hash I bought."

"A friend of ours in Marrakech got it for us," Phillippa replied, remembering Hamid's rather shy smile.

"You've been to Marrakech?"

"Just drove down from there this morning. Over the Tizi-n-Test."

"It's a beautiful road."

"It was cloudy when we came down," David commented. "We didn't see anything until we'd driven through it. Not so much fun driving, though. What's your name?"

"My name? Marla."

"David and Phillippa. We're from London. Have you ever been there?"

"No. Never."

And then Marla dropped her head down and continued writing.

Shit! Phillipa sighed. She thought they were getting somewhere. Anyway, you couldn't tell with these hippy girls. Some of them were pretty uptight. But at least she knew Marla smoked dope.

In fact, it was only after they'd shared the joint between them that Marla opened up at all. She pushed her hair off her face and smoked it in a very strange way, cupping her fist and holding it between her forefingers.

"That's all right, love," remarked Phillipa as the joint was passed to David. "We've not got Hepatitis or anything!"

"But you don't know if I might," remarked Marla with a smile. "Anyway, I like it cool. I don't smoke cigarettes, so the smoke hurts my lungs."

"It does me, too," smiled David, mimicking Marla's pose and inhaling deeply from the hole between his thumb and fingers.

The conversation began haltingly, but bit by bit Phillipa established that Marla was travelling around Morocco by herself on public transport following an itinerary taken from her Danish-language guidebook. She had been touring with a male friend, but they'd had a quarrel in Meknes and had chosen to go their separate ways. During her journey, she'd mostly been staying in places rather like the Atlas and was fairly contemptuous of the more expensive places Phillipa and David preferred.

"You never meet anyone in places like that," she opined.

"Well, at least there's no television here," remarked David. "Everywhere you go there's a TV. And they're always showing another atrocity in Palestine. That fucking Sharon! He's a real cunt."

"I mean," agreed Phillipa, "if he thinks he's going to resolve the intifada by

driving tanks into the Gaza strip, he must be fucking mad! It's a real hornet nest he's stirring. Fuck knows where it'll end!"

Normally when David and Phillipa expressed their opinions in front of hippy types they expected a sympathetic response. After all, if anything united those of liberal opinion it was a general disgust of Israel's atrocities, but Phillipa noticed that Marla looked distinctly uncomfortable.

"I don't know," she said. "If you consider what the Israeli people think when their buses get blown up by suicide bombers, it isn't so clear."

"It's obviously an over-reaction!" David sniffed.

"That's not what it seems in Israel..."

Phillippa could see this edging towards a quarrel, so she placed a hand gently on David's before he launched into his usual rant about Palestinian rights.

"Have you lived in Israel, love?" she asked.

Marla nodded. "I worked in a kibbutz for six months. It's the least I could do!"

"Are you Jewish?" David wondered.

Marla nodded. "There aren't many of us left in Denmark. The fucking Nazi bastards! They killed everyone. And those they didn't kill... My grandfather! He was in a camp. His right hand is totally crushed. And he was right-handed, too. And my grandmother... She was only a young girl! The bastards treated my grandparents like shit. That is why Israel is so important to us. And after all the... after the fucking fucking... after the holocaust... you can't say to the Israeli people that it's wrong to defend themselves against their enemies!"

David and Phillipa were silenced. Phillipa could see that her husband dearly

wanted to express his own views: that the Israelis were behaving no better than the Nazis, that the Palestinians had a right to self-determination, and that those who didn't learn from history were condemned to repeat it. Phillipa, however, had other things on her mind.

The subject of conversation steered away from this sensitive topic as the three of them compared notes of the various sights of Morocco. Phillipa was glad that Marla had forgotten the brief note of contention. When Marla left to go to the toilet, Phillipa stood up and followed her, smiling slightly as she noticed how Marla was staggering a little after the effect of the Kif and the beer that David kept replenished. And she didn't follow Marla because she also needed a leak. She'd already taken care of that.

Marla was startled to see Phillipa standing outside the toilet when she emerged, after flushing the latrine several times before it finally let the toilet paper sink out of sight. She was even more startled when, without warning, Phillipa took Marla's head in her hands, grasping her behind the ears, and pressed Marla's lips against her own. Phillipa achieved what she wanted when she noticed Marla's eyes flash in that unmistakable way that indicated a suddenly awakened desire. Phillipa was too intelligent to squander her advantage by following through with her tongue. She placed an open palm on Marla's crotch and briefly nuzzled her jaw and ear, before pulling herself off with an apologetic grin.

"I'm sorry, love," Phillipa said coquettishly. "I just don't know what came over me!"

She left a flustered Marla and entered the loo where she sat on the toilet seat, thankfully one built on the British rather than the French model, and spent her time

smoking a cigarette and reflecting on the signs of reciprocal lust that Marla had betrayed. That was good! She relished the memory of Marla's earring brushing against her nose and the girl's hot breath on her cheek. And, of course, that sparkle in her eyes when they parted. Marla was plainly someone who understood the pleasures of another woman's body, although it might not be her usual preference.

Finally, she flushed the cigarette in the bowl, it having served the purpose of blocking out the dreadful stale smell of urine. She flushed the latrine and returned to David and Marla who were chatting animatedly about, of all things, the qualifiers for next year's World Cup. Bloody football! That was one interest of David's Phillipa could never understand.

Eventually, it was obvious that the barman was occupied in the rather unsubtle business of closing the bar to business. In the meantime, Phillipa had pushed her advantage, slowly and cautiously. A hand placed on Marla's knee. A squeeze of her hand. A kiss on her cheek when she'd said something that Phillipa found especially touching. And then the long hand-holding that was so natural in a country where men friends would wander around so obviously showing their affection in that way (although Hamid had disabused her of the notion that this necessarily meant anything of more carnal intimacy).

"Well, it's time for bed," said Phillipa, still holding Marla's hand. "Are you coming with us?"

Marla looked quite taken aback. "You mean to your room?"

"Yes."

"For sex?"

"If you want?"

“The two of you?”

“David’s very gentle. Aren’t you, dear?”

David smiled in that way he had practised so many times. It indicated a degree of sympathy that didn’t obscure his intent, but suggested enough vulnerability that it almost always worked.

“Is he goyim?” asked Marla.

“Goyim? You mean gentile. Yeah, David’s not a Jew. Neither am I. What difference does that make?”

“So, he’s not circumcised.”

“No. Does that bother you?”

Marla hesitated.

“Have you never made love with a man and a woman before?” David asked. “It’s fun, you know. Twice the fun, in fact.”

“But you’re not circumcised, are you?” Marla asked again.

“No. Does that trouble you? Or is it just the idea of having sex with a couple?”

“It’s not that. I did it once, no twice, in Kristianer. It was okay. But I don’t like men who are not... who are uncircumcised.”

“Is it a big deal?” David wondered, betraying his hurt. “It’s all the same under the foreskin.”

“I don’t like uncircumcised men. It doesn’t seem right.”

Phillippa and David were dumbfounded. David looked at Phillippa. Phillippa frowned at David and squeezed Marla’s hand a little tighter. David shrugged his shoulders.

“I’ll talk to the barman,” he said at last. “He’ll know where I can pick up a prostitute.”

“Are you sure, love?” asked Phillipa.

“They always know. And anyway, if he doesn’t know, I’ll find one. There’s bound to be a girl, or a boy for that matter, who does trade in this town.”

David kissed Phillipa lovingly on the lips and then strode off purposefully towards the bar. He was very soon in animated conversation with the barman who waved his arms around as if giving directions.

“You don’t mind, do you?” wondered Marla, her hand still in Phillipa’s.

“No. He knows the deal. He doesn’t mind.”

“Not me and you. Him. You don’t mind him seeing a prostitute?”

“Of course not. He always uses a condom.”

“But he’s your husband. He’s going to have sex with a prostitute.”

Phillippa frowned and squeezed Marla’s hand in hers.

“I really do not mind what my husband does. He can fuck any girl he likes. He can fuck two or three at the same time, if he wants to. He can fuck a boy or he can fuck a girl. I don’t mind. And he doesn’t mind who I fuck either. The only stipulation is that he uses a condom. We have regular check-ups, but the last fucking thing I want is to catch fucking AIDS off my husband. That’d really fuck up our love life!”

When they had made their way up the stairs, Marla was impressed with Phillipa’s bedroom. She sat on the bed and spread her arms behind her.

“Your room’s huge! It’s much bigger than mine. And you’ve got an en suite bathroom. I didn’t know they had those in this hotel.”

Phillippa smiled. Perhaps David's tip to the receptionist had been more effective than she'd thought. But there was business to attend to. And she could see she'd have to be prompt or all enthusiasm would soon be gone. With only a few swift movements, she pulled off all her clothes, but decided against letting them drop to the floor. She didn't want to find that a cockroach had crawled around inside them. She placed them on the small cane armchair by the window that looked out onto the small dust-blown square. She then sat naked on the bed next to Marla and took her hand. She lifted it up and pressed her lips to the fingers and knuckles.

Phillippa had got used to the women she bedded being relatively inexperienced. It was a fact of life that most women were more accustomed to having sex with a man than with another woman. And with no David to help here, she didn't have the advantage of his own subtle way of making a woman feel at ease with what for many women was a novel experience. But as Phillippa knew, these women had just not had the benefit of a tutor of quite her experience or skill.

She soon graduated her attention from the hand to the face and buried her tongue in Marla's mouth. She felt the reciprocating tongue probe nervously at first, and then become steadily bolder around her teeth and gums.

Patience was all you needed. They had all the time in the world. And one thing that Phillippa most savoured about making love with another woman was just how long and leisurely it could be. Today, what she most wanted was precisely that gentle slow build-up. Inevitably, her sex sessions with Hamid and David had become very frantic and vigorous ever so soon. What do you expect with two men, both of whose pricks were proudly erect and both eager to penetrate her?

Marla was finally naked after a slow disrobing, each item of clothing, most especially her cotton knickers, eased off with both fingers and tongue, taking in the smells and taste of the flesh around them. She revealed herself to be a slender young thing, her head ever so slightly too large in relation to her shoulders. Her breasts had a slight droop, the areola around her nipples nearly a quarter of the size of her medium small breasts. Phillipa took a nipple in her mouth, the soft down of the chest slightly dark even against the tanned skin, evidence of nude sunbathing in the recent past, while her fingers twiddled with the prominent clitoris.

When Marla came, she did so violently and urgently, twice the number and frequency of orgasm that Phillipa was able to achieve. Her whole body shuddered with each spasm of ecstasy, her taut chest juddering, the muscles distinctly contracting with each one. Phillipa envied her that. Her more mature body disguised the spasms that were mostly expressed by falsetto gasps that built up and up and released themselves with a sympathetic tightening of the muscles in her thighs. In fact, so sensitive was Marla that all Phillipa needed to do was tug with her teeth at the small ring pierced through her eyebrow for Marla's body to arch beneath her stomach and press forcefully onto the fingers pushed into her vagina and the thumb eased into her anus.

The couple slowed down and parted, Phillipa's arm around Marla's shoulders and a hand placed on her pierced navel. Marla put a hand on Phillipa's and pulled a strand of hennaed hair in her other hand. She smiled at Phillipa.

“Did you enjoy that?” Phillipa asked.

Marla was too overwhelmed to do anything than nod with her still excited smile. Phillipa didn't need to ask, but she was sure that this intensity of orgasm was a novel

experience for Marla. Perhaps the men she'd fucked had been too eager to give her the time she needed to bring herself to the level of orgasm that was almost routine for Phillipa.

She looked towards the window, the curtain being too flimsy to hide the glow of the streetlights outside. At this moment, she couldn't help wondering where David was. He'd almost certainly found someone. Perhaps it was a prostitute. Maybe he'd found a Moroccan man who would indulge David's passion for cock in his mouth. It was even possible that he'd stumbled across another tourist, maybe one of the young men and women who'd also been in the bar. If he had, it would scarcely be the first time. Phillipa was already looking forward to hearing her husband's account of his nocturnal adventures.

She smiled at Marla, who returned the smile. That twinkle in her eyes was impossible to ignore. She put a probing finger in the mouth of Marla's still very moist vagina, the long brown hairs of which were flattened by sweat and the grinding of their tribadism.

She pressed her mouth to Marla's and let her finger sink deeper inside. There was more to come! In one way, she was not at all envious of her husband. No man had the capacity for prolonged lovemaking that Phillipa could enjoy with a woman.

Tangiers

The waves crashed against the jetty. The same waves, Marla reflected, that might have crashed against the Gibraltar shore on the other side of the straits, waves that were as much Atlantic as they were Mediterranean. Each wave fierce and restful at the same time, built up slowly and steadily out at sea to break sometimes on themselves and sometimes against the concrete jetty that projected into the open water.

She glanced down at the postcard on her lap, the same one she'd started writing half an hour ago and had still not got beyond the initial sentence where she told her parents about how friendly Moroccans were. It wasn't, of course, their friendliness that most concerned her (she didn't want to tell her parents too much about how some of this friendship was real and some was just a means to an end). No. The friendship that most haunted her, even now, more than a week later, was what she'd experienced at the Atlas Hotel in Taroudannt.

Was she really a lesbian?

She'd always known she was bisexual. The first time in Kristianer with Helga and Rolf. That was one thing. But they were all drunk and very very stoned and the lovemaking was not totally successful. Helga had even fallen asleep with Marla's tongue still licking her thick pubic bush. The second time wasn't so much a reprise as a total disaster, when it was Rolf this time who was unable to fulfil his role in the trio. Men were always so eager to begin with, but you could never be sure they could sustain the enthusiasm.

And the second time in the kibbutz, with Isabella, the Brazilian girl, whose

friendship had somehow developed into something altogether more intimate. Theirs had been a relationship more marked by moments of tenderness than ones of abandon and uncontrolled passion. Isabella tried so hard to hide the relationship from everyone else in the kibbutz, even sometimes pretending she hardly knew Marla, who was aware that what Isabella most wanted was for the two of them to retreat to her bed and lie together. Maybe just hold hands. Maybe just kiss each other's face and breasts. And, so few times that each time was wholly memorable, to explore the pubic region that burned so fiercely.

But none of this was anything compared to the passion Marla had enjoyed with that English woman in the Middle Atlas. In fact, not one encounter, with either man or woman, bore fair comparison to the intensity of the passion Marla experienced that day. She was so frightened of spoiling that memory, she deliberately avoided Phillipa and David the following day and set off by as early a bus as she could to El Jadida, whilst the couple no doubt continued driving on to Agadir.

The memory of those orgasms was intense not only in her mind, but the mere recollection burnt just as intensely between her legs. How could sex be so intense? So overwhelming? So totally beyond what Marla had ever associated with sex before?

Was Marla a lesbian?

She was still sure it was men she most desired. Even now, with the memory of Phillipa's fingers and thumb so vividly imprinted on her vagina and anus, it was the image of a man and the hope of achieving similar satisfaction with one that was uppermost in her mind.

"Elles sont belles, n'est-ce pas?" Marla heard.

"Pardon?"

“Les vagues. Elles sont très belles!” repeated the young man who stood above her as she sat cross-legged by the edge of the jetty.

“I speak English, you know,” said Marla with a smile. The young man’s French accent was truly execrable. He was slim, with baggy khaki shorts that came nearly to his knees, open-toed sandals, and a tee-shirt that celebrated the Pacha nightclub in Ibiza.

“You do? I thought you might be French or Belgian or summat.”

“Not Moroccan?”

“No. Not Moroccan. You don’t look Moroccan. Where d’you come from? Switzerland or Austria or something?”

“Denmark.”

“Oh! I’d never have guessed!” he said, crouching down beside her. “I’m sorry for butting in, like, but I saw you were by yourself. I thought you might want company.”

