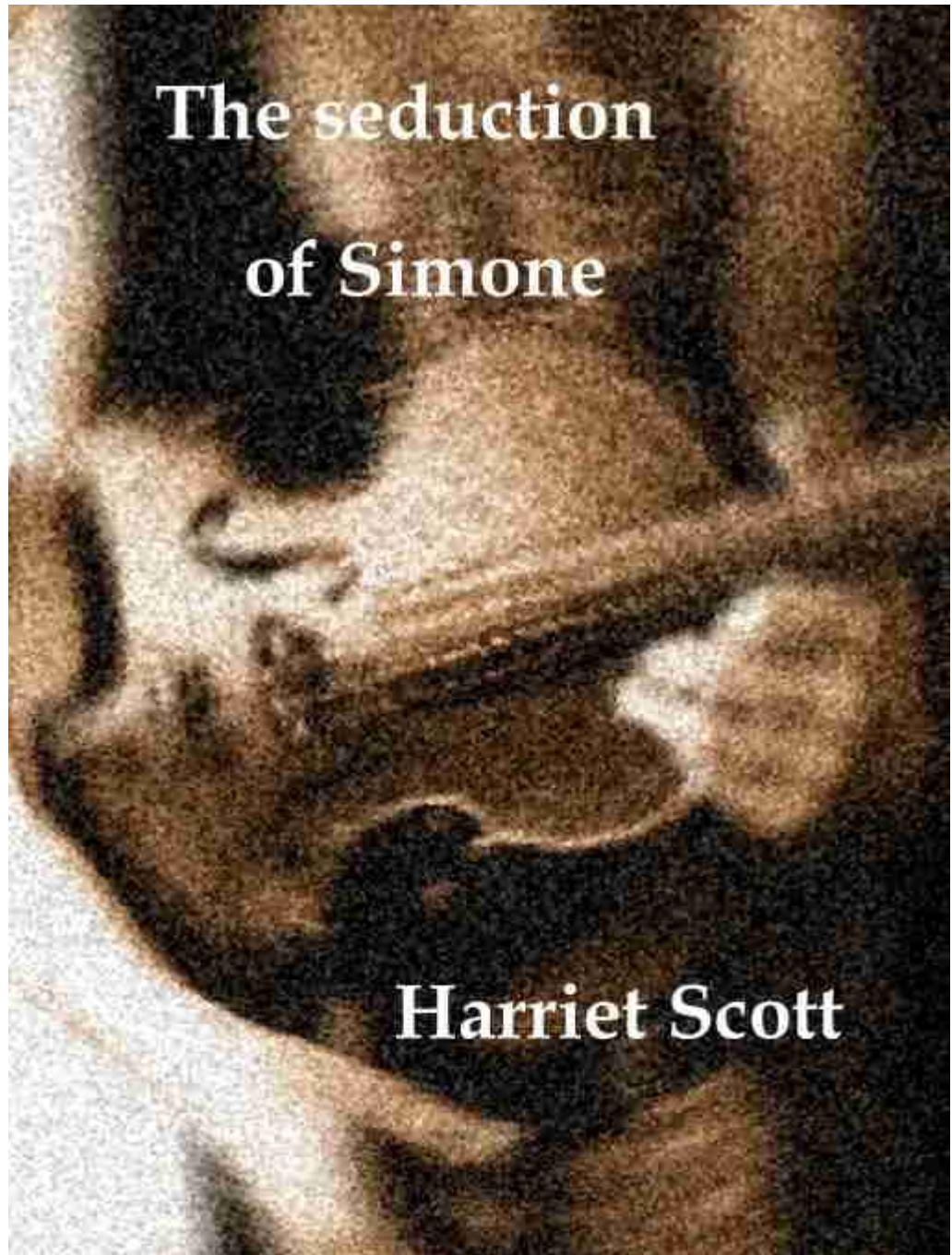


The Seduction of Simone

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THE FIRST SIGHTING

Yesterday, I saw the most beautiful woman in the world. She was sitting opposite me in a pub with an older couple whom I took to be her parents. She was young, about twenty-one at most, and was, I suspected, home from university for the weekend: she had the louche confidence of a student, an ease with herself which was entirely natural and utterly charming. It was clear she was the centre of her own universe, not in a vane, selfish way, but because she was so clearly focussed on what she wanted to do: the young have a certainty, a sense of purpose which idealism fosters and which only the future grind of reality diminishes. You remember what it was like when you were young, and eternity stretched before you, and every day was a new opportunity?; when you had a vision, goals, when you felt - no, knew - that you were going to make a difference. She exuded that calm intent, this beautiful young woman.