“Really?” said Marla, with a smile. This young man couldn’t be much more than twenty, almost a boy really, with a chin that was still relatively smooth and hair that had grown out a bit from whatever style it was originally supposed to have been. He seemed quite harmless. And he had such a sweet smile.

“Yeah! I mean, I’ve been sorta wandering about, like, not doing much and I saw you. So I thought, well, you know, I thought...”

“Yes,” said Marla, putting the hand that held her ball pen onto her lap. “The waves are beautiful. I could watch them for hours. They are very restful. And you? Where do you come from? I don’t recognise the accent. Are you Australian? A New Zealander?”

“Am I fuck!” he said, rather surprised. “Do I sound like an Ozzie? No, I’m

English, me. I come from Newcastle.” He noticed Marla’s blank expression. “It’s in the North. Near Scotland. In fact, it’s a sort of Viking place. It was you Danes that we Geordies originate from.”

“Oh yes,” said Marla. That was fascinating. She knew her history. She knew England had once been part of the Danish Empire, but it was very curious to meet an Englishman who was part of the same heritage as her, if in a rather indirect way. “I’m Marla, by the way.”

“Paul,” the young man said, reaching out a hand at the end of his skinny bare arm and shaking hers in an unpractised way. “Pleased to meet you, like.”

“Are you here on holiday by yourself?”

“Naw! But me mates are in the hotel room still. They’ve both got the trots. It’s like Delhi Belly, only this being Morocco and all I guess you have to call it something else. It was the bloody couscous and stuff we had in the restaurant last night.”

“But you’ve not got the same problem?” remarked Marla. Her English was always very good, but she had difficulty understanding much more than half of what Paul was saying. She surmised that Paul’s friends must have eaten something that disagreed with them.

“Well, yeah! I’m a vegetarian, like, so I didn’t have none of the chicken and mutton and stuff. You don’t get the trots from vegetables mostly.”

“Vegetarian?”

This seemed most unlikely. Most of Marla’s vegetarian friends dressed in ways that proclaimed their social conscience that was totally unlike this young man. He didn’t look the sort who would relish lentils or organic rice. Marla sympathised. When it was

possible, she much preferred her food to be kosher, though halal was acceptable.

“Aye,” he said, looking almost embarrassed. “I’m not some sorta hippy, like. Though I smoke blow like the best of them. I dunno why. I just sorta gone off eating meat. I guess I must be soft, me.”

“Soft?”

“Aye! Not hard, like. I sorta look at meat and I think about the animals, you know, the sheep and cows and pigs and all. And then I just don’t fancy it. So, I must be soft as shite, me.”

Marla found this terribly endearing. Although he betrayed a certain degree of boldness by breaking into her reverie in the way he had, there was still something rather shy and awkward about him. He fiddled with the waist of his huge shorts and smiled readily and easily. But his eyes contrived to focus on hers for only as long as it was strictly polite to do so.

“And have you and your friends been travelling around Morocco?”

“Well, not really. We just came for a couple of days in Tangiers. We’re going on to Ibiza for the clubs later, but we thought we’d see what Africa’s like. But it’s not proper Africa, is it? They’re all Arabs and the like here. And there’s no zebras and elephants and lions and stuff.”

“It’s still Africa.”

“Guess it is. But I’d like to see real Africa some time. You know, go on a safari or something. There’s summat about big animals I’ve always liked.”

“And your friends? Do they like animals?”

“Nah! They don’t give a fuck about stuff like that. They’d rather smoke blow and

drop E and go to nightclubs and dance and stuff. Not that I don't like doing that and all. And they're good mates, like. So what are you doing in Morocco?"

"Touring. Seeing the country."

"Oh! And where've you been?"

"Everywhere," Marla boasted. "Fez. Marrakech. Meknes. Casablanca. Rabat. All over."

"Hoo! You and your mates, like?"

"No, just me."

"Just you? You're by yourself, like?"

Marla nodded. She could see Paul was slightly uncomfortable with that information. He knelt down next to her.

"So, what are these places like? You must be a brave lass to go to all those places."

Marla smiled and gave an account of the places she'd visited, the sights she'd toured, the carpet shops she'd been to. She told him how difficult it was sometimes to shake off the persistent attention of Moroccan men in the Kasbahs and medinas, and how there always seemed to be someone who wanted to be her friend and tour guide. She recounted the ruses she used to escape from their attention, but spluttered when she was sure he used the word 'cunnilingus' in one of his nodded interjections.

"Sorry? What was that?" she asked, for the first time aware that he was in some sense a potential sexual partner.

"You're a canny lass!"

"A what?"

“Canny lass. Smart girl, like. Geordie expression.”

“Oh.”

Marla was enjoying Paul’s attention. She was touched by how, whenever she caught his eyes looking at her in a clearly appraising way, he visibly blushed and looked away. Although he was soft-spoken, Marla wasn’t at all sure how much that was to do with his peculiar English dialect or if it would be the same whatever his native tongue.

“Shall we go for a coffee?” she asked.

“A coffee?” wondered Paul, the freckles on his face deepening again with his ready blush. “But I hardly know you, like.”

“To a café. There are a few near the Kasbah.”

“Oh, in a café. Aye, of course. We’ve been drinking that weird Moroccan tea. Mint tea. It’s reet sweet, like.”

“I prefer coffee. *Café cassé*. Or *café au lait*.”

“Yeah. I could do with a cuppa, me.”

They sat outside a café at a table on the pavement. The waiter swivelled the huge parasol so they were both in the shade of the fierce North African sun. Paul seemed ill at ease but insisted on buying the drinks. He struggled with his schoolboy French while the waiter nodded and seemed to understand. Marla couldn’t help smiling at his pronunciation, but chose to make no remark.

“You pay afterwards,” she advised him as he fumbled for some dirhams.

“Oh! Of course. Like you do in France and Spain, like.”

After the coffees, they wandered into the Kasbah. Marla enjoyed herself as she helped Paul haggle over a scented cedar box that he took a fancy to, easily reducing the cost to about a fifth what was originally requested.

“You’re a reet canny lass!” Paul exclaimed.

That expression again. Marla giggled. As she contemplated Paul’s startled face she resolved in her mind to take this young man in hand. She had some condoms she’d brought over from Denmark. Perhaps she could find out for sure whether she really was a lesbian. If she was one, why would she find herself so attracted to Paul? She liked his smile. She liked the way he occasionally ran his fingers through his hair to push it off his forehead. She liked his gaucheness and that unforced charm that came from his heart and not his head.

“Have you got a girlfriend, Paul?” she asked as the two of them left the winding claustrophobic maze of stalls and re-emerged into the open square through one of the doorways to the Kasbah.

“A girlfriend? Naw! Not now I haven’t. It’s not I’m a poof, like. I used to go out with a lass. Trish. Reet bonny lass she was, but we split up months ago. But I’ve dated a few birds since, like.”

“I see,” said Marla. She took Paul’s hand in hers for the first time, the one that wasn’t carrying the plastic bag with the cedar box, the canvas sandals he’d bought for his mam, and the stone carved into the shape of a small bird he’d bought for his sister. He looked genuinely startled, but he squeezed her hand appreciatively.

“I didn’t think you...” he said with a hoarse voice. “It wasn’t what I was thinking about at all, like...”

“I know,” said Marla with a smile, turning round to face him and kissing him tenderly on the lips.

She glanced down to see, even through the baggy thick cotton of his shorts, that

her affection was pretty much reciprocated in the way men just couldn't help expressing.

"Are you circumcised?" she asked. At last! She'd managed to ask the question that had been increasingly troubling her.

"Circumcised?" Paul asked. "Does it bother you, like? I know a lot of lasses don't like a bloke to be circumcised. How did you guess?"

"So, you are circumcised?"

"You're reet clivver, aren't you? I didn't think anyone could spot things like that. Is it the way I walk, like?"

"No. No. It's not that."

"I don't know why my parents did it. I s'pose they thought there were good medical reasons for it, like. Penile cancer or whatever. Trish didn't mind, but one lass I knew, she really hated it."

"She did?"

"She said it was reet off-putting. Is that what you think, Marla?"

"No, not at all," said Marla, kissing Paul rather more vigorously on the lips. She kept her tongue behind her lips and was gratified to see Paul's lips part in obvious anticipation. "In fact, I prefer it that way."

"You do?"

"I'm staying at a small hotel here. The Hotel Atlantic it's called, although all I can see from the window is a shop selling gas bottles and a broken-down bus. It's not far at all."

"Isn't it?"

"No."

“Erm. Shouldn’t we go to a chemist first?”

“Chemist?”

“Get some johnnies, like.”

“Johnnies?” Marla wondered, falling in love with Paul’s obvious embarrassment.

“Condoms. You know. Be on the safe side.”

“No. I’m quite well prepared.”

Paul laughed with evident relief. “You’re a real canny lass!” he said, squeezing her hand tight.

That expression again! Marla laughed and reciprocated his grip, tempted to put her other hand on the bulge she could see under his shorts. But no! Not in the open air. Not in Morocco.

She could sense Paul’s nervousness as she walked with him past the reception desk of the old French hotel and made their way up the ancient crumbling staircase to her room on the second floor. She squeezed his hand, only letting go to fumble for the key to her room she kept in her shoulder bag.

Once inside, before there was any chance of Paul’s amour abating, she turned round and pushed her lips against his, this time letting her mouth open to admit his tongue. It was a much nicer tasting kiss than the one she’d last enjoyed with Phillippa. There was none of that overwhelming stench of nicotine that almost put her off on that occasion. She relished the slight roughness of his facial stubble on her chin. Now she thought about it, the lack of stubble was just one of the many things about Sapphic love that both attracted and slightly bothered her.

Paul was certainly no virgin, but he was still relatively awkward. When he

focused on just kissing, he became much more assured, but she noticed he kept his eyes closed as if he was imagining she was someone else. That was understandable. That was something she used to do when she started having sex with other people after her year-long relationship with Knut finally came to its messy end. Paul was still recovering from the end of his relationship with the Trish he'd alluded to.

Paul was clearly uncertain how to bring his expression of passion to the next phase and Marla's jaw began to ache from the effort of kissing. She was sure she knew all she needed to know about Paul's fillings and the slight chip on his lower incisor. She eased her teeth onto his tongue and bit it slightly.

"Yow!" Paul said, pulling his face off hers.

"Take your clothes off, Paul," Marla commanded.

"Now?"

"Well, of course. Don't worry. I'll take mine off too."

"Oh! Okay!"

Paul pulled off his tee-shirt and shorts to reveal the very amusing boxer shorts he wore emblazoned with cartoon pictures from South Park. Marla divested herself rather more speedily and tossed her clothes on the armchair. She was careful that they shouldn't land on the floor where cockroaches could crawl inside them.

Paul hesitated and looked around the room for the first time before finally pulling down his boxer shorts, his penis so obviously stirring inside.

"You've got a real bonny room. Much nicer than the one I'm sharing with me mates."

"Never mind the room," said Marla, slightly impatiently and lying on the bed,

totally nude, one knee raised and her other leg stretched out. “Off with your pants!”

“You’re a reet bonny lass!” exclaimed Paul, finally raising his eyes from his discarded boxer shorts and for the first time really exploring Marla’s body. She was pleased to see that Paul’s remark didn’t seem at all rehearsed.

“Bonny?” asked Marla, not knowing but guessing it meant the same as the French word *bonne*.

“Beautiful!” Paul said, slightly melting as if frightened this unexpected opportunity for sex might yet pass him by. “Bonny is Geordie for beautiful.”

“And you’re a ‘bonny’ man yourself, Paul!” Marla reassured him, stretching her arms out to grab him to her bosom.

Their lovemaking was clumsy and fumbling to begin with. Paul had none of the self-assurance either of Phillipa or of many of the men whom Marla had made love to. But as he gradually became more confident, he became more fluid and passionate, his mouth exploring her breasts and shoulders, his teeth nibbling her ear, while below his erect penis prodded against Marla’s thighs hesitant as to whether he should enter.

He leaned back, raising his head with a broad grin, his eyes open wide and staring into Marla’s and his fingers probing around in the hair between her legs.

“Hoo! You’re reet wet, lass!” Paul exclaimed, a finger probing Marla’s vagina, his thumb pressing on her clitoris.

Marla grabbed the sealed condom she had remembered to place close at hand on the bedside table and passed it over to Paul. “And you’re very hard, Paul.”

“Hard! Aye! I am that!” Paul said with a smile, unwrapping the condom and with practised skill tugging it over his glans. He squeezed the nipple as he stretched the

prophylactic over a penis that Marla was pleased to see was amongst the largest she'd seen in real life. And circumcised too, as Marla was delighted to confirm.

At first, Marla was also anxious as Paul thrust in and out of her. Would she enjoy heterosexual sex again? Was she now a changed woman? Gradually, as Paul became more focused on the moment, she too became less and less worried and relished the very different sensation of a man's lovemaking. It was less tactile and more carnal than a woman's as he surrendered to a rhythm that was not of his choosing. A man might not have the intimate insight of how a woman might feel, as Phillippa clearly had, but his role from an opposite direction, not really understanding the pleasure he was giving, and perhaps slightly guilty at the pleasure he received, was a role with which Marla felt comfortable. It was like putting on an old jumper after trying out a new sweater and remembering again what it was she used to like about it. Not perfect, but somehow more comfy and reassuring.

Paul wasn't a bad lover. His relationship with Trish had certainly taught him respect for a woman's feelings. He resisted not once, but more than once, the spurt of ejaculation Marla could feel ready to explode within the condom's nipple inside her, slowing down his thrusts before the critical moment. He was appreciative of her own rhythm which gradually grew as her reservations about heterosexual love dissipated, and soon gave vent to the small gasps and shudders that denoted to her not orgasm exactly, but something near enough for her to be satisfied.

Eventually they collapsed, one on top of the other, sweat running through the sparse hairs on Paul's chest and streaming into the pool of perspiration between Marla's breasts. Paul tugged off the condom and dropped it into the huge pottery ashtray, a blob

of semen captured in the swollen nipple. Like all men after the event, Paul was exhausted, wanting only to rest in Marla's arms, which she was happy to let him do. Her mind conversed silently with itself as she wondered whether this impromptu sexual encounter had actually proven anything to her.

In the commune in Kristianer where she lived, it was relatively easy for Marla to find sexual partners whenever she chose, but she was always reluctant to take full advantage of this license. Although she didn't want to make this too clear to her friends, this was less the fear of earning a reputation for promiscuity than a kind of fastidiousness. She didn't find all men attractive. In fact, it was really only a minority who really attracted her at all. And it was men with the same kind of faint vulnerability she recognised in Paul that were most attractive to her.

She bent over and kissed Paul tenderly on the cheek.

He started and looked up.

"Eeh, lass!" he exclaimed with a laugh. And then, he asked the question Marla had been secretly dreading. "Will we be seeing each other again, like?"

Marla pondered over this. What had been good about her encounter with Phillipa was partly its briefness, that it hadn't been spoiled by any later less memorable reprises. Although now this current lovemaking served another purpose, to reassure her that her sexual identity was still secure, she wasn't sure she wanted to spoil this encounter with the memory of later ones. Particularly, Marla reflected, if this entailed having to meet Paul's friends who by the evening might well have recovered sufficiently from their alimentary ailments to accompany him. She wasn't sure she wanted to entertain more than one Geordie in one day.

“I need an early night,” Marla lied. “I’ve got a bus to catch tomorrow.”

“Oh!” said Paul, clearly disappointed. “Where are you going?”

“Erm...” Marla said, wondering what plausible destination she could invent.

“Tetouan. I’ve not been there before. I’ve heard it’s worth a visit.”

“Tet Wan? Eeh aye! I guess you’ve got your travels to do,” said Paul bravely, but disguising his disappointment badly.