The pub was packed, and I was with a colleague from work, which meant I couldn't concentrate on her properly, couldn't tune in to her conversation or freely observe her beautiful face, but as I half-heartedly responded to my colleague's inane chatter, I found the lure of her perfect features compulsive, found myself unable to resist staring at her. We were only a few feet apart, seated at separate tables, and she was directly in my line of vision, facing slightly away from me so that I saw her in profile. A couple of times when she looked up she caught my eye, but took no notice, absorbed as she was in her own conversation and her own company.

As I sat watching her, I was aware of the effect she was having on me, and aware, too, that this wasn't normal behaviour for a respectable woman. I wasn't accustomed to lusting after young girls in pubs but, it was undeniable, she was eliciting a very sexual response from me. I could feel a familiar tingle, the queasy edginess in my stomach, that light-headedness and dry-mouthed nervousness which generally signifies a lustful attraction. And yes, I was becoming wet.

She had been there when we arrived, a little after six, for our usual Friday night rendezvous to release the tensions of the working week. I spotted her immediately and was instantly hooked. I was relieved when, as they completed their drinks, the father, or he whom I took to be the father, went to the bar to buy another round. "Same again, Simone?" he had asked. I knew her name, then: Simone, a beautiful name, and so apt for her, somehow. As the father returned with the drinks I settled back and resumed my secret observation; midway through those drinks, though, much to my dismay they called for a menu, and about quarter of an hour later they decamped to the adjoining restaurant to eat. And my beautiful, beautiful girl was gone.

I can't stop thinking about her. All day I have been trying to recall that face from my memory, relive its beauty, revel in its perfection; all day I have mooned around the house, reluctant to do anything which requires concentration, which would prevent me from thinking about her. I'm like some feckless, lovelorn teenager; I know I should get on and forget about her, but I can't, I can't give her up. She is the most beautiful woman in the world and I'm obsessed. There's no other way to describe it: I'm obsessed.

You probably wouldn't agree with me if you saw her. Most likely you would think I had lost my senses, or at the very least my taste. She is not what you would call a conventional beauty, I'll grant you. She has a huge, crooked nose, for one thing, and one of those simpering, self-conscious smiles, the sort which say "love me" and which after a while make you want to hate them. But she is still the most beautiful woman in the world. No question, no debate, she just is. All the rest of your so-called beauties can take a back seat as I attempt to conjure up perfection.

As I said, an enormous nose, truly massive, dominating her entire face. It is the fulcrum, the centrepiece, the genesis: everything else seems to have slid off it and into place. At its bridge, where bone meets cartilage, there is a truly noble Roman hook, quite the most extraordinary, extravagant and graceful I've ever seen. From there, the lateral cartilages give shape and definition to the main body of the nose, a trumpeting expanse leading triumphantly down her face. Just when you think, though, that it must surely launch outwards, projecting like some glorious ski run into the distance, it draws back in towards the face again, rounding neatly and sweetly down to the septum and surprisingly small, teardrop shaped nostrils. And this is what makes the nose so exceptional: it is the heroic marriage of the prodigious and the dainty, the way in which the magnificent, the grand, resolves into a fragile, delicate perfection. It is a nose which is bigger, and greater, than the sum of its parts: it is the ensemble, the generous conjunction of the monumental and the refined which confers its true majesty. It is, in truth, perfect.

So dominant is her nose that at first you don't really take in the rest of her features. This is a pity, as they, too, play their part in creating the perfection that is Simone. Her eyes, if one is honest, are possibly set too close, but it is impossible to imagine them any other way. They are small and round, dreamy blue beneath extravagant lashes. Slightly downturned, they lend her a kind of oriental serenity. Her mouth, without lipstick, is still a vibrant red, with beautiful, plump lips, a vermilion curtain undulating provocatively beneath her perfect nose. Unstyled, but sexy, shoulder length hair rounds off her appearance, framing her dazzling beauty in a chestnut, windy, tousled mop. I wish I were a more accomplished writer, wish I could convey through words the extraordinary beauty of the woman, but I can't, and I am not sure anyone could. Perfection cannot be replicated.

As soon as I saw her I knew I had to make love to her. I cannot live without having savoured the joy of loving her, of kissing, caressing her, stroking her hair; I need to taste her, trace my lips across her face, plant a thousand kisses on her nose, cover it with my love, my adoration; I want to have her in my arms, our breasts together, hands clasped in union; I want to explore, to undress her, lead her to my bed, to lay her down and drink her beauty; with my hands I will caress her, with my tongue I will entrance her, with my eyes I will worship her. Together, we will disappear into the ether, drawn out of this world into a world of beauty; we will emerge in Elysian meadows, walk hand in hand through nature's glory; we will make music, compose symphonies of romance; we will paint our emotions on an astral canvas, bold and vibrant and strong; we will write sonnets of such grace and eloquence one would cry at the sight of them. I want her; I need her. I aim to have her. As I sit here and write this, I have come to a decision.

I am going to seduce Simone.

DIARY OF SIMONE CLEMENTS

May 10th

Home for my birthday, which means a weekend with the parents. At least, out of deference to my 20th birthday celebrations, they weren't at each others' throats the whole time. Although, I'm not sure which is more disconcerting: them arguing the toss non-stop or the enforced niceness and jollity which replaces it on such occasions.

Having a few days away from John is probably a good thing. Things are getting pretty intense, and it's stressing me out. I know he wants to go all the way and I'm not ready for it. Memories of Steve are still too fresh, the scars are still livid. Talking of which, the birthday means it's three years exactly since it all happened. I know it's time to put it all behind me and get on with things, but it's difficult. Difficult to trust people. Difficult to stay positive. Difficult to keep up the front, conceal my fears. I wish John was more help.

Since I told him about it all he's kind of blocked it. Never mentions it, it's like he wants to pretend it didn't happen, at least not to the Simone that he knows. History, in the past, not his problem. Which it isn't, of course, but a bit of understanding would be good.

I don't know how to handle it if he makes a pass at me again. He did it on Friday, before I went for the train. We were in my room, listening to Eminem (wanker) and he started kissing me all over. It was very nice, he was very tender, kissing my eyebrows, eyes, cheeks, lips, chin, jaw, ears. Made me feel special. We ended up lying on the bed, snogging, and his hands started wandering. Men, predictable or what? He was stroking my back, dragging his nails hard, so that I could feel them through my tee shirt. Then he started sliding round to my breast, and started kneading and stroking me. It got me pretty hot, I have to say. So much that when he slid his hand under my tee shirt and felt me through my bra I didn't stop him. My nipple was stiff and he rubbed his fingers round and round on it. A bit much, actually, a bit sore at times. Then he put his hand under my bra and started stroking my bare breast. First person to touch me in three years.

I really wanted to. I was soaking. I wanted him to continue, I wanted to enjoy it, but I couldn't go through with it. While he played with my breasts I was okay, but then his hand started to go downwards, over my belly, to my jeans. That was when I lost my nerve. "I'm sorry," I said. "I just can't. Not yet." He said he didn't mind, but of course he did. His cock was bulging in his jeans like a truncheon. He kept kissing me for a few minutes, but it was pretty half-hearted stuff, and I think we were both relieved when I had to go for the train. So I'm not looking forward to seeing him again, really. How will he react? I hate being like this. Just wish I had the confidence.

Will I ever love anyone again?

There was a woman in the pub last night who kept staring at me. It was extraordinary. She was so blatant, looking at me the whole time. Every time I looked up, there she was, ogling. I felt like saying "Yes, I have a bloody great hooter, don't I? Biggest nose you've ever seen, I suppose." What a bitch. Just because she was gorgeous. We can't all be Miss World. Expect she's been telling everyone about it ever since. "You should have seen it. Enormous! Hope she doesn't get wrinkly when she's older, people will mistake her for an elephant. Poor soul."

Bitch.

So here we are, Saturday night. Two evenings and one day left before I can escape back to Derby. And how will I spend my Saturday evening? Out on the town, clubbing, stuffing “e”s down my throat? Some chance. Can’t even use Clint, because I’m paranoid they’d hear the buzzing. “Simone, what on earth are you doing, child? What have you got that up your pee-pee for?” So it’s off to bed for some fingerwork and dreams of Robbie Williams. Night night.

A DREAM OF SIMONE

Twenty four hours on and I still can't get Simone out of my mind. I re-read what I wrote about her yesterday before I went to bed last night, and laughed. I'll be rational about it in the morning, I thought. Reality will intervene; I won't be able to recall her face and I'll gradually begin to wonder what I was thinking of. I'm thirty-seven, and too old for fanciful notions and teenage obsessions.