Marla took his face in her hands and swivelled it round toward her. There was a kind of moistness in his eyes that confirmed the strength of his newly awakened emotions towards her. “But that’s tomorrow, Paul. We still have time today.”

“We do?”

“You may have noticed that I have more than one condom on the bedside table,” Marla announced with a smile, placing a finger on the unsheathed glans of Paul’s visibly stirring penis.

Ibiza

Paul's forehead juddered against the thick glass of the window as the bus sped over the uneven sunbaked tarmac, forcing him to jerk his head back. He studied the trees and villas the bus passed on this longer dash between stops, all brightly illuminated by the late morning Mediterranean sun. He rubbed his forehead uneasily and let it slump again onto the glass.

At least he wasn't feeling like shit this morning, like he did most mornings on his three week stay in Ibiza. He had done well to go easy the night before, his body and head complaining after the punishment he and his friends had inflicted on themselves in the pursuit of pleasure. His mates were still back in the room they shared in the *pensione* just outside the town. He could imagine Baz still in bed with Tina and Dave with Sue, the girls they had got off with last night. Paul had been less lucky. The girl he'd focused on had collapsed in a pool of vomit and had to be helped back to her hotel by her friends, while he tailed behind Baz and Dave and their fresh conquests. Their score rate was always more impressive when they held back on the booze, though the general haze of Ecstasy and blow took away most of their inhibitions with women.

Paul had consumed enough booze and blow to help him fall asleep in his lonely bed where he could hear Baz and Dave making love with Tina and Sue. Fortunately, they weren't nearly as noisy as on that other night when Paul had also scored, but it was Baz that time who had to doze off alone.

Their Ibiza holiday was going well. After only one week, their relative score rates, which they often liked to compare, was nothing to be ashamed of. Eight nights so far, and

each of them had scored with at least five lasses apiece. It mightn't be that romantic having to fuck in the same room as your mates, but they had to be careful with cash. The *pensione* they found not long after arriving on the island was dead cheap. This meant they had plenty left to spend on nightclubs, drugs and booze.

Paul, no more than his mates, didn't want to go too wild. The money they'd saved in their year off working in offices and factories before going to university, he to Manchester and Baz and Dave to Leeds and Sussex respectively, would be needed to supplement their student loans. That was one millstone Paul didn't relish carrying about with him while studying Engineering and Physics. But Ibiza was generally real cheap, except for the nightclubs of course. They'd done the main clubs. Pacha. Manumission. Café Del Mar. Most evenings, they went to rather cheaper clubs where the DJs might be less famous but the music was just as banging. Or seemed to be when you were tanked up and E'd out.

Paul glanced over at the middle-aged Spanish woman he'd haltingly asked to alert him to the stop his Spanish was far too rudimentary to pronounce especially well. Most of the time, you didn't need to speak a word of Spanish, which was just as well, really. Languages had never been his strong point. He hoped though she didn't guess why he wanted to get off at this stop. In fact, he hoped he could avoid telling Baz and Dave just where he was going. He hoped they might think he'd lucked out again as he did in Tangiers with that Danish lass. Baz never stopped telling him he was a real *spawny get*, which tickled him. It was usually Dave who pulled the birds the most successfully.

He wished he'd kept in touch with Marla. They'd swapped e-mail addresses, but Paul sensed that any mail he sent her wouldn't be answered with quite the alacrity he

always showed when something new appeared in his inbox that wasn't spam. She was a bonny lass. Not as much so as Trish, but bonny nonetheless.

The woman smiled at him from across the bus and gestured to him.

"Is this the stop?" Paul asked as the bus slowed down.

"*Si!*"

Paul staggered out of the bus. "Cheers mate!" he said to the bus driver, who made no comment. He wondered if it was just because Spanish drivers didn't acknowledge you like they did back in Newcastle or if he guessed why Paul should choose such an out-of-the-way place to disembark.

As the bus drove off, a cloud of dust blowing in its wake, Paul fumbled in his rucksack for the Lonely Planet guide he'd brought with him. If this was the bus stop, then he still had quite a walk to get where he wanted to go.

It had always been a secret ambition of his, one he'd never confessed to anyone except Trish, let alone Baz and Dave, to go to a nudist beach. He knew there were a few on Ibiza and now just seemed the right time to see what one was like. He wondered if that meant he was some kind of perv. Maybe it wasn't a pervy thing to go round starkers, but a lot of nudists were supposed to be real cranky. And Paul wasn't sure he wanted to go because he wanted to enjoy the open air *au naturel* or because he just wanted to gawp at naked women, but he was committed now. He couldn't very well go back without doing what he'd come to do. Even though he'd later have to invent some excuse that he'd been wandering round the markets to justify his absence to Baz and Dave. If they told his other mates back home, well, he'd be laughed out of the Stag and Hounds. And maybe the New Inn and all.

Paul followed the signs to '*La Playa*' which he guessed meant 'beach', but you wouldn't have guessed that as the trail led him through thick brush and over rocks. Finally, perhaps a mile or so later, he was at last at what was a beach. But was it a nudist one?

Paul nervously walked along, glancing at bathers dressed in normal swimsuits. Just past an official looking sign he could see bodies in the distance which, squint as he could, displayed no evidence of bathing costumes. Paul waited until he'd passed a few naked bodies, mostly couples, some with children and some rather old, before he decided that, yes, this was definitely a nudist beach.

He felt slightly excited as he took off his shorts and tee-shirt, the new one he'd bought at Manumission, and stuffed them into his rucksack, wearing now only his designer sunglasses and the espadrilles he'd bought for next to nothing at the market. He hoped his excitement wasn't express by the penis that swung between his legs, one he had no need to be ashamed of, but was so easily aroused. And there was a lot to arouse it.

Somehow, even ordinary women looked so much better in the nude. And yes, not only were they topless, which was no big deal, but he could see the hairy patches of pubic hair magnified in his mind out of all proportion to the bodies that sported them. Even the plump girls didn't look bad. He was slightly disturbed by his feelings when he saw two naked girls, probably not even twelve years old. He wasn't some kind of paedophile, was he? That wasn't right. He averted his gaze to distract his mind from inappropriate thoughts, wondering now whether what was most pervy wasn't so much going about starkers, which he was sure was no big deal (though it seemed so not so long ago), but that he couldn't take his eyes off the women.

In actual fact, there were more naked men than women, but when you'd seen one limp cock in a bush of hair you'd seen them all. He just wished that some of the women weren't accompanied by either men or children. There was no chance for him to get to know them, And that, as Paul got steadily bored with walking along the coarse sand, the sea crashing on the shore and hidden from any roads or houses by thickets of palm trees and rocks, was surely the point of this exercise. Much as he liked beaches, he'd had more than a week of them now and this beach was nothing special, beyond being a bit secluded. He'd spent many hours dozing with Baz and Dave on much nicer beaches than this, only with a towel and a Science Fiction novel to keep him company.

Paul wasn't sure what he expected to gain from talking to a naked woman on the beach, any more than he was sure why he was there in the first place, but it seemed the natural thing to do. And there at last, almost totally obscured by the huge boulders around her, Paul saw an unaccompanied woman. As he approached her, he was sure she was a bonny lass. She certainly wasn't fat, although certainly not thin, and she had a very impressive pair of breasts. Paul didn't think of himself as a tit-man, although when he and his mates discussed what it was that they liked most about women, he'd never quite decided if he might not be. He didn't have Dave's attraction for arses or Baz's for thighs, and he was self-aware enough to know that a pretty face, however bonny, wasn't enough without a good accompanying package.

Experience had told him that whenever an opportunity was presented, the right thing to do was to dive in. When he was younger and his mates started seeing girls, he had been so painfully nervous he never got anywhere. Then his mate, Dave, gave him good advice as to what to do. It doesn't matter what you say, he told him, just say

something. And don't worry about how crap it sounds. A lass isn't really listening to the words anyway.

"It's a good thing you've got a shade up in this sun, like!" said Paul, pointing at the sunshade that sheltered most of the woman's body.

Until then, Paul had really only seen her back and the pendulous bosom as her body twisted round to rest her buttocks on a huge beach towel. He'd noticed that her dyed-blond hair was short, not severely so, but off the ears. Her skin was a medium golden brown rather than the deeper, almost chocolate brown, of those people who made a religion out of sunbathing. The eyes behind her small steel-framed sunglasses peered into a slim novel by someone called Jeanette Winterton, whom he'd never heard of before. But when she turned her head around to look at him as he stood a yard or so away from her, he now noticed that she wasn't a young lass at all.

She wasn't old exactly. Well, younger than his Mam which was Paul's benchmark of middle-age, but not that many years younger. Maturity had made her breasts pendulous, her arms thicker than the stick-thinness of a younger woman's arm, and her stomach less flat. In fact, she might even have had lines on her face, but Paul couldn't be sure in the shadow of the sunshade.

"I'm sorry?" she asked in a voice that had lost every hint of girlishness.

"The sunshade, like. It's a good thing you've got one in this bright sun and all."

"You're a Geordie, aren't you?" she asked with an amused smile, turning her body round to face him. She looked him up and down dispassionately.

"Aye," said Paul weakly, suddenly feeling very naked, his penis now such a prominent thing between his legs but one he knew it was far too late to try and hide

behind his hands. And now he could see her in all her nudity, he felt a sudden frisson as he regarded her crotch. She hadn't even a little patch of pubic hair there. Not even the little stripe adorned by porn stars and strippers, like the ones at Manumission. And, unlike those children, equally bald in that region, whose crotches had disturbed him so much and made him evade his eyes partly from respect and partly from fear of his own desires, this was not the tidy smooth vulva of a London statue. The lips of the vagina spilled out and were clearly visible, as golden tanned as her breasts and the rest of her body. No white patches, unlike the rather obvious one he exposed between his waist and lower thighs.

"And you're alone, are you?" she asked. "You're not with some friends hiding behind a rock laughing at you while you chat up a strange English woman on the beach?"

Paul blushed. Was he making a fool of himself? "Naw! There's nobody. There's now't but me, like. I just saw you sitting there, all alone, like..."

"And you thought you'd chat with me, is that it?"

"Aye. I'm sorry if I've pissed you off, like," he said crestfallen and blushing in that way he still couldn't control. Just as he had with that Danish lass in Morocco. "I'll just leave you, like. I shouldn't have disturbed you."

"Don't be silly!" the woman laughed with some kind of Southern accent. Not a London accent, perhaps, though Paul was no expert in these matters. Maybe Home Counties. "I don't mind. As long as you don't think I'm a likely *catch*, if you know what I mean."

"A *catch*?" Paul wondered.

"Well, whatever you youngsters call it these days," she said. "Look! Sit down. I

don't mind. I'm by myself. My ... er ... friend, she's sleeping off a hard night at the moment, so I thought I'd wander over to the nudist beach. Catch up on a bit of reading. Improve my tan. As long as you don't get any silly ideas, I really have no quarrel."

Paul sat down nervously beside her. Perhaps this wasn't such a good idea. He looked around the beach, where the next nearest company was quite a way off. "Naw! I wasn't going to ... you know ... I'm not really that kind of guy. Not really." Although, when he was with Baz and Dave, and the girls were so obviously up for it, there was no doubt in his mind that he could be and, in fact, almost certainly was that kind of guy. But here, alone, with a woman more than fifteen years older than him, he was definitely not lying.

"I see," said the woman, placing her paperback face down on the towel. Paul noticed for the first time that the illustration on the cover was of a quite sexy young woman. "My name's Jayne, by the way."

"Paul."

"Paul the Geordie," Jayne laughed. "Almost every region of Britain is represented here in Ibiza. Why's that?"

"It's the clubs, like," Paul said. "That's why me and me mates are here."

"You like dancing, do you?"

"Oh aye! Going to nightclubs and dancing. That's the biz."

"And what music do you listen to? Is it this house music that they play?"

"Well, some house. Mostly hard house. But I like trance, me. But I'm not too fussy. I'll dance to anything if it's got a good beat. You know, garage, progressive, drum & bass, even R&B."

“Really?” Jayne asked, leaning over with a smile, that shaven crotch less than two feet away from Paul’s limp penis.

Paul breathed in deeply. This reminded him of the unexpected consequences of his encounter with Marla. What the fuck had he let himself in for?

“Are you a nudist, like?” he asked.

She nodded. “Are *you*, Paul? Surely you must be to come to a beach like this.”

“Not really,” confessed Paul, trying hard to keep his eyes off Jayne’s shaven crotch, but not sure where else to look. He could see his reflection in Jayne’s sunglasses as surely as she could see her own in his. “I thought I’d just see what it’s like.”

“I’m not a card-carrying nudist. I don’t belong to any naturist organisations. But I like to be naked. And do you have a girlfriend?”

“What here? On the beach?”

“Well, anywhere?”

“Not really. Though I did a few months back. Do you have a boyfriend?” He asked this to deflect the conversation away from the subject of his single status.

“No. In fact, I’ve never really had a boyfriend.”

“No?” wondered Paul, feeling quite sorry for the lass. She wasn’t bad looking and she didn’t seem especially shy. “Why’s that, like?”

“I don’t really want one. Men don’t appeal to me very much.”

“Oh!” said Paul, feeling even more sorry for her. This reminded him of what Trish told him the first time he persuaded her to go out with him. Perhaps Jayne was like that for the same reasons.

“That’s what my girlfriend said at first,” he told her.

“She did?” Jayne asked, with a genuine expression of interest. “But she changed her mind, did she?”

“It took a long time,” Paul admitted. Somehow, it didn’t feel so bad talking about such things with an older woman. “We’d been going out together nearly a year. She let me kiss her and touch her up and all, but whenever I suggested doing anything more she got all upset and sometimes angry.”

“Was it because she preferred women?”

“Women?” wondered Paul, who’d never thought of that before. “Naw! She wasn’t a lezzie... a lesbian. It was her Dad that made her like that.”

“Her Dad?” asked Jayne, with a slight catch in her voice that suggested genuine concern.

“She didn’t tell me about it for months. But she made hints I didn’t really understand, like. In fact, we’d been going out for ages, and we sorta pretended we’d been, you know, doing it, so our mates wouldn’t think we were queer or ow’t, and then she told me all about her Dad. He’d left her Mam a couple of years before and she’d never really told me why. But it was because... it was all because of her...”

Paul paused as the memory of Trish’s confession replayed itself in his mind. She cried so much while she told him. She was hardly able to complete a sentence before spluttering into tears.

“Was her father abusing her, Paul?” asked Jayne in a low sympathetic voice and placed a hand very lightly on his bare shoulder.

Paul squeezed his eyes. He was glad for the sunglasses now. Not only did they keep out the glare of the sun, their presence meant Jayne couldn’t see the moisture in his

eyes behind them. He really was soft as shite, even now. He still felt really angry on Trish's behalf. And yet Trish's father had never seemed a bad bloke, often going down the same pub as Paul's Dad and his pals.

He nodded his head. "Not once. Not even only a couple of times. But all the time! And getting Trish never to tell her Mam, like. Ever since she was real young."

"How young?"

"I dunno. It started when she were just a bairn. But he had real sex with her when she was not even yet eleven, like. And he kept doing it till Trish told the school councillor about it when she was fourteen."

"Why did she leave it so late?"

"I guess she didn't want to get her Dad locked up or summat. You know what it's like when you're young. Family first and all. But she was always moody at school. And got into trouble all the time. Getting into fights, bunking off school, not doing her homework and things. And when the councillor spoke to her, she sorta let it all spurt out, like. And that was why her Dad had to leave home."

"She'd never told her mother?"

"Her Dad told her not to. That it would upset her, like. And that she shouldn't upset her Mam."

"And what did you feel like when she told you?"

"I dunno. Real weird, I suppose. But it wasn't long after that, we sorta got it on together. But we only sorta did so for a few months. And then she decided not to see me any more, like."