But it hasn't happened. If anything, I'm more besotted than ever with her.

I lay in bed for over an hour last night, playing with myself and fantasising about her. In my dream she came over to me in the pub and started chatting to me. I get the impression she is a completely self-confident person, and as I dreamed she took the lead in the conversation, easy-going and relaxed. She began asking me personal questions: do you have a boyfriend? (no); girlfriend? (no, blushing); looking for someone? (yes, aren't we all?); anyone in mind? (possibly); male or female? (pause, ahem, female); anyone I know? (gulp, yes); is it me? (yes, eyes downturned coyly, it is). I played out this conversation over and over again, with her chatting me up, leading the conversation, gradually introducing a sexual element to it.

I pictured her inviting me home and without much fanfare guiding me to her bed. She undressed me slowly, carefully, planting kisses on every expanse of flesh she uncovered. Shoulders and arms fell under her siege, as she kissed her way down them to my hands, then sucked on each finger individually. Sitting on the bed she kissed my stomach, wiggling her tongue deliciously inside my belly-button, making me squirm, raising goose pimples all over. Pulling down my skirt she tracked her tongue up and down my thigh, hand stretched sensuously around my arse cheek, stroking my silk knickers. She eased my bra off and began to fondle my breasts, rubbing my aching, taut nipples. As I pictured it, I began to mimic the scene I was inventing, stroking my own breasts, tweaking my nipples, scratching my nail against my areolae.

My dream lover began to suck on my breast, drawing it exquisitely into her mouth and using her teeth to graze almost painfully against my nipple. As she did so her hands splayed out against my thighs and she started to ease my knickers down. Imagining myself standing before her, pussy exposed to her gaze, I lay back on my bed, legs stretched apart, and began to stroke myself. I thought of her tongue stretched towards me, seeking out my moist slit, and my fingers began to mark out a regular rhythm, first and third fingers stroking at my lips, while my second finger saw to my engorged clit. I fancied that my fingers were her tongue, lapping gently at me, slowly transporting me to a

paradise of the senses. Fluids were streaming from me, my fingers slick and wet as they darted in and out of my pussy.

Beautiful Simone laid me on the bed and continued to minister to my tensions. As I lay my left hand on my thigh I imagined it was hers, stroking, caressing, loving me. My finger pressed hard against my clit and I moaned, as a climax began to develop inside me. Simone, Simone, Simone. Her very name was electrifying. Flashes of her face appeared before my eyes, then disappeared, that beautiful face, that nose – oh magnificent nose – imposing themselves on my mind. My fingers began to pulse in and out, up and down, stroking myself to satisfaction. As I felt my climax approach, rushing towards me in a frenzy of lust, I pressed hard against my clitoris, rubbing either side of it, enclosing it between my fingers, exposing its sensitive nub to my excited touch. In my mind I pictured Simone's head between my thighs, her face hovering above my pussy, tongue stroking fiercely at my lips and her heavenly nose pressed hard against my needful clit. And that did it. The image of her nose pressing against me, rubbing, provoking, tempting, delighting, was enough to send me over the edge, and as I sprawled on the bed my vision of Simone brought me to an almighty climax.

And so, as you can see, I haven't overcome my obsession with this delightful person. Tomorrow I begin my search. I must find her again.

WALTZING'S FOR DREAMERS...

How do you find an angel? I am tormented, I'm torn, my mind is blighted, thoughts benighted, a sea of troubles around me. I've lost an angel, lost my angel, dear heaven I've lost my angel. Two weeks now, and my beautiful, beautiful Simone is lost to me: I've tried, and I can't find her. How do you find an angel? "Oh play me a blue song and fade down the light," and leave me to pity as senses take flight.

I'm at my wits' end. I thought it would be easy, somehow. I thought I would go back to the pub the next Friday and she'd be there again, or at least her parents would. I thought I could follow them home, find her address, her phone number, call her, get in touch. I thought that someone would know them and would recognise my description and tell me who they were. I thought I would bump into her in the street. I thought. I thought.

I thought it would be easy, and now I've lost my angel. And I don't know what to do. "Just let me dream on, oh just let me pray."