Paul thought back to those two or three months when he and Trish were real

lovers. It was strange. He wasn't a virgin before her, but she was his only proper regular girlfriend. And when, a few days after her confession, Trish said she'd decided they could have sex together, it was real weird doing it with her. But after the first few slightly embarrassing tries, their relationship became incredibly passionate. And it was obvious that Trish knew a great deal about sex.

Those first few times, she was really reserved. It was as if she thought sex was something you did with your eyes closed, on your back, sort of waiting for it to be all over. But then she somehow exploded into an ecstasy and passion that frightened Paul. It was a sudden release. And for the next couple of months, Paul and Trish had the best sex he could imagine anyone ever having. Every time they made love, he just wanted to stay inside her. She made every effort to keep him there, although because she insisted he use a condom, and she never took the pill or got a diaphragm, they got through quite a few packets every week.

And then, on the phone, not in person, she told him she'd decided they shouldn't see each other again.

And that was that.

No warning. No sign that anything was wrong the last time they'd made love, their bodies clinging together, sweat sticking to their conjoined skin. They had the same relaxed conversation afterwards, when they both joked together and caressed each other's still-burning flesh. And then, on the phone, a curt announcement that they were no longer a couple, a decision that didn't change at all despite all his pleading and subsequent phone calls. And no evidence that there was another boyfriend who'd superseded him in her affections.

Jayne put her arms around his shoulder.

“Gosh!” she said. “Your penis is very big!”

“It is?” said Paul, startled.

And indeed it was. Thinking about Trish and their lovemaking had somehow brought it to life, without him even being aware of it. It wasn't fully erect. Not standing up like a soldier, as Trish used to describe it, but definitely not limp. A three-quarter swelling lifted it up at an angle to his outstretched legs. Shit! If he'd not been nude, if he'd been wearing shorts, then no one would've noticed!

Then Jayne did an incredible thing. Paul's eyes bulged out of their sockets as she grasped his penis in her right hand and pulled it up the whole length to his exposed purple glans.

“It's very warm!” she commented. “Is it just the sun? And ooh! It's getting stiffer!”

“It is!” exclaimed Paul, aware of it pumping up to full erectness, its shadow across his chest.

“I've never touched a penis before,” Jayne confessed. “Are they all like yours?”

“More or less,” said Paul, but aware that his was rather prouder than most, including Dave's, which he'd glimpsed a couple of days ago when he was prodding that slightly tubby girl, Sharon.

Jayne moved her hand up and down the shaft of his penis, from the bush of hair at the base, his testicles now hard and aching, and up to the tip. Her fingers were warm, but they were also firm and gripped quite tightly.

“Is this what I do?” she asked, looking into Paul's face with a quizzical smile

quite unlike the uncomfortable expression that contorted his mouth.

“Yes! Yes!” Paul said. “A bit faster, like.”

Jayne concurred, her hand jerking up and down, whilst her other hand moved down to her crotch where she let a finger probe into its ragged lips, perhaps to stimulate her clitoris.

The two said nothing, except for Paul’s involuntary gasps, as Jayne pumped her hand vigorously, Paul’s buttocks tightening and spasms shooting through his taut stomach. Up and down. Occasionally, she capped his glans, which swelled hugely at the end of his shaft. Paul squeezed his eyes shut, his thoughts returning again to Trish and those many months before they had proper sex, when she jerked his penis in much the same way, not wholly confident in what she was doing. And when he opened his eyes, there was Jayne again, regarding his penis with almost academic interest.

She took her other hand from her crotch and squeezed Paul’s testicles. Ooh! That hurt! And then Jayne used two hands, one pushing up and down, while the other squeezed it at the base.

Inevitably, his penis released itself. A globule of semen shot out and spat onto the hair on his thigh. That was followed by a series of smaller spurts, warm and creamy and trailing down Paul’s penis onto the grip of Jayne’s hand.

“It almost burns!” Jayne exclaimed, removing her hand and studying the milky liquid on her fingers. She rubbed it into the sand and looked up at Paul’s face. “You don’t mind, do you? I just wanted to see what it would do.”

“You did?” said Paul, feeling both grateful and somehow anguished that this act of intimacy was for no other reason than to satisfy her curiosity.

Jayne nodded.

The two of them lay side by side on the warm sand under Jayne's sunshade; Paul's penis now flopped uselessly on his thigh, the semen cracking on his sunburnt flesh and the glans no longer so swollen. His balls felt sore, but Paul was loath to touch them.

Then Jayne stood up and picked up her novel. She stuffed it into her shoulder bag without a word. Paul watched as she silently folded up her towel and took down the sunshade. She stood above him, the bag over her shoulder, towel over her arm, and the sunshade in her other hand.

"Well, it's been nice meeting you, Paul," she said, in a slightly breathy and possibly embarrassed voice. "But I must be going. Cath, my friend, she'll be wondering where I am. I suppose you'll just continue resting here, won't you?"

Although this was expressed as a statement, Paul understood this as a request. He smiled at Jayne, knowing that as soon as she had walked far enough in the distance, he'd want to head back to the bus stop again. "I guess I will," he agreed.

"Well, goodbye, then," said Jayne. She shook his hand and left.

Paul watched as she strode along the beach, her full buttocks swaying with her tread, her heavy breasts occasionally visible as she wound past other sunbathers. As she disappeared from sight, the whole of the encounter became more and more improbable in his mind. Did it really happen? Had he just dreamt it?

He looked out to sea where a ship was passing slowly by. A few children played in the waves, splashing water at each other and laughing in that unselfconscious way only children can do. He let his mind wander to his plans for the evening. Perhaps he'd drop an E, snort some speed and all, and make a real night of it.

But not yet, he thought, a sudden weariness overwhelming him. Just a few more minutes resting naked in the sun and he'd be ready. He'd forgotten just how tired he could get. And besides he rather wanted to relish his memories of Trish a little longer before facing the prospect of chasing skirt.

But even as he became excited at the prospect of another night of Mediterranean hedonism, he knew if he had the choice between her and any one of the lasses he'd shagged the last week, he would have chosen Trish every time.

Islington

Jayne's tongue lapped back and forth on Cath's parted vulva, moistening yet further that clitoris whose hardness was so familiar to her and savoured the comforting odours from within. Two fingers thrust in and out of the wet and welcoming vagina, occasionally twisting her hand to brush the knuckles and her smaller two fingers on the sweat-sodden pubic hairs. Cath gasped as her body spasmed to Jayne's ministrations, one foot kicking out and bashing against the headrest of the shared bed.

Jayne reciprocated her gasp as Cath's smaller fist pushed all four of the fingers of her right hand into Jayne's equally receptive vagina, her thumb stroking against Jayne's own aroused clitoris. Jayne could feel the rubber sinuousness of her tongue on the folds above her clitoris, shaved so close that Cath had no difficulty in finding exactly what her tongue sought out.

Cath did not shave her pubic hairs, but this never troubled Jayne. She was willing to shave her pubes as Cath once requested, happy to keep them shaved for as long as darling Cath wanted it that way. In any case, she rather relished the daily routine of shaving, which she did as often as she could in full view of her younger lover. It was as surely a token of the love she felt for Cath as any ring, and in its carnality a much more honest one.

Jayne raised her head and removed her hand from Cath's pubes. A particularly long brown hair had got trapped between her teeth. She tugged it out and her mouth returned greedily to her feast of carnal scents. Her tongue dipped in as deep as it could into Cath's spread open pussy, flicking it up on occasion to lick against Cath's little knob

of a clitoris. All the while, Cath's pubic hair pressed into Jayne's nostrils and tickled her chin. Jayne was sure that the hair down here was longer than that on her head, but as a matter of taste she was glad that her lover had never thought to coat her pubic hairs with the thick gel that kept her otherwise unruly dark brown hair in place.

At last, the two lovers separated.

Jayne sat on one side, her heavy breasts falling down onto her stomach and one arm around Cath's waist. Her lover was much thinner than her, just as she was so much younger, just twenty-five years old but, Jayne was sure, looking much younger. And this was because she was so *very* thin. Her breasts were mostly nipple raised on a much less prominent bosom, her waist still very slender, and her arms and legs nearly child-like in their almost total lack of extraneous fat. Jayne was *so* lucky to have such a beautiful lover. What had she ever done to deserve such good fortune?

"Fuck, Jayne!" Cath exclaimed, flicking the ash from her cigarette into the ashtray she had placed beside her outstretched leg, the other crooked and pressed onto Jayne's womanly thigh. "If you thought by seducing me you'd stop me going out and seeing my mates, you must have known it wasn't going to work."

Jayne sighed. That wasn't the intention at all. When she'd seen Cath sitting there in the armchair watching *Eastenders* on television, naked as always, as Jayne was too, she'd just responded to yet another of her spasms of desire. It seemed natural, seeing that there was no cigarette alight at that moment, to stand behind her lover and squeeze her to her bosom. And Cath, as always, was just as keen as she was to leave the petty arguments and quarrels of the soap opera to join Jayne in their shared bed, the recently made sheets pulled roughly to one side.

“So, you’re going out this evening, Cath?” wondered Jayne, who also wondered why it was Cath thought she kept such a keen track of her lover’s movements.

“Yeah! We’re going to a club, me, Penny and Julie. You know the one, the *Pink Pussycat*.”

“Didn’t it used to be called *Munchies*?”

“That was fucking ages ago.”

“And why should I be bothered about you going out to a night club, sweetest?”

Jayne asked meekly, knowing precisely why.

“You just want me to be a fucking one-woman woman, Jayne. You don’t like it when I have sex with my friends or with anyone I pick up at the clubs. You’re greedy! You just want me for your fucking self!”

Jayne couldn’t deny the truth of that last assertion. She very much *did* want Cath for herself. She was undeniably jealous of her lover, though Cath’s occasional dalliances never seemed to lessen the love she expressed towards her older partner. But now, of course, Jayne had lost the moral high ground, since she foolishly confessed to masturbating that sweet boy on the Ibiza beach during their summer holiday. She didn’t know what had possessed her that time. Not desire for the boy, she was sure of that, but his obvious distress regarding his abused girlfriend had affected her strangely and, she had to admit, she had always harboured a secret curiosity about male genitals.

Although the confession had brought nothing but tears, Jayne was actually rather pleased that Cath had taken it so badly. Cath still reminded her of her ‘handjob’ as she called it, but Jayne was quite gratified there was some reciprocal jealousy in their relationship. Not that this in any way seemed to lessen Cath’s desire to augment her

experience of Sapphic love beyond that they expressed for each other.

“So, don’t you fucking try stopping me, Jayne. If I want to get my tongue on Julie’s clit or my fist up Penny’s pussy, that’s my fucking business. And if there’s some other girl tonight, femme, butch or undecided, it’s just what I want to do.”

“Well, as long as you don’t bring your catches home, Cath,” said Jayne in what she thought was a conciliatory manner, but instantly regretted her words.

“And why the fuck, can’t I? Fuck you, Jayne! You just want to trap me. Hold me close to your motherly bosom. I’m not your fucking daughter! I’m a fucking grown woman, with fucking real desires. And we’ve never had one of those exclusive relationships. If I want to fuck another woman, that’s just what I want to do.”

Jayne sighed again. She raised her arm from Cath’s waist and ran her fingers through the thick gel in Cath’s short hair, significantly shorter than Jayne’s own quite short cut.

“I love you, Cath,” she said. “I love you more than anyone else I’ve ever loved. But can’t you see why I might not be so happy thinking of another woman’s body pressed to yours? Or another woman’s fingers and tongue where mine have just been?”

“Or me doing the same thing, you mean?” sneered Cath. “Fucking get used to it, right! That’s just what I’m about. If you don’t like it, find some lover who’ll stick to you like some heterosexual wifey.”

Jayne sometimes thought that was exactly what she’d prefer. Most of her gay friends of her own age had more or less settled down. There were no extra-partner relationships that muddied their relationships. At no time in Jayne’s life had any of her previous partners had been so openly unfaithful. Sure, there were the few occasions of

infidelity. Veronica, whom she'd lived with for more than five years, often bore evidence of scratches and strange bruises that gave evidence of dalliances beyond Jayne's loving arms, but at least she'd had the courtesy to deny anything had happened. Jayne had been unfaithful once or twice, when she was in her early twenties, when the excitement of Sapphic love was still new and urgent to her, and she was hungry for more than what a steady relationship could offer. But there was something very different about Cath's blatancy. Perhaps it was just that Jayne was getting too old to really understand how a younger woman might feel. Or maybe the younger generation were just less inhibited than women were in her youth.

Cath got up from the bed and moved over to the dressing table that dominated one end of the bedroom. She pulled up a chair and sorted out the make-up she'd apply. Like Jayne, Cath didn't wear a great deal of make-up. Some natural-looking lipstick and perhaps some discreet eyeliner. Neither woman viewed herself as a femme, but then neither were they exactly butch.

Jayne got up and stood behind Cath. She put her arms around Cath's slender shoulders and nuzzled her nose in Cath's short hair. The smell was totally different from that in Cath's pubes, that was for sure. But Jayne enjoyed both very different scents.

"You know I love you, Cath. I don't mean to ever make you feel restricted in any way."

"You're just saying that, Jayne. I know you hate it. And I've got my eyes on a real pretty girl. Lyena, she's called. I think she might be Russian or something. She was at the *Pink Pussycat* last time I was there. She's got the most delicious smile. Her hair's a bit long, but it's a kind of russet brown. And her accent's real sweet. I want to put my nose

right between her legs.”

“You do?” asked Jayne. Why did Cath have to torment her so?

“I want her fist right up me. Her hands are tiny. Her fingers kinda taper but her fingernails are short. I checked that. I’ll even let her prod my arse. Would you like that, Jayne? Lyena’s fingers up my arse?”

“You know I’d rather you didn’t,” said Jayne, nuzzling Cath’s pixie-like ears. They were ever so slightly pointed and she loved the folds inside them. She let her tongue wander onto one of the small earrings Cath wore.

“Well, fuck you, Jayne,” said Cath. “Because that’s exactly what I want to do. And if she’s not got a place for us to go back to, we’ll come back here, whatever you think, and we’ll fuck in the living room. That’ll keep you fucking awake!”

“You wouldn’t, would you Cath?” Jayne asked, hardly able to hide her alarm.

“That’s exactly what we’ll do,” said Cath, clearly relishing Jayne’s discomfort. “We’ll lie across the sofa, nude, of course, and I’ll get out that purple dildo, the extra big one, and she’ll put it all the way inside me. And you better hear me come! In fact, everyone in the fucking block will hear me come!”

Jayne removed her arms from Cath’s neck. There was no reasoning with the girl. They’d agreed long ago that Cath could do what she wanted as long as she didn’t risk bringing any diseases into their relationship (not that it was likely) and kept it out of the connubial household. Cath was just bating her. She feared she might bring up the subject of Ibiza and handjobs again. And the only reason the subject had ever come up was when Jayne was telling Cath about the abuse Paul’s girlfriend had suffered. The implications of it rather frightened her, although she had known the odd woman who’d been abused

when they were younger. But then, many abused women were so traumatised that lesbian sex was the only kind they would ever again contemplate.

“You see, Jayne. You just wait and see!” Cath said, putting on her clothes. On went a short top that revealed all of her waist almost down to her crotch, moleskin trousers that stopped somewhat short of her ankles, followed by a small nylon jacket that came to her navel but even when zipped up did nothing to hide the slimness of her waist. Last of all, she put on some booties that made Jayne sigh as she thought of Cath’s beautiful toes hidden inside the leather.

Jayne remained naked as Cath left the flat. A dressing gown hung near the doorway just in case there was a surprise visitor. The last thing either Jayne or Cath ever wanted was for some strange man to see them nude. That would be humiliating! But as Jayne sometimes fantasised and Cath sometimes speculated, she wasn’t sure she’d mind so much if that single mum from the first floor came by, even if she was accompanied by one of her snotty-nosed children.