Typical, typical, frankly typical. Typical of me, typical of what I've become, typical of Margaret Bellamy. I'm losing my grip, I'm getting old, I'm getting stale. Twenty years ago I wouldn't have let such a treasure slip through my fingers. Twenty years ago I would have charmed the knickers off her before that first evening was over. Twenty years ago I was different. Now I'm just a waltzing dreamer.

Where does it all go? All that youthful zeal, that certainty, the confidence, the will to thrill and the care to dare? You don't notice it disappearing, and that is the cruel thing. One morning you wake up and you're thirty-seven, going on seventy-three, and it's all slipped past you in the night when you weren't looking, and you look in the mirror and what do you see? A loser in love.

And what's left? What's the future? The long slide towards bingo on a Friday night and a box of Ferrero Rocher for a touch of the exotic; the steady march towards having seven identical pairs of support knickers in the drawer and breasts which tickle your belly button; the sad descent of the glamour girl and the grim ascent of the frump.

You'll have to excuse me, but it's Tuesday, and Tuesday's my night for wallowing in self pity. Come round tomorrow, I'll be cheerier then. Wednesdays are keep fit days. Thursdays can be for flower arranging, I've already said Fridays are for bingo, and Saturdays can be my Darby and Joan night. Sorry, I'm off again. It's probably something to do with the bottle of Chilean

Sauvignon Blanc I have by my side: wine and depression do not a happy girl make. Mind you, it's a very nice Sauvignon Blanc, from the Maule Valley, by way of the 24 hour Tesco over the road. Dangerous, living fifty yards from a 24 hour convenience store.

But never mind, the frump has a night out tomorrow. I can doll myself up, forget my age and relive old times. It's only at the Star and Garter, admittedly, and I've never heard of the band who're playing, but if I stay in this house one more evening, trying not to think about my darling Simone, I shall probably go mad. Altogether now: "one step for aching, two steps for breaking, waltzing's for dreamers...."

SIMONE'S DIARY, TUESDAY MAY 27TH

Been a couple of weeks, sorry. Can't even say it was because I've been painting the town red, seeing new sights, doing new things. Nothing so interesting. Not that I'm bothered, to be perfectly honest. I seem to have this reputation for being the go-getter, Miss Up-and-at-'em, the woman who can, and I'm damned if I know where I got it from.

That's not true either, of course. I know exactly where I got it from: me. It's carefully cultivated and jealously guarded. It's a mask which I need, a domino for my doubt, a veil to hide my verity. Couldn't have them thinking I was Simone the Serious, could I?

I seem to have blown it totally with John. He hasn't spoken to me since the night before I went home last, when he tried to feel me up. Ignored me for a fortnight, and today he blanked me totally. We bumped into each other in the refectory queue, and couldn't help but acknowledge one another. Except he didn't, just talked to Gareth the two-faced Welsh tosspot. I stood there for a minute, staring at him, waiting for him to say something, and he didn't. I felt so belittled, so humiliated. But I know he just wants one thing from me, and when I wouldn't give it to him that was that. There's no room for romantic love in this world, is there?

The band are playing tomorrow night, so it's back home. I'm a bit nervous actually, which I don't usually get, but it's a while since we played together, what with me being at uni most of the time. Expect we'll pick it up okay though. Don phoned earlier and sounded really up for it. Marie is trying out her new fiddle, apparently, so the Fiddle Twins will be reborn... I'll let you know how it goes, and hopefully not in two weeks again... Night night.

THE CONCERT

The evening started auspiciously, and I suppose hindsight tells me it was an omen, although at the time I considered it nothing more than good fortune. When I returned home from work there were three letters sitting behind the door: a tax rebate of £321.01 (so precise, just a pity they hadn't been as accurate in the first place, when they erroneously took too much money from me); a letter from Veronica, from whom I hadn't heard in ten years; and a note from my agent with details of some freelance reportage which she felt was right up my street. Joy.

Barbara came round for me about seven-thirty and, giggling like schoolgirls, we headed off for the Star and Garter. Barbara was signally jealous of my good fortune with the taxman and my agent, and insisted on helping me to celebrate by allowing me to buy the drinks. We settled into a table near the back.

"This place is a complete tip," I said, wiping my finger over the table and showing it, replete with film of dust and cigarette ash, to Barbara.

"I know. You realise you're in a rough place when the windows have bars on both sides. The Scar and Batter, the locals call it."

"Ha," I snorted. "You really know how to show a girl a good time, don't you? What have you got lined up for us later on? A walk home down Crack Alley? A visit to the red light district?"