And when Cath was gone, the memory persisting of Cath’s parting speculations of just how easy it would be for Lyena and her to get it together, Jayne was alone, naked. Much as she liked having the flat to herself, she much preferred Cath’s presence, however noisy and restless she was. And now what should she do? Watch television? Read a book? Put on a record and do that sewing she’d put off for so long?

Jayne riffled through the CDs, finally pulling out that St Germaine album she liked, with its relaxing jazz samples, hidden amongst Cath’s collection of garage, deep house and female singer-songwriters. She found the pile of cardigans, blouses and trousers she’d neglected to repair for so long and busied herself on the sofa.

All the while she thought of Cath and her time at the *Pink Pussycat*. In the early days of their relationship, Jayne made an effort to accompany Cath on her evenings out, but the pall of smoke, the loud noise, and the raucous company was no longer to her taste. Age crept up on you so sneakingly! There were so few records to which she and Cath could dance together. Modern dance music was altogether too fast and percussive for her now. And Cath's complaint that Jayne was just getting in the way and making it difficult for her to get off with other women always rather hurt. Despite her reluctance, Jayne had come to accept that if she were to have a lover so much younger than her, it was necessary to be rather more indulgent than her heart dictated.

As much as Jayne loved Cath, there were occasions when she looked forward to these evenings alone. Cath could sometimes get so tiresome, especially when she was unhappy about something at work that troubled her or when she complained about how very ordinary her childhood in Solihull had been. It was no more ordinary than Jayne's childhood in Guildford, but it had taken less time for Cath to recognise her sexuality. Whereas Jayne had mostly been just puzzled, maybe bemused, by her lack of interest in boys, Cath's discovery had been much more revelatory and more troublesome to her than had Jayne's. And Jayne hated it when Cath bated her about her infidelities. How often did Jayne have to reassure her that she understood and, although she didn't like it exactly, wasn't going to present an obstacle to Cath's voracious hunger for female flesh?

Jayne finished her sewing and turned on the TV. The St Germaine album had long ago finished, but Jayne wasn't bothered to replace it with another. She flicked through the channels and settled on a TV drama set in America that featured a relationship between a man and a woman. Jayne wished there was more drama that featured the relationships she

understood, though there were the occasional aspects of heterosexual relationships that seemed relatively similar. Generally, she much preferred dramas that told the story from a woman's point of view.

She wasn't sure her curiosity about men was wholly satisfied by her 'handjob' with Paul. There was no emotion involved, but she did find the sight of an erect penis strangely exciting. When she and Cath had used those penis-shaped dildos, she often wondered just how much it was like the real thing. She still didn't know, of course. It was one thing to hold a penis, even to see its semen spurt out through that tiny hole at the end. What did straight girls make of all that creamy stuff? It smelt so odd, but, like the penis itself, it was very warm. She wondered whether one day she might satisfy her curiosity further and actually let a man's penis penetrate her. He'd have to use a condom, of course, and it would have to be a special kind of man, perhaps a bisexual; one who understood that she had no interest in a man beyond them being a machine to satisfy her curiosity.

The very perversity of the thought made her feel quite warm between her legs, so she stroked her clitoris while watching the film. There was even a scene where the man and woman took their clothes off and simulated some kind of sex. There were no penises on display, of course. Certainly not erect ones. Would she be as enthusiastic as the woman in the film? Jayne somehow doubted it, although the thought of something like Paul's penis entering her definitely excited her. If only there was a way to enjoy a penis without the additional consideration of it being attached to a man.

Jayne stayed up beyond midnight. It was, after all, a Thursday night. Only one day to the weekend when she and Cath might take the car out of Islington, maybe out of

London altogether, and head off to somewhere green and rural. She imagined the blue skies and green fields and speculated whether there might be a time she could persuade Cath to leave the city behind. Maybe they could move to Surrey, maybe even Guildford, far enough away not to actually live in London, but still able to commute to their respective jobs: she to the publishing house where she worked as an editor and Cath to the software house.

Jayne was watching an especially mindless Channel 4 quiz show when she heard the front door slam shut. Cath entered the living room still in her top and trousers, the jacket flung onto the back of the armchair she plopped into. Jayne could see the expression of disappointment on her lover's young face.

"Lyena only went off with fucking Julie!" she exclaimed bitterly. "And Penny picked up this girl with plaits. Some kind of Dutch girl."

Jayne picked up the remote and turned off the TV. She smiled at her lover as she fumbled into a packet and pulled out a cigarette. She lit it and flicked ash into the ashtray they'd bought in the Ibiza market.

"How are *you*, Cath sweetheart?" Jayne asked.

"Fucking pissed off is what I am!" Cath replied. "What's fucking wrong with me, Jayne? Why don't I score as easily as Julie or Penny? Or Emily or Judith, for that matter?"

Jayne could see that Cath had drunk more than the two or three glasses of wine she was normally comfortable with. More than that and she tended to get maudlin and irritable.

"You don't do too badly," Jayne said reassuringly.

“No, I don’t. I’m fucking useless. Aren’t I, Jayne? I’m just a fucking failure.”

“You do better than I did when I was your age.”

“Fuck!” said Cath irritably, flicking her ash contemptuously into the astray so that the column of ash nearly separated from the body of the cigarette. “That’s no fucking comparison. At least I got you though, Jayne. You love me, don’t you?”

“Yes,” said Jayne standing up and walking towards her lover, whose clothes would so soon come off her and the two retreat to bed to resume the lovemaking they’d enjoyed a few hours later. “That is one thing you can always be sure of!”

Clapham

“She’s a cow! A real fucking cow!” Prissy exclaimed, blowing smoke into the air of the pub where the wisping blue vapour was sucked into the smoke extractor. “I don’t know why I stick with her!”

“Me too!” agreed Cath. “My Jayne’s so fucking uptight. All she fucking wants to do is sit in and watch telly.”

“So, you ditching her then, Cath?” Emily wondered. “You know, like you said you would?”

Cath coughed. She didn’t really want to diss her lover like that. After all, Jayne had been real sweet to her today. And last night, when they were in bed together, Cath knew it was love she felt for her older partner. But then if there was any girl whose knickers she’d like to pull down and whose pussy she’d adore putting her tongue to, it was Emily.

“Yeah!” she said, not really convincing even herself, and flicking the ash from her ciggie into the ashtray. “Yeah, I reckon I will. But she still licks clit like a champion.”

“So does my Tina,” agreed Prissy, smiling at her two friends, balancing her cigarette between her forefinger and thumb. “But she’s a fucking cow, all the same.” She looked at Emily with a sneery smile. “So you still between lovers, sweetheart?”

“Yeah!” said Emily, brushing her fingers through her short hair so that it stood up in the thick gel. “But that doesn’t stop my love life. No fucking way! I’m having more fun now than I ever had when I was with Marlene. I don’t miss a day since I ditched her. She still phones me up and all. I guess she wants her k. d. lang CDs back, but, fuck it,

she's not gonna have them. Nor her Polly Harveys."

"What's it like talking to her?" wondered Cath, afraid that her interest might betray her own true feelings for Jayne. "You'n'her were real close. A real item. You'd been living together for years!"

"Well, she gets real blubbery on the phone. Still cries and everything. Like a fucking baby. She's a fucking embarrassment. I don't regret ditching her at all. And it's great having the flat to myself again. I can invite back whoever I like. Y'ought to put your money where your mouth is, Cath. Ditch Jayne. I mean, she must be fucking forty or something!"

"Thirty-seven next month," said Cath, almost instantly aware that this concern about her partner's birthday said more than she'd intended. She didn't want Emily to think she didn't want to go back with her to her newly vacated flat.

"Well, whatever! She's too fucking old for you. And it's not like when you got your own place you don't get pussy. I mean, you know that Sally..."

"Sally!" Prissy exclaimed with a laugh. "You didn't, did you? She'n'Pat, I thought they were welded at the hips!"

"Fucking femme fanny! Good she was. And d'you know, she's got this cute little ring in her clit and guess what else?"

"What? She got pierced nipples as well?"

"No. A tattoo just over her shaved pussy."

"A tattoo! Fucking hell!" Prissy remarked, leaning forward, her face ever so close to Emily's. This irritated Cath who wanted to be the one getting that intimate. And who wanted to be the one who placed a hand on Emily's thigh almost bursting to get free from

those deliciously tight jeans.

“It’s kind of like a love token. It’s a tattoo that reads ‘Pat’ in kind of Gothic script. They must have been together since they were goths or something.”

“I remember that! Fucking black jumpers and eye-liner and everything!” Cath said.

“You were a bit like that once, if I recall,” said Prissy, with not such a pleasant smile. “You used to be into all that goth shit.”

“Yeah! Well, that was *years* ago!” said Cath, fuming from Prissy’s unsubtle reminder.

“Whatever!” said Emily, who wanted the conversation steered back to her sexual triumphs. “So, it wasn’t just Sally I ate out. It was also Pat as well. And fucking tasty, it was too!”

“Oh! You lucky bitch!” Prissy shrieked. “I’ve always wanted a taste of Sally. She’s such a pretty girl! Wooh! Those lips of hers! It makes my pussy drip just thinking about her.”

Emily placed a reciprocating hand on Prissy’s bare knee below the culottes she wore. “It’s not dripped down this far!” she said with a conspiratorial laugh.

“It wouldn’t take much to get me moist, sweetie!” Prissy said. She took her hand off Emily’s thigh, pressed it hard on her hand and dug the fingers into the thick flesh.

Shit! Cath could see where this was going. When Emily had phoned up to say she was going down to the Half Moon in Clapham and could Cath come along, she’d made no mention of Prissy being there. All that wasted anticipation on the tube, stop after stop on the Northern Line, for what? She wished she’d not been so nasty now to Jayne when

they'd parted. It looked like she was going to have another evening where she'd return to her lover only to admit there really was no one else in her life than Jayne and her beautiful breasts.

Well, fuck it! Cath grimaced as she pulled out another cigarette, now feeling quite excluded while Prissy and Emily continued their rather detailed account of Emily's lovemaking. She loved Jayne. She might be twelve years or so older, but theirs was a love worth more than an evening in Emily's bed. However much she rationalised about it, she still felt deprived of the fun she'd promised herself and the prospect of which she'd so enjoyed taunting Jayne with.

She surveyed the pub around her. Why had Emily insisted on coming to a place like this where three young women with short hair and uncompromising swagger would only look out of place? It wasn't that Emily was in any sense ashamed of her sexual preference, but this was no dyke bar. Most of the clientele were men, and the few women were generally in mixed company. In fact, the only other group of women unaccompanied by brutish men, sitting in front of their Bacardis and Coke, were probably the least sympathetic of anyone to Cath and her friends. She stubbed out her cigarette and let her ears focus again on Emily's boasting, this time about some cute girl she'd seduced on the Central Line.

"It was only when I kissed her she knew what the game was," she laughed. "Sometimes a girl just can't see what's coming however bloody obvious you think it is!"

"And did you?" Prissy wondered.

"It was fucking touch and go, I can tell you! I could see she was wet. Well, you can, can't you? But I had to be subtle. Push too hard and a girl runs away. But, yeah, it

only took a few drinks in the New Inn and having to listen to her moans about her fucking boyfriend, and we were back at my place. Not the best pussy I've tasted, but better than my vibrator."

Would Cath get to taste Emily's vagina? It seemed increasingly unlikely. She remembered Marlene's comments about how Emily shaved it sometimes. Would Emily be shaving it now? Or was she sporting a full bush? It didn't look like Cath would ever find out.

"Scuse us!" Cath announced heading off to the loo. Perhaps if she brushed her short hair, maybe re-applied that natural-look lipstick that gave her lips that seductive pout, Emily might see that of she and Prissy, it was Cath who was the most deserving.

Her hopes rose as she admired herself in the toilet mirror. She'd made such an effort. That new micro-check shirt she'd bought. The hip-hugging jeans she'd spent nearly a hundred quid on. The leather jacket with the silk lining that she only wore on special occasions.

It was obvious when she returned to the bar that it was going to be Prissy, not she, who would get to know Emily better tonight.

"You don't mind, do you?" said Emily with a barely disguised smirk, "but I feel real tired. You know, these late nights can really fuck you up!"

"And I only live down the road," said Prissy. "Shame you've got such a long trek back up North. You really ought to move down here some time. South London's really happening, you know."

"Specially round Battersea. When you ditch Jayne, give it a chance. It'll be worth it!"

Cath was left alone in the bar, vulnerable and lonely, watching Prissy and Emily leave together, not caring at all what people thought of them as they put their arms around each other. With the last dregs of her wine, Cath was beginning to care very much what the other people in the bar thought of her. Could they see the mortification burning off her cheeks?

She pulled out a cigarette and hid herself behind the comforting veil of smoke while she fumed in equal measures of disappointment and uncertainty as to what to do now. It seemed too early to head back to Clapham Common tube station and the Northern Line.

She glared at the women on the other side of the bar as one of them poured more coke from her bottle into the small glass. She couldn't very well show herself up in front of them, could she? She'd have another drink, just to show how little she gave a fuck for being abandoned by her friends. Perhaps they'd think she was waiting for another friend.

If only!

Cath stood up and wandered to the bar which was thankfully quite empty and ordered another glass of sweet white wine from the geeky looking barman. She glanced nervously at her leather jacket slung over the chair by the table where she'd been sitting. Perhaps those women would be useful, after all, by keeping an eye on it.

"I'll pay for that and I'll have a single bourbon as well while you're about it," a man's voice announced.

Cath turned her head, her first instinct to decline the offer. Men and she didn't mix, especially one who spoke in such an obvious American accent. He looked at the man who'd made the offer. He was in his mid-thirties, stocky, sporting a grey check

jacket and no tie in the buttoned-down collar of his brush cotton shirt. Cath, who had an eye for these things, could see that nothing he wore came cheap.

“Gee! I hope you don’t mind me buying you a drink,” he said with a broad smile, “but I’m an American, as you must have guessed, a New Yorker, and that’s just how we do things. So, don’t feel obliged to do more than take your drink and sit down. I won’t hassle you if you don’t want me to.”

“New York?” asked Cath, despite herself. She’d always wanted to go there, but there’d never been an excuse. Jayne much preferred heading south for the sun. But what tickled her was his accent.

“Yeah. New York. Best city in the world. ‘Cepting London, of course.”

Cath smiled despite herself. It was just like in the movies. ‘Noo Yawk’. The American accent was so funny.

“Yeah, I’m here on business. A lot of business, mind you. My company’s kept me here for a couple of months sorting things out for them. It’s a drag living away from home. So, you a Londoner?”

“Yeah,” said Cath, hesitating between returning to her seat and the fact that there was buggar all for her to do when she got there. She hoped this guy wouldn’t spot the slight Brum accent she’d never quite managed to lose in all the years she’d been in the capital. But an American wouldn’t know the difference, would he?

“Great city, London. And Clapham’s not bad either. This where you live?”

“Islington, really. North London.”

“Gee! I’ve never been there. I’m sure it’s a real cool part of town. By the way, my name’s Gareth. What’s yours?”

“Cath.”

“Well, Cath, I don’t really want to bother you if you don’t want me to, if you’re waiting for a friend and all. I’m just a lonely yank in town who doesn’t know anyone. But it’s been real good meeting you.”

He took the glass of whisky that the barman offered him and handed over a note.

“Have a drink on me, bud.” he said to the barman and handed Cath the glass of wine.

“Not the best vintage,” he continued as Cath picked up the glass and took a small sip. “You sure you don’t want anything better?”

Cath didn’t really know that much about wine. She didn’t drink much normally. “It’s fine.”

“You sure?”

“Yeah.”

There was an awkward pause while Cath wondered what to do. Just returning to her seat seemed wrong. Gareth smiled and half-turned away. It couldn’t do any harm to be polite could it? It didn’t look like he was trying to pick her up or anything. He’d get a real shock if he thought she was a likely prospect!

“So, where d’you come from in New York?” she asked.

Gareth turned back, a broad grin on her face.

“Manhattan. Lower West Side. I’ve got a great view from my apartment. Do you know New York?”

Cath shook her head. “What’s it like?”

“Well, now you’re asking,” Gareth said with a smile.

He launched into an enthusiastic account of a city that fascinated Cath. It certainly wasn't only skyscrapers and car chases and Central Park. There was so much to the city. The financial district where he worked. The park where he jogged every day when he could find the time. The very many and varied restaurants. The museums and art galleries. The department stores and theatres. The Rockefeller Center. The Empire State Building. And, most of all, the night life. It was *mad*. A night life far wilder than Jayne had ever allowed her to have.

And then, Cath didn't know how it happened, the conversation centred not on New York and the fabulous views from above, looking down at it from the top of the South Tower at the World Trade Center, but on her. And now it was Cath, not Gareth, who was doing most of the talking. And it was like a sudden relief to be able to talk about herself to someone who didn't know her at all, about things she found difficult to talk about with friends and just as difficult with Jayne.

The conversation wandered along with Cath and Gareth back to where her leather jacket remained untouched on the back of the seat. Gradually, Cath found herself talking about her love life and her discontentment with the limitations on her freedom. Having an older lover really stymied her style. When she went out to nightclubs she couldn't really go with her lover and she found it difficult to be as free with her body as she'd like to be. But for some reason, although she was specific about Jayne's age and the way she seemed to get more pleasure from reading books and watching television than snorting lines or dropping pills, she was consciously vague about her lover's sex. Or even that of the people she chose to have sex with.

"So, you like a line, do you?" Gareth wondered when he returned with another

glass of white wine, a rather better quality label than she usually drank. “I take it you mean coke?”

“Yeah. Charlie. Ching. Whatever!” Cath boasted, though in truth she rarely partook. But she wasn’t going to let on.

“I just happen to have some quality Colombian I brought over with me,” Gareth remarked with a smile. “I’m not a cokehead before you say anything. I just like the odd line. It helps a busy day go by better.”

“Colombian?”

“It’s good stuff,” Gareth reassured her. “But you were saying? That deadline you’re working toward?”

Cath returned to her account of the software system she was helping to install, naturally inflating her role in its delivery. As a very junior programmer, or ‘software engineer’ as Gareth flatteringly termed it, she really had a minor part to play. All the while at the back of her mind she was wondering about Gareth’s quality Colombian. It would really piss off Jayne if Cath had a line or two. She was always snotty about any of the drugs Cath took. Even smoking dope in the house was something Cath had to be diplomatic about. She could really boast to her friends what it was like to snort quality coke. She was sure they’d no more real idea what that might mean than she had.

Gareth smiled all the while. Occasionally he interjected an encouraging comment, deliberately accentuating his apparent naïveté. His green eyes sparkled and his smile lit up a face that as Cath’s vision became more clouded with alcohol (how many glasses had she drunk now?) became steadily more reliable and attractive. Cath puffed away at cigarette after cigarette, Gareth steadily sipping his bourbon and refusing the offer of a

cigarette himself.

He noticed that Cath's glass was empty. He indicated it with a finger.

"I'm staying in a condo, company let, a flat the company uses to house its executives when in London, just round the corner from here. It's only five minutes walk. If you like I'll let you sample some of Colombia's finest."

Cath paused. Was this guy hitting on her? She was normally wary with men. After all, they were the enemy, weren't they? But it wasn't as if he'd been trying anything on, was he? And there was plenty of time till the last tube home.

"Yeah! Why not? Let's see what Colombia's got to offer."

Cath was *very* impressed by Gareth's flat when they got there. It wasn't cheap, that was for sure. It had a really grand reception area. And when he opened the door, she could see the place was huge. Everything was just that bit more splendid than she was used to. A massive living room with a widescreen television. A plush leather sofa and armchairs in the living room. And on the walls were framed pictures of English landscapes and views of London.

"If you don't mind, Cath, could you take your shoes off? The carpet, you know."

"Oh okay!" Cath agreed, slipping off her moccasins and walking across the thick, luscious pile carpet to the sofa onto which she slumped, her head still fuzzed with wine.

Gareth knelt by the small glass table next to the sofa and began chopping up a line of cocaine with an American Express platinum credit card. He did it with expert promptness, gathering the white powder into four long thin lines. He smiled at Cath and rolled a crisp twenty pound note into a neat straw.

"You first," he offered.

Cath knelt down and snorted the line through the note. She felt it burn the side of her thin nostrils and the grains pass through the back of her throat. She coughed. Fuck! It was a good hit! Almost instantly she got that weird buzz of clarity that obliterated the fuzziness of alcohol. Although her thoughts now seemed to be in a clear focus she was aware they were really no less scattered than before.

Gareth snorted a line himself with the note and passed it back to Cath. She picked it up, and now with her left nostril, which was a somehow less effective Hoover, she snorted it down, stopping briefly half way and then recommencing. Overwhelmed by the impact, she collapsed back on the sofa, somehow unable to do anything more coherent, let alone resume the conversation that had stopped mid-sentence before they entered the flat.

She laid back, a ciggie in her hand, but mostly burning out by itself, its ash dropping in pristine cylinders into the huge ashtray Gareth offered her. As she lay there she became gradually aware of a tickling sensation on her left foot. What the fuck? She looked down, along the leg of her denim jeans, to see Gareth holding her foot in his hands in exactly the pose she imagined Prince Charming would do while evaluating Cinderella's foot.

“You have beautiful feet, you know,” he remarked with a smile.

“Do I?”

“Beautiful! I've always admired a good foot.”

He placed his lips on her big toe.

Cath shivered. But was it from fear, apprehension or something else?

Emboldened, Gareth kissed each toe, one by one, beginning with the big toe and

working his way down, slowly and with no haste, to the smallest toe.

“You don’t mind, do you?”

“No. It’s nice,” Cath slurred.

It was true. Her senses felt somehow magnified and there was something very sensuous about those lips on such a sensitive part of her body. It was a part that Jayne rarely explored, and certainly not with the relish with which Gareth continued. Now on each toe of her right foot. And then with his tongue on the web between each toe. Gradually, slowly and surely, he took each toe into his lips, his tongue in and around the nails, the whole of her big toe inside his mouth: a dry and unthreatening fellatio of the toes. That sensation together with the effects of alcohol and cocaine was tickling another part of her, a part she was sure would never get stimulated tonight. Unless, that was, she managed to get home before Jayne fell asleep and she nestled under the duvet next to her, their naked bodies to be entwined in their slumbers.

Fuck it! What was she letting herself in for? Not since she was a kid, long before she was certain of her sexual predisposition, with Mark, who was even more nervous than she, and who made a total mess of the whole thing, had she experienced any part of a man touch any part of her.

“Are you all right?” Gareth asked, as Cath gave vent to an involuntary shudder.

Cath nodded. Somehow, despite the coke, she just couldn’t articulate in words how she felt.

“I’ve got a condom, you know.”

“A what?”

“A condom.”

Cath paused, frozen. What was this guy saying? This wasn't right at all. She was a lesbian. It was women she adored. Not some hairy Neanderthal brute. She should just draw it to a close now. Get out. Go home. But, on the other hand, fuck it! This would really fuck up Jayne. Especially after Jayne had confessed to her that tearful, hysterical night what she'd done on the beach in Ibiza. Fuck her! Two could play that game. And Gareth wasn't a bad looking catch really. For a bloke, that is.

And it wasn't like she was going to be making love with Emily, anyway.

"Yeah!" said Cath languidly. "Whatever. Why the fuck not?"

She tugged off her jeans, a more difficult exercise than she remembered from last time she'd spent the night with anyone other than Jayne, and then unbuttoned her shirt. She sat on the sofa in only her cotton knickers and bra while Gareth stripped down to his crisp white boxer shorts.

"The bedroom," he suggested, nodding to an open door.

"Yeah, right!" agreed Cath, undoing her bra and dropping it to the ground as she followed Gareth.

Gareth took his boxers off and laid them neatly by the side of the bed. She slipped off her knickers to lie on the sheets on the huge mattress, its duvet pushed to one side. She was now totally naked, her thick thatch of pubic hair on full display, as she regarded Gareth. It was the first time she'd seen a naked man in the flesh for an extremely long time. Not since she was a kid, really. And this was quite an odd sight. A trim form, but a waist as wide as a chest adorned with a bush of curly hair, hairy legs and, strangest of all, an erect penis where normally Cath expected to see nothing at all.

Thankfully it wasn't that large. Or was it? Cath was ill-informed in that respect.

Nothing, anyway, compared to the strap-on she and Jayne sometimes used. And nothing at all compared to the dildo they kept in the cupboard for extra special occasions. It was strange to see something connected physically with the body and twitching in such a peculiar way.

She let her head fall back on the pillow and let her thoughts wander as she felt Gareth recommence slowly and with no rush his circuit of her body from her toes to her crotch. His lips puckered and kissed their way up her thighs and burrowed into the hair around her vagina.

When Gareth finally penetrated her, it almost came as a surprise. Cath had become so accustomed to his tongue, lips and fingers as they stroked and lapped over her that she'd almost forgotten where the end of all this foreplay was meant to lead. On the journey she became looser, moist even, enjoying the nibbling of her coke-enhanced clitoris, glad he kept his tongue and stubbled chin away from her face.

It was a different sensation to strap-on sex. The penis was so warm and had a kind of plasticity that no dildo ever had. Her vulva had become so sensitive that she fancied she could even feel the veins on his penis throbbing as it slid back and forth so easily in her moist inner caverns.

Was she enjoying it?

Perhaps. Though she preferred to keep her eyes off Gareth, reminded as she was just who was fucking her, imagining to herself not only Emily's body, naked and smooth, seeing at last those perky breasts that contrasted so much with Cath's smaller, large nipples, but also, as so often when she was unfaithful, Jayne's body and those breasts that fell so heavily on hers in the throes of their passion.

Then her body lost all tension and she pulled herself up and grasped Gareth around the chest, his arms sympathetically grabbing her shoulders as that familiar release of animal passion returned. Her thrusts reciprocated his, just as they did when Jayne pushed that realistic, perhaps idealistic, plastic toy inside her. For a few moments she didn't care who was fucking her, man or woman, as she surrendered herself to animal passion.

At last, they parted and Cath watched with amused interest as Gareth removed the silvery condom from his now much smaller penis, a string of semen trailing from his foreskin to the aperture that had once been so tight on the erect member. It hadn't been as smooth as that with Mark. In fact, on that occasion, it was only the second or third condom he'd unwrapped that had ever served any useful function at all.

She lay back and studied the ceiling, which was not nearly as high above her head as the one in Cath and Jayne's flat in Islington. Nor was there that glorious rose around the light shade that she and Jayne loved to discuss as they lay back after their exertions.

As she usually did after making love, Cath began talking about so many things. The women in the pub who she thought had been sneering at her. The way she felt so cheated when Emily and Prissy had left her with only the company of a few sips of wine and a packet of cigarettes. The differences between the huge bed that dominated this correspondingly large bedroom and the one in her own bedroom. As she chatted she became increasingly aware that it was more a monologue than a dialogue she was engaged in. Unlike Jayne, or indeed most of the women she'd made love to, Gareth was almost entirely silent. He lay on his back, his arm around Cath's thin shoulders, only occasionally grunting in response.

Fuck! That wasn't right. Almost the best part of making love was the excited conversation afterwards that so often led to a reprise, or a series of them, of the lovemaking that preceded them.

"I need a fag," Cath announced.

"Go ahead!" Gareth murmured, slumped in apparent exhaustion.

"Okay!" said Cath wandering into the lounge still naked and relishing the texture of pile carpet between her toes.

As she sat on the sofa, contemplating whether it wasn't too late for her to catch a tube home or to spend the night in Gareth's decidedly welcoming bed, she also wondered whether this moment of heterosexual love might indicate that, after all, she should be less discriminating in future about the gender of whomsoever she made love with.

Although she concluded she should cut her losses and spend the night with Gareth, more to worry Jayne than from any sexual desire, it was the sight of a man's body naked with a now useless penis flopped on a thigh that resolved it for her.

Men might be fun when the going was good, but they were fucking useless afterwards.

New York

Marianne wasn't the slimmest woman Gareth had ever made love with. In fact, as she unclasped her bra to let her heavy bosom fall loose, Gareth studied her full stomach with some hesitation. She wasn't fat exactly, not even plump, but by no measurement could she be described as slim.

It wasn't as if Gareth could complain. Despite those few hours a week he found to attend the gym, he had definitely lost the slim figure he still sometimes imagined was just a temporary loss. He pulled down his boxers. His penis, not yet fully erect, never would be unless he lost his self-consciousness about the stomach that had forced him to accept a fifty inch waist-size on his discarded suit trousers.

Outside the window, Gareth could hear the roar of the Manhattan traffic some twenty or so stories below. He fancied he could hear more sirens than usual, but this caused him no concern. New York was a busy city. There was always something happening somewhere or other. It was best never to worry too much about it.

After the last month or so since touching down at JFK, he had only gradually got back into stride. The long meetings, the overflowing mailbox, the documents he had to prepare only now seemed the natural routine of his working life. Besides the projects whose looming deadlines justified his handsome salary, and generous annual bonus, there was at least one project that he had at last brought to closure. And this was, of course, his pursuit of Marianne.

Finally, those evenings in the bar after work, sitting with her and other colleagues, and those sometimes not especially subtle hints, had come to this. Something he was sure

justified making up the excuse of having to take one of his estranged wife's daughters to the clinic and thereby take the Tuesday morning off. But, of course, instead of driving across the Brooklyn Bridge, he steered his BMW over to the Upper East Side to fulfil his rendezvous with Marianne.

Marianne lay down on her back on the huge bed she normally shared with her husband. She supported her back on her shoulders. Her breasts flopped down onto her belly. Her dyed-blond hair was immaculate as always. Her round face was the only part of her in any sense dressed with light purple lipstick, subtly applied highlighter, and the equally subtle application of mascara around her wide blue eyes.

Those eyes were so fucking sexy Gareth reflected, his penis stirring in joyful anticipation, especially now that Marianne was so obviously looking forward to unrestrained sex.

Gareth had a routine he followed with any new conquest. He would start at the feet and work his way, inch by inch, kiss by kiss, up the length of the leg. Although this progress was slow and steady, he knew that by the time he reached Marianne's vagina, it would be moist and welcoming.

As his puckering mouth ascended the calves, gently sucked and licked the round knees, and then slobbered along the expanse of thigh, he could hear that familiar chorus of gasps as Marianne became increasingly aroused. He gazed up at her face, his nose now only inches away from the full, untrimmed mass of her light brown pubic hair. She arched her head back, her hair falling back onto the pillow, while from the corner of his eye he could see a picture of Marianne and her husband smiling contentedly from a photograph by the bedside table lamp.

This was the first time Gareth had ever seen an image of Simon. There really wasn't the time to study it properly. Far more urgent business was on hand. Just as Gareth normally would, Simon was at this moment almost certainly wearing an expensive suit in keeping with the luxury of his apartment and his status in the Lower Manhattan brokerage where he worked. In the photograph he was wearing a polo shirt and slacks, his confident assured smile matching that of his wife around whose waist he wrapped a bare arm.

One thing Gareth was certain of, although he was spared the embarrassment of actually seeing it in the photograph, was that unlike him, Simon would have a circumcised penis. That much was obvious from the surname he shared with his wife.