"No, I thought we'd pick up some rough, take them down the park and let them bugger us rigid."

I sipped on my drink. "Yeah, okay then. As long as I get first choice."

"Naturally. Seniority goes with age, after all."

"Watch it, I'll make sure you get left with Nobby the cross-eyed bricklayer from Birmingham."

"Had him last week."

"Still, even he'd be a cut above your normal pull."

"Walking on two feet, you mean?"

"Yeah, that one you had a fortnight ago..."

“Don’t. The one with just the one giant eyebrow across his whole face...”

“And brow so low it was beneath his nose...”

“Hung like a horse, though.”

“Kissed like one, too, I imagine,”

“Same breath, certainly.”

Barbara was what you might call a sexual adventurer. Monogamy or celibacy were impossible concepts for her. I admired her courage and resilience, and wondered at her stamina. She spent every weekend in dogged pursuit of men, never failing to return home with somebody in tow. That she was five feet six inches, blonde and big busted was probably in her favour, but I think, had she been a fat boiler with greasy hair and no teeth, she could still have pulled. Some women just ooze sexuality, and Barbara, with her lightning wit and easy, relaxed manner, could charm and schmooze her way to anything she wanted.

“What time are this band supposed to be on, then?” I asked, gathering up the glasses and heading towards the bar for a refill.

“Half eight, I think. Have you seen them before?”

“Never heard of them, to be honest.”

“They’re good. I saw them here a few months ago. Couple of girls on fiddles, a bloke with a bouzouki-thingy, a guitarist and a percussionist. They’ll be on in a minute, so I’ll have a double, save you going up again when they’re playing.”

There was no point arguing so I made for the bar, and was just returning to our table when a smattering of applause broke through the din of the canned music, and the lights dimmed. The band tramped on to the small stage at the front of the room, a typically ramshackle bunch of louche kids in ill-fitting clothes, scowling at the floor and avoiding any eye contact with the audience: why do all young bands seem to consider it a badge of honour to have no stage presence whatsoever? As Barbara had said, they comprised three blokes and two girls.

And the one at the back was Simone.

Instantly, my mouth went dry, my ears started ringing and I could feel the blood pulsing in my head. I sat staring, rigid, unable to move, like a woman in shock. It was her, there was no doubt. She looked stunning. She’d had her hair cut shorter, which neatly emphasised her face, drawing one’s attention to it immediately and pulling one to her exquisite nose. She was wearing a skimpy blue tee shirt, revealing a lithe body and shapely bust, not too large; distinctly

on the small side, in fact, no more than 32 or 34, and a B cup, maybe even an A. Her outfit was completed by a pair of black trousers, loose fitting, which showed off her bum to great effect. I wouldn't have thought it possible, but she was more arresting than she had been that first night: she was electric, casting a hypnotic spell over me. I couldn't take my eyes off her.

The world around me shimmered and shifted, grew narrow and darkened at the extremities of my consciousness, a meaningless, peripheral void; across the length of the room, I felt myself become attached to this ravishing beauty through some umbilical cord of the senses, drawn to her, only her, and only we two existed.

They began to play.

A slow introduction, picked attractively on the bouzouki and guitar, counterpointing one another, playing separate, complementary melodies which came together delightfully in harmonic triplets, flitting in and out of the main tune much in the style of Planxty; a steady, languid increase in tempo and volume, the guitar giving itself over to supporting chords, tuned down, probably to DADGAD, allowing more sympathetic support to the Irish melody; and then the first swoosh of fiddle as the third cycle began, accompanied by a gentle, rhythmic ripple of percussion from African-style drums: very pretty, very effective. I sat entranced, staring at my beloved and listening to the ethereal sounds. Still, though, Simone hadn't entered the fray.

And then she did.

And my heart stopped.

I fell in love all over again. As the set segued into a new tune, a reel I didn't recognise but which I suspected was from Shetland, the two fiddles launched themselves in tandem, shrill, exciting, excitable; like twins they bestrode the stage, my Simone right-handed, the other girl left-handed, mirror images of one another, bowing in tandem, drawing an exquisite tune out of their instruments. They worked beautifully together, seamless, relaxed and confident in each other's ability, a genuine understanding clearly existing between them. The vigour of the fiddle, with its edgy, raw sensuality, filled the large room, invigorating the audience, drawing them in to the power of the music.