Marianne's vagina had a rich, welcoming smell when Gareth buried his nose into it, his hands supporting his weight on her outstretched thighs. The taste was equally arousing as his tongue guided itself around the folds and creases of her vulva. His tongue discovered her clitoris before his eyes did, a hard knob of arousal buried under the most complicated of all her complex contours. His forefinger pushed into the vagina, easily engulfed by its moistness. One by one, two, three and then four fingers, thrust backwards and forwards, and orchestrated a series of gasps from Marianne above.

The progress of Gareth's mouth from the vagina, over the navel, around the crenulations of her nipples and finally to her mouth and its expertly capped teeth was just as leisurely and steady as his earlier progress from the ankle. All the while, he kept a finger or two inside the warm cavern of her vagina, twitching her clitoris and pushing his fingers back and forth. Marianne gasped and panted with growing passion, her polished fingernails digging into Gareth's broad back. And just as Marianne was clearly ready for

action, so too was Gareth, his penis throbbing and pulsing and ready for the plunge.

At last, he was inside, and the two of them thrust their crotches up against each other in a steadily growing curve of passion, one that after many partners and many similar encounters, Gareth knew he could delay from the final moment of release for many minutes more.

And then the phone rang.

“Shit!” Marianne cried. “Who the fuck can that be?”

“Ignore it!” hissed Gareth.

Whatever it was, there was more urgent business to attend to.

The phone rang all six times and then Gareth heard Marianne’s voice crackle from the answer-phone explaining that she and Simon were not able to take the call at the moment, but if the caller left a number...

And then her voice stopped abruptly as the respondent hung up.

Despite the interruption, Gareth was too expert to let this deflate his prowess and within a minute, he and Marianne were fucking again, more energetically than ever. Gareth now learnt something about Marianne he would never have suspected and that was the extent of her vocal passion. Her gasps became shrieks that ascended in volume and pitch with each of Gareth’s thrusts.

She was a screamer.

It was a good thing, after all, that they had arranged to meet in Marianne’s apartment rather than retreat back to the office after a glass or two of wine, as Gareth once contemplated.

Then Gareth heard another sound, quite piercing but definitely melodic. It wasn’t

from outside, though he was conscious of the echoes of sirens and automobile horns rising from the streets below. Rather noisier than below his own apartment, that was for sure. And it was too high-pitched to be the sound of a stereo blasting from an adjoining apartment.

“Fuck!” Marianne gasped, stretching her arm over to the bedside table, Gareth’s penis still deep inside her. “Now it’s the cell phone. I should’ve just turned it off!”

“Just ignore it!” Gareth snarled.

He was just about losing patience with these interruptions.

“Shit! Shit! Shit!” Marianne cried agitatedly. “Get your dick out of me! It’s fucking Simon!”

Gareth hated doing that. It was almost physically painful to snatch his penis out from where it was so fully embedded, his erection as stiff as it could ever be. Clearly, it wasn’t that pleasant for Marianne either, who gasped with a painful grimace, snatched the cell phone from the table, and pressed it to her ear.

Gareth sat back on the mattress, cross-legged, his penis twitching in attendance, while Marianne sat on the side of the bed nodding her head and occasionally shaking it, making occasional monosyllabic utterances.

“So, you’ll be back early then!” she confirmed, just before turning off the cell phone and replacing it on the table.

“Your husband’s coming home, is he?” Gareth asked, wondering whether he should now just leave. He had, after all, achieved almost everything he’d intended to do. Not absolutely everything, of course, but almost.

“He doesn’t know,” said Marianne, looking startled. “He doesn’t really know

what's happening. There's been a kind of explosion in the other tower. Not the one he works in, but the North Tower. No one knows what's happened. Apparently there's smoke coming out of it. He's been told to stay at his desk. They think it's the best place to stay. Apparently, it's safer than outside if there's something like that explosion they had a few years ago in the underground car park."

"So, he'll be staying at work then?" wondered Gareth hopefully.

"Who knows," Marianne remarked. "No one knows what to do. Simon's been phoning emergency services for advice, but they're always engaged. The management advise staying at their desks. After all, what's happened in the other tower can't be happening in both of them, can it?"

"I guess not!"

Marianne put the cell phone down and bit her lip. She looked up at Gareth and noticed his erect penis protruding almost incongruously between his crossed knees.

She giggled.

"Well, he won't be back for an hour or so, even if they do evacuate the building," she remarked. "What can we do while we're waiting?"

"I know exactly what I want to do!" said Gareth determinedly, with a wicked smile on his face.

Re-entry was not as smooth as had been the original entry. Marianne was obviously quite tense, though there was enough residual moistness for the feat to be achieved with no pain to either of them. He thrust back and forth, only gradually building up the rhythm, mindful of what it was sometimes like when the fucking was interrupted in mid-stroke and remembering too well the times it had killed all the passion.

Then Marianne said, whilst not responding at all with her body as Gareth had hoped, “It’ll be on the box, won’t it?”

“What?” Gareth answered, barely able to disguise his annoyance.

“Something like that, an explosion in the World Trade Center, it’ll be on television, won’t it?”

“Yeah, I guess so!”

“Then let’s turn on the TV,” Marianne said.

Gareth pretended not to hear her. His rhythm was beginning to take precedence over anything else.

“Look! Fucking get off me, will you!” said Marianne with annoyance. “We’re putting on the fucking box whatever you fucking think!”

“Oh! Okay,” said Gareth reluctantly, his penis popping out with a slight eruption, just about audible over the distant traffic noise.

The two of them then sat naked on the side of the bed. Marianne located the remote control and aimed it at the television.

For a moment, they looked with disbelief at the picture on the screen which was of a huge tower with smoke billowing out just two-thirds the way from the bottom.

“It’s not a science fiction movie, is it?” asked Marianne in an urgent whisper. “It’s the real fucking deal, isn’t it?”

Gareth nodded. This couldn’t be happening! And not now! This was America in the fucking twenty-first century. This was the real world. Whatever was happening and being televised couldn’t be real, could it?

But, of course, it was.

“Shit! This is serious!” said Gareth, as the unsteady lens of the television cameras were intercut with images of newsreaders and a stream of data tickertaped under the screen. Flight 11. 8:48 a.m. Details still awaiting. The North Tower.

“This isn’t real!” Marianne exclaimed. “Those poor people. And what’s that? What *is* that?”

Gareth felt a sudden very sick feeling grip his stomach as the image replayed itself in his mind. It was someone falling out of the window. Or if not a person, exactly what a person would look like if it plummeted from the window of a 110-storey building.

“I need a piss,” Gareth announced.

He stood up and strode across the pinewood floor towards the en-suite bathroom, his head turning back with horror, half-hoping and half-fearing that he might see more of that horrific scene. He stood in front of the bathroom mirror, not really sure if he wanted to pee at all, but certain that he needed some space to himself. Did he feel like puking? There was a very real sickness in his gut, but it wasn’t translating into anything more material.

He gazed at his reflection. He was a good-looking guy. He knew that. His success rate was evidence enough of that. The girls he’d picked up and fucked. Even that dyke chick in the South London pub. Not the first dyke he’d notched up, but one worth the effort. But what should he do now? What he wanted to do was find a decent excuse and split. He’d done what he’d come to do, after all. Now, he could jump back into the BMW and drive back across town. He felt sorry for Marianne, of course, but her husband would be back soon. And Gareth almost envied him the story he had to tell his wife.

And then he heard a shriek from the adjacent room. A shriek that chilled him in a

way he'd never imagined one could. Something that all those horror movies he'd watched had never really prepared him for. It burst out suddenly and violently, rose high and then choked on itself before returning with gulps. In Gareth's imagination, it was as if Marianne had just been attacked by a figure in an almost comical mask, but he knew it was something quite different and something almost certainly associated with whatever it was that was happening downtown.

He dashed out of the bathroom, his pretence of needing a piss totally forgotten, to see Marianne choking on her tears as she watched the television, its volume raised to an entirely unnatural volume.

"The cunts! The fucking cunts! The motherfuckers!" Marianne gasped.

"What? What?"

"The South... The South Tower... Another..."

Gareth had never known an experience like this before. At the back of his mind, he'd assumed that a plane hitting a sky-scraper in Manhattan could only be an unfortunate accident. Horrible. Unfortunate. But understandable. Things like that could happen. It had happened to the Empire State Building, after all. But two planes! Whatever it was, it couldn't be an accident!

There was no pretence at concern that drove Gareth to put his arm around the naked, sobbing, huddled Marianne as he watched the screen with horror that was so great he wondered if it was humanly possible for Marianne to feel any worse. The newsreaders and tickertape told the same story. Another plane. This time filmed. Again and again, he saw the image replayed by the television studio of a huge Boeing 747, Flight 175 as he later discovered, fly straight into the North Tower, the very one where the cuckolded

Simon was working, but fortunately not on the 90th floor.

“I’ve got to phone Simon!” said Marianne, suddenly sobering up. “Check that he’s all right!”

Gareth nodded. This clearly took precedence over anything else. He felt suddenly conscious of his nakedness and that of Marianne, but he was unable to do anything quite as trivial as put clothes back on. He sat on the bed, his knuckles pushed against his teeth, while the billowing clouds of black smoke emerged from the recently hit building, mingling with those of the North Tower.

“Shit! Shit! Shit” he murmured again and again. Was there nothing more profound you could say when things like this happened?

“It’s engaged!” shrieked Marianne, throwing her cell phone violently onto the mattress. “It’s fucking engaged! Fuck! Fuck!”

And then she once again shrieked out loud, a piercing cry that added to Gareth’s misery and also to his embarrassment. His clothes? Should he?

And then the cell phone rang again. Marianne snatched it up and held it to her ear. Gareth had enough presence of mind, and this somehow steadied his own shattered nerves, to lower the volume of the television, while Marianne nodded her head and gasped “Yes! Yes! Of course!” at regular intervals.

“I love you!” she said suddenly.

What?

“I do! I love you, Simon! Please please please... just get home...”

And then Marianne sat there, reluctant to put the cell phone down, although Gareth sensed the call had finished. She lowered it slowly towards her lap and gazed at it

as if hypnotised, her face a crumpled mess of misery, her mascara just a smudge of tears.

“He’s on the 105th floor. They don’t know what to do. There’s smoke everywhere. They’re heading to the roof. It’s the only place to go.”

“Surely a helicopter will pick them up.”

“It must do! It must!”

What do you do in times like this? Gareth knew how to play women when it came to seduction, but comforting them? What do you do? He put a reassuring arm around Marianne’s bare shoulders. Instinctively she nuzzled close to him, her eyes focused on the television and its images of firefighters and billowing black smoke.

And then she abruptly pushed him off with enough violence that it bruised his chest.

“Just keep your fucking hands off me, you bastard!” she shrieked before exploding into another torrent of tears.

Oh shit! Now what?

Marianne punched furiously at the cell phone buttons.

“What’s happening? Are you all right?” she yelled hysterically into the mouthpiece.

Marianne returned to a conversation that Gareth desperately pretended not to hear while his attention was split between the relative comfort of newsreaders and the gasps of disjointed interjections from Marianne. She put the cell phone down.

“It’s not easy getting up the stairs. It’s real crowded. Simon’s had to get off the phone to help someone from a lower floor who’s burnt. He says it’s horrible. Her skin’s boiling or something. It’s a fucking nightmare. Oh! Ohh! I *so* want to talk to Simon!”

It was no use. Gareth had to return to the bathroom. He staggered across the room, hesitated by the pile of clothes and slipped on his boxers, before taking them off again in the bathroom where he stood in front of the latrine. From the bedroom he could hear Marianne's agonised cries while he stood, wobbling, above the sight of a latrine into which his penis was stubbornly refusing to relieve itself.

And then he remembered that image of the falling body. In his mind's eye he imagined it tumbling, rolling and flailing as it bounced against the unforgiving vertical hardness of the tower to eventually land on the ground below.

He choked and a small stream of spew ejected itself from his chest and drooled down his chin.

He choked a bit more, kneeling on the ground in front of the toilet bowl, coughing up, with no result, as the vivid image in his mind recurred of a splattered human body, perhaps like a fly on his car windscreen, hitting the ground surrounded by fire engines.

At last he staggered back, carefully tugging his boxers back on. The task of dressing himself when he returned distracted his eyes from looking at Marianne. When clothed he finally did so, to see her sitting in her dressing gown, the cell phone against her ear, and the clear evidence on the white towelling that she too had relieved herself of the contents of her stomach.

"I love you! I love you!" she repeated over and over again while her eyes focused on the billowing smoke on the television screen.

And then, suddenly, it happened.

Marianne and Gareth looked at the television with the same horror as, in what seemed like slow motion, the North Tower crumbled and collapsed, like a man punched

in the chest. It was more like those controlled explosions that provided so much entertainment when a city block needed clearing, but this time not controlled at all. This time, the explosion took with it the lives of so many innocent men and women and so many brave firefighters whose dedication and courage had beamed out reassurance in these last few minutes.

Marianne lowered the cell phone. It had gone dead.

And then, as the South Tower collapsed, floor after floor falling on the floor below, Marianne herself followed the same gradual descent, her body losing all its meaning and purpose.

Then Gareth was alone. Marianne sprawled unconscious next to him, the shock of her sudden loss too much for her to bear.

Shit!

Camden

Marianne never used to smoke. It just wasn't something you ever did in New York. So much had changed in the last year that it was natural to accept the cigarette Phillipa offered her. It was far from the first she'd had today or even the last few weeks.

She balanced the length of the British cigarette on her lower lip, her upper lip holding it in place, while drawing in determinedly on the flame from Phillipa's cigarette lighter. 'Fag' they called it over here in London, England, she reflected, almost smiling, something she had so much difficulty in doing any more.

"So, you don't know when you're going back to work?" wondered Phillipa. "I mean you're welcome to stay here as long as you like, of course, but don't you know just how long?"

Marianne blew out a cloud of cigarette smoke and watched it disperse about the room. She sat back on the huge leather sofa and balanced her elbow on the armrest, her cigarette pointed up to the unnecessarily high ceiling.

"The doctor doesn't know. She says that a trip like this to London, England, might do the trick. Get out of the apartment. Get away from all the memories of Simon and that horrible horrible day! But depression isn't something you get over like a cold. It takes some people longer than others."

"It must be dreadful for you. We were shocked enough when we watched it on TV as it happened. It was afternoon for us, of course, but morning for you. You'd probably only just got to the office when it happened. Though knowing you yanks you'd probably been in the office hours already."

“I wasn’t in the office,” said Marianne slowly and carefully.

And then, it happened again. Her eyes erupted suddenly, with no forewarning, into an explosion of tears. Her face crumpled with the impact of her sorrow and the embarrassment that even now, after all these many months, she was unable to control her emotions. And she, a woman who was once one of the sternest and most formidable negotiators in her department!

However hard she tried, it always happened. Something would trigger it off again. Couldn’t it just go away? Why did she have to forever carry this guilt and remorse around with her? Even though, of course, it wasn’t she who had been at the controls of those Boeing 747s. Even though she was in no way culpable in the events that led to her husband’s death. And his body never to be found or positively identified.

If only she had let her desires get the better of her on another day and not on the one day that was etched not only in her memory, but that of everyone in the world. A day now codified as two numbers whose very mention, even in the most innocent of circumstances, would invariably trigger the same tears she was struggling at this moment to suppress.

Phillippa carefully removed Marianne’s just-lit cigarette from her hand and placed it cautiously on the ash-tray. Then she sat on the sofa next to her friend and bent her head onto her bare breast so that Marianne’s nose was buried just by the reddened areola around the nipple. This wasn’t the first time Phillippa had comforted Marianne in this way. She was, after all, like her husband, extraordinarily tactile for a Brit, but Marianne was still not wholly relaxed in the habitual nudity or near-nudity in which her friends disported themselves in their huge North London maisonette.