And then, and then. Words fail me, I'm sorry. As they crossed into the third tune of the set, flicking deftly into a flighty slip jig, my Wonder Woman took centre stage, playing solo lead while the rest of the band provided a weighty support. I couldn't take my eyes off her, and I swear I didn't blink for the duration of the tune, wrapped up as I was in her splendour. She commanded the stage, feet planted firmly and definitely, half a yard apart. Her fiddle was lodged confidently on her shoulder, pointing downwards at an angle of 60° and facing away from her towards the wings. Simone's concentration was fierce, her

gaze firmly on the fretboard, observing her dancing fingers. It was a very pretty tune, and she played it with elegance and understated charm.

Understated, that is, until the second cycle, when it exploded into life. Something seemed to take hold of her, a life force appeared to grip her. The change was extraordinary: music has an awesome power, and occasionally, often unexpectedly, it enters your soul, takes over your entire being, and you have no alternative but to give yourself over to it. Such a change came over Simone at that point; I could see it happen. Her body went rigid and loose at the same time: rigid as any conduit must inevitably be, but fluid, alive, sensitive to the rhythm of the music. She was hunched over her instrument, body bent to its will, head down, eyes no longer watching the progress of her fingers on the fretboard, but sightless, staring, oblivious of everything but the perfection emanating from her fiddle. Her breasts, negligible though they were, swayed mesmerically. I was transfixed, by both the music and the musician: the two were inseparable: it was as though the tune were an aural manifestation of the woman. The fiddle soared, hitting achingly perfect high notes, then swooped, plucking from lower octaves, a living, searing, soaring, musical journey; all the while Simone, lost to the world, trapped in her music, swayed and rocked, her magnificent, beautiful body a graphic representation of the perfection she was creating with her hands and her fiddle.

And just as she was lost in the beauty of her music, so was I in the beauty of the musician.

As the tune ended I felt an ache in my heart, a loss, a little death. Music is the most imperfect, impermanent art. A beautiful painting can be observed for hours; a perfect line of literature can be studied, re-read, admired for ever; but music, that transient artform, is here, then gone, instantly, a bird on the wing, momentary perfection, a fleeting, glancing rendezvous with absolute beauty. I sighed and treasured the memory of that wonderful moment.

And I became aware of Barbara.

“Welcome back to Planet Earth,” she said, her voice ripe with amusement. “So which one has got you all hot and bothered? Is it the guitarist or the drummer boy? I rather fancy the drummer boy, actually, so hands off, he’s coming home with me tonight.”

I had no answer for her. At that moment I couldn’t possibly have put my thoughts into words; even now, a day later, I am having difficulty explaining the power of the emotion which was surging through me; even now, I don’t think I understand it fully myself. Fortunately, I was spared having to frame a response by a mercifully brief introduction to the next set, as the music struck up once more.

The tune, I noticed was “Music in the glen”, a tune the Bothy Band had made famous a number of years ago, although this was a very different

interpretation, focussing on the fiddles as main instrument. I smiled as they segued into the next tune: “The humours of Scariff” had been the next tune in that original Bothy Band set, which presumably meant they were going to finish with “The Otter’s Holt”, one of my favourite Irish tunes of all time.

As “The Humours of Scariff” floated round for the third time, played out delicately on fiddle and bouzouki, Simone laid down her fiddle and headed towards the back of the stage. She re-emerged some second later, holding a flute. My God, was there no end to her talent? The other fiddler launched into the opening section of “The Otter’s Holt” and went through the repetition. And then the interpretation of the whole tune changed. As the second section began, ringing out with three dramatic D chords from the guitar and bouzouki, in the stead of the lead fiddle, Simone launched herself on the tune with her flute, breathy and daring, flighty and fresh. It was startling. The tune came to life, resuscitated through her flute’s breath, dancing, flying, soaring. She charged through the second repetition, and then the third, and by now my breath was shallow, as I scarcely dared to breathe for fear of missing some of my precious love’s music. My favourite tune, and I can honestly say I have never heard a more outstanding version: not simply because I was besotted with her, but truly and honestly, it was a rendition which brought that delightful tune to life, revealed the charm of its simple, insistent melody, charged it with a haunting, eternal grace.

By now I was inhabiting a different world. Human time was beyond my comprehension, and so, it seemed, two minutes later we had reached the interval. In that two minutes, I know, we heard probably half a dozen sets of tunes, but my memory of them is almost non-existent: by now I was so disorientated I would have had difficulty telling my name. So overloaded were my senses that the interval was a distinct relief.