Although Marianne was accustomed to Phillipa's way of consoling her, it was still odd for her tears to drip directly onto her friend's bare skin, which was losing its summer tan and becoming quite pale in the late autumn coolness. It was also somehow more comforting than resting her cheek on the material of a dress or blouse, no hard buttons or stitching to rub against her face, while Phillipa supported Marianne's stouter body, clothed more modestly in jeans and a sweatshirt, and gently stroked her recently cut hair.

"The pain just doesn't go away!" Marianne sobbed. "I thought it would. But even here, an ocean away from Manhattan, whenever I think... whenever my mind returns... at the smallest..."

"Don't worry! Don't worry about anything!" said Phillipa comfortingly, rocking back and forth gently on the huge sofa, a rhythm that must have reminded both of them of the maternal affection neither had the fortune to bestow on children of their own.

Marianne noticed how close her lips and nose were to Phillipa's nipple. It was thin and quite definitely stiff on a small, but pert, bosom. She looked up at Phillipa who gazed down at her almost lovingly.

"You can suck it, you know," said Phillipa. "I don't mind. In fact, I'd love it if you did! I'm sure it would do you good."

"No," said Marianne softly. "You know I'm not that kind of a girl..."

Phillippa sighed. "I know. But sucking a nipple isn't sex, you know. It'd make you feel good."

In actual fact, Phillipa's almost inappropriate act of compassion already cheered Marianne up. Maybe in a woman less sexually promiscuous and less indiscriminate she

might have accepted the offer. Perhaps a woman's nipple would bestow again the comfort that her own mother's had provided when she was a suckling babe in arms. But she didn't want to give Phillipa ideas as to her affection toward her that she might regret later. She valued her friendship with her British friend too much to allow it to become something that would never work and for which she had no interest in pursuing.

Would she have felt the same way if a man had shown her affection in such a way? She might have been more certain of her sexual desires, but no less reluctant to pursue a physical relationship even with men since her husband died. And this despite having had obvious opportunities, not only with Gareth, but also, and very openly, with David, Phillipa's husband and Marianne's ex-lover from many years previously.

Marianne let her head fall down onto Phillipa's lap, well away from both the nipples and the shaved bareness of the crotch between her legs. The two women made no comment while Marianne's head rested on an upper thigh and Phillipa continued to stroke and pat her expensively coiffured hair.

In the background, Marianne could hear the soft sound of jazz music pulse from the huge speakers that stood on either side of the wide television screen. From the bedroom in the floor above, she could hear the steady thump of a headrest against the wall as David and his colleague continued the lovemaking that had excluded Phillipa from her connubial bed all night. Apparently, Maurice didn't feel comfortable having sex in the company of a woman, so from discretion and also the desire, no doubt, of ensuring the success of David's latest project, she had slept in the bed in another spare bedroom next to the one that had almost become Marianne's home this last week or so.

When Marianne focused on the sound of two men making love it seemed almost

as natural as the passion more often expressed between David and Phillippa, and sometimes their other friends. Despite that, a part of her still didn't want to imagine David, the man she'd shared a room with as a student in the halls of residence, up there on the huge bed fucking, or being fucked by, a man who looked so much like a hairy gorilla. This was an opinion she held even though Maurice had a twinkle in his dark brown eyes that reminded her so very much of poor Simon.

And then Marianne burst into tears once more, her manicured nails digging into the flesh of Phillippa's bare thighs and her body heaving with irrepressible grief.

When she next saw Maurice, an hour or so later, the twinkle in his eyes was hidden behind wire-frame spectacles. He wore a corduroy jacket over a check shirt where thick strands of chest hair peeped out from under the open collar. He popped his head into the living room and waved nervously at Phillippa and Marianne who sat on the sofa watching a Sunday afternoon news programme. He hovered only a brief moment, perhaps startled to see that Phillippa was still wholly naked, a cigarette dangling from one hand.

"I'll be off then!" he shouted.

"Not till after another kiss!" announced David's voice firmly from the hallway.

Marianne found it difficult to concentrate on the discussion between Donald Rumsfeld and some British newscaster while she could also hear Maurice and David snogging loudly and energetically in the hallway, interesting though the discussion was on the threat Saddam Hussein posed to world peace. She wasn't exactly sure what part the man had played in the circumstances that led to her husband's death and her abrupt widowhood, but if he was in any way culpable she was sure he deserved whatever was coming his way.

Eventually, the front door closed and David entered the room, just as naked as his wife, his penis still semi-erect.

“How was it dear?” Phillippa asked, looking up from the television.

“You must have heard, sweetheart. Maurice doesn’t half squeak when you prod him. And there’s a man whose rear passage you could drive a train through!” He laughed indulgently. “I think we’ve got the whole thing in the bag, Phil. We’ll be signing the contract tomorrow!”

“That’s fucking magic!” cried Phillippa, jumping up off the sofa and over to her husband to kiss him on the cheek. “Do you want to celebrate?” she asked giving his penis a little squeeze.

“Not yet, love!” David remarked, disengaging himself and plomping onto a leather armchair. “I’m well and truly knackered! My prick’s had more punishment than you can ever imagine! So, what’s on the telly?”

“Just fucking Donald Rumsfeld!” Phillippa exclaimed. “What a plonker! Now they wanna do Iraq, would you believe!”

Marianne felt distinctly uncomfortable as Phillippa and David made comments regarding the crusade on terrorism, keeping her eyes glued on the television and resisting the temptation to express her very different opinions. David and Phillippa were great friends, but couldn’t they see that extreme acts of terrorism deserved equally extreme retribution? Even the ones that took place in Israel.

“So, Marianne, what plans have you got for tonight?” David asked, while Phillippa lit up a cigarette and offered one to their guest.

“None,” said Marianne, blowing smoke out of her mouth.

“Well, I think we’re gonna visit a friend of ours. Hamid. He’s studying for an MBA at the University of Kingston or some other polytechnic they’ve upgraded to uni status. He’s been a bit down since coming to England, so we’ve been trying to cheer him up, haven’t we, Phil?”

Phillippa nodded her head. “He’s become like a monk, though. We’ve suggested loud and clear that he loosen up a bit, but he doesn’t seem up for it anymore!”

“Pity!” David sighed. “A good fuck he was, too! So, Marianne, you game? We’ll be meeting him at the Tyburn at Marble Arch. There are a few good Lebanese restaurants round there.”

“Is Hamid Lebanese?” Marianne wondered.

“No. Moroccan,” Phillippa answered. “From Marrakech. We met him last year when we did our grand tour.”

“I see,” nodded Marianne.

She wasn’t sure what to say. She couldn’t very well use as an excuse the thing that most troubled her to turn down an invitation for a night out. She was sure that a couple of liberal Brits with their unsympathetic views on American policy would think her a racist if she were to confess that she wasn’t quite yet ready to meet an Arab. She’d never met one before, not knowingly, but now that her husband had been murdered by a group of fanatical Arabs, she wasn’t sure she could easily restrain either her sorrow or her anger.

And Morocco? Weren’t several of the terrorists on the planes that hit the Twin Towers from Morocco? She was sure of it.

She was actually quite charmed by Hamid when she met him in the pub. He

immediately jumped up from his seat to buy a round of drinks for Marianne and her friends, now, at long last, properly dressed and quite lively despite the long delay on the Central Line. He was probably in his mid-twenties with smart black hair, light brown skin, and a playful smile on his lips.

As their conversation proceeded, she was aware of how much more attention Hamid was paying her than her two friends and she sensed a sadness in him. He was easily distracted and would sometimes break off in the middle of a sentence to stare into space before returning to whatever subject they had been discussing.

He was especially excited by the fact that Marianne came from New York, a city he'd never visited but had always intended to. He asked sympathetic questions on the lasting legacy of the cataclysmic events of the previous year and shared her concern that the outrage be properly commemorated on the site of Ground Zero. It almost seemed that he was about to weep as Marianne described the many tributes left around the perimeter of the site. The fading photographs of dead fire-fighters. The banners and messages sent to the nearby church from all around the United States and the rest of the world. The teddy-bears and toys left by children who knew no other way to express the strength of their emotion.

The rest of the evening was spent in a Lebanese restaurant where Hamid displayed his knowledge of the food on the menu, ordering everyone's meal in Arabic, and telling amusing stories about life in Morocco. If Arabs were all like Hamid, they could certainly be disarmingly charming. When Hamid suggested to her as they parted at the tube station, just opposite the impressive building after which Marble Arch station was named, she gladly assented to meet him on another day.

It was the first evening she could remember in which she was able to cast out of her mind the sorrow she carried with her all the time. Perhaps it was because Hamid was so soft-spoken and sympathetic. Perhaps it was that his observations on the bizarre habits of the English were so perceptive.

Phillippa squeezed Marianne's hand tightly in hers as the train thundered and shuddered through the tunnels towards Tottenham Court Road and the Northern Line.

"I'm so glad you and Hamid got on so well. We were worried that, you know, him being an Arab and everything... But it all went *so* well! When are you seeing him again?"

"Tuesday," Marianne replied, unable to disguise the smile on her face.

"He's a good man, Hamid," David remarked. "But don't expect any more from him than a chat. It's like he's taken some kind of vow of chastity."

This actually suited Marianne. She was sure she wasn't ready for anything more than friendship. She was pleased, too, when they kept their rendezvous at Hampstead that the evening did not end with a crude attempt at seduction., Nor did the next couple of encounters, both of which were in Camden near the flat he was renting at ridiculous expense only half a mile or so from where Phillippa and David lived.

Perhaps it was because the promise of sex had not been mentioned at all and that their conversations had steered so completely away from the subject, that when Hamid actually suggested she come back to his flat she accepted his offer. It seemed that he genuinely liked her as a person, despite the fact she was nearly ten years his senior. Their conversations over wine and falafel in the restaurants were relaxed and sympathetic. It was difficult for Marianne to persuade Hamid to accept even part-payment for the

restaurant bills; although it was unlikely he had anything like the material wealth she was expecting from the insurance companies when they finally processed her case.

When Marianne leaned up to kiss Hamid on the lips, he seemed genuinely startled as if he had never thought that this holiday friendship could become anything greater. He stood back, flustered and ill at ease. Then he smiled, that sadness still lingering in his eyes, and returned her kiss. It wasn't the most passionate kiss Marianne had ever received and it was very brief, but it was enough for her to know that the evening would not finish on a cup of coffee and a few joints.

Hamid's flat was tidy and sparse. There was a small television, a laptop computer on a desk surrounded by books and folders, and several pictures of people Marianne assumed to be his family. They drank tea rather than coffee and the joint Hamid rolled was much less potent than the ones Phillipa was so intent on sharing.

When it was stubbed out and the two of them removed their clothes, there was a gentle shyness about him. Almost an awkwardness in his movements.

"You must excuse me," he said softly, removing his underpants, the last item of clothing either of them divested. "It's been a very long time since..."

"Me, too!" Marianne confessed, happy she hadn't lost her sexual passion after all.

Hamid's progress about her body was almost in total reverse to that of Gareth, the last person with whom Marianne had sex. He started at her mouth and gradually made his way downwards, over her flattened breasts, over the flap covering her navel, expressing real pleasure in the slight bulge of her stomach and then his tongue finally made contact with her clitoris, which Marianne was pleased he stimulated slowly and carefully.

Marianne had always been slightly self-conscious about how much noise she

made when making love. Not all women, she knew, expressed their passion so vocally, but it was, for her, proof of the intensity of her sexual desires. When, bit by bit, she heard herself squeal and gasp, it was a return to her old self that she sometimes worried might be gone forever.

Hamid sat up on his knees, knowing for sure how aroused she was from the squelchiness of her vagina as he pushed his fingers in and out, and produced a condom that must have been very close at hand. Marianne watched as he pinched its end in his fingers and gradually unrolled it down the length of his erect penis which, like Simon's, was also circumcised. This pleased her. It had never seemed right when she and David were an item at King's College, that he had that useless nipple of flesh at the end of his penis, although she had come to learn in her subsequent and concurrent sexual encounters that circumcised penises were rare in the United Kingdom.

Hamid didn't neglect Marianne's breasts and face as he thrust into her. His tongue and fingers stimulated her on all her tender points, while her buttocks reciprocated his thrusts, her voice exploding into those reassuring short shrieks that built up to louder and more urgent cries as he became steadily more energetic.

Eventually, Marianne knew he had released himself, but not after over half an hour of love-making during which time they had shifted from him being above her to she over him, pressing down onto his erect penis while his hands massaged her bosom.

And then their bodies parted. The two of them slumped together on Hamid's bed. Hamid gently withdrew the condom from his penis and Marianne could see his circumcised penis again, only this time much more shrivelled.

She smiled and gently stroked the deflated glans.

“So, Arabs are circumcised as well. Is it religious?”

“No. Not really. Not like with Jews,” replied Hamid. “Are you a Jew? You’ve got a Jewish surname.”

“Cohen? Yes, it is Jewish. But I’m not a Jew. It was my husband who was.”

“Husband?” asked Hamid, suddenly looking startled. He leaned up on the bed on one shoulder and looked down at Marianne beside him. “Are you married?”

“Well, yes. Or rather, no.”

“I don’t understand. Are you separated? Divorced?”

“No,” replied Marianne slowly, feeling something break within her. Oh shit! Shit!
“He’s dead.”

“Dead?”

“He was working in the North Tower. You know, in the World Trade Center. He was there when it happened.”

“He was one of those who...”

“Yes, he was,” Marianne affirmed. And then she couldn’t hold it back at all. The tears burst to the surface. And perhaps because she was already loosened by the result of just having had sex, she cried more vocally and more wretchedly than she had for many weeks.

“He died. He was killed by the bastard... bastard... He was one of those... And I was... I feel so very, so very...”

Hamid held her sobbing body to his equally naked body, gaining comfort somehow from this shared misery. He wrapped his arms around her back and felt the tears rise in his own eyes as they did on so many occasions this last year.

But for him, this was the first time he had cried in the presence of anyone outside his immediate family. He was ashamed, as any man should be, for expressing his emotions so nakedly and so pathetically when surely the impact of that tragic event should have lessened somewhat by now.

When he'd first learnt of the destruction of the World Trade Center, his foreboding about his brother's involvement made his own horror much deeper and more intense than that of his friends. He was angry, angrier than he thought possible, when some people cheered the event as a kind of Islamic revenge on the evils met upon the Palestinians. There were people, real people, involved in that horror, who in no way deserved to die on a day when their only crime was to have gone to work.

But he also felt a guilt that he had alerted no one of his fears on the day he last spoke to his brother, six months before. That feeling of guilt worsened when it was confirmed that his brother was indeed one of the perpetrators of that crime. It was he who was amongst those terrorists who had booked a flight on the plane that hit the South Tower so soon after the first collision.

He had to endure many questions and interrogations about his brother's role in the crime. First from the local Moroccan police and then, with subtlety and persistence, from the mysterious Americans who detained him and the rest of his family. At the end of it, his father was forced to sell his business and the family name was no longer to be associated with the factory Hamid had known all his life.

Hamid could no longer tolerate the weight of guilt that tormented him. He finally confessed to his surprisingly sympathetic American interrogators that he hadn't notified anyone of his fear that his brother was engaged in some dreadful plot. And then he felt

guilt that he had, in some way, betrayed the confidence of a brother who was now just cinders in a city he had never visited.

Marianne was surprised by the intensity of Hamid's sorrow. In some strange way, it seemed almost to exceed even her own. She and Hamid rocked together on the narrow bed, their tears commingling, while Marianne reflected that perhaps Hamid too had lost someone on that dreadful day. She never suspected how very different was the role played by the object of Hamid's loss to her own.

"There! There!" she repeated again and again, astonished to find such an unlikely ally in grief.

But she was also happy that it could be expressed in such an intimate way. Although she had no idea how few degrees of separation there were between the perpetrator and the victims of that awful tragedy, she certainly appreciated the degree of intimacy she felt for Hamid at that moment.

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