But then, I realised, I would have to deal with Barbara.

“I’ll get the drinks in,” I said, pre-empting any enquiries from her, and rushed to the bar. There was a melée, as there always is during intervals, and people were jostling me from all around. I didn’t mind. I was so elated by the evening I was oblivious of all the things which would normally have had me irritated enough to eat my slipper. Consequently, I was beneficence personified when someone dug deeply into my ribs with their elbows, almost making contact, so it seemed, with my liver and spleen. I turned round, forcing a smile on my face, prepared to accept the puny apology.

And it was her.

It was my Simone. My beautiful, wonderful, talented Simone. The woman who could make her fiddle sing, could cause her flute to cry, who lived her music, made it alive for her audience; and above all, the woman who was perfect, the woman who had obsessed me, stolen my waken moments, colonised my dreams, insinuated herself into my mind since the moment I first saw her.

It was her. And I didn't know what to say. After all, what do you say to the woman who has stolen your heart?

"Hello," I said. Sorry, it's feeble, I know.

She looked at me quizzically. "Hi," she said. "Sorry, did I poke you just then?"

Oh my love, my love, my perfect, beautiful young love.

"Oh, not at all," I replied. "I loved that set. You are so striking, so exceptional..."

I was trying to tell her how I thought, but as I was speaking I was aware of a curious look crossing her face. Suddenly, she became disengaged from me, distant, different, difficult.

"Oh yeah?" she responded, hostility dripping from every inch of her body. "Really striking, really exceptional." Her tone was so dismissive, so defensive, so hostile. "I expect you're wondering why I needed the bow for the fiddle. Why not just use the nose, eh?"

I had not the slightest comprehension of what she was talking about, but she was clearly upset. I tried to grab her arm, to talk further with her, but she angrily thrust me aside and stormed away from the bar.

I have no conception of what I did wrong.

None whatsoever. But it is eating me alive. I can't sleep. I can't think of anything but that conversation. I keep replaying it in my mind. I keep trying to rewrite it, rephrase, correct myself, make it better. But I can't. Because I simply don't understand where I went wrong.

I have no idea what she meant. "Why not just use the nose?" I simply don't understand.

SIMONE'S DIARY, MAY 28TH

Hiya. Just got in after the concert. Well, I put that damned woman in her place. While I was trying to get a drink at the interval this woman started speaking to me, gushing about "how striking, how exceptional" we were. I thought it was a bit over the top, like a bit suspicious, and then I realised I recognised her. It was a few seconds before I figured out who it was: it was that woman from The Vaults, a couple of weeks ago, who kept staring and staring at me. The rudest woman I've ever seen. All but got a metre stick out and started measuring the nose. Presumably she was taking the piss – "striking", "exceptional", my arse. So I stared at her and said:

"I expect you're wondering why I needed the bow for the fiddle. Why not just use the nose, eh?" That shut her up. Bitch. I turned away and left her there. I was tempted to stay actually, to see the look on her face, but decided discretion was the better part of valour. Didn't see her again after that. Wonder why... *G* Told the others about it later and caused a good laugh. Don has started calling me Fiddlenose. Not strictly accurate, of course, it should be Bownose, but that doesn't sound quite right somehow... *L*

The concert went okay. The first couple of sets were a bit ropey, truth to tell. Marie and me, in particular: the Fiddle Twins weren't quite together. Not at all bad, though, and we got a pretty good reception. Good as you ever get in the Scar and Batter, anyway. Why do we play there? One day our agent will come. Sweep us off to stardom... As if. But during "The Otter's Holt" I thought I got it just right. Could feel the change coming over me, felt myself relaxing. Everything else went out of the window, it was just me and the fiddle. Life, problems, etc just disappeared. I love it when that happens. It's like you go onto another plane, the music takes you over. Nothing matters, nothing else exists really. It doesn't happen very often, and that was the first time in a long time. Probably since... well, probably. Anyway, it was good. After that, the set went pretty well.

I chickened out of singing tonight, though. I was going to do "Withered and died" but didn't feel up to it. Next time, though, I promise. My confidence is growing all the time. Still can't face the crowd when we first come on stage though. That bit terrifies me, really terrifies me. It's not until I start playing that I calm down. Then you kind of hit automatic pilot, and I start to enjoy myself. I'm not what you'd call a natural performer, though. *G* Just hope my terror doesn't show.

So anyway, time for a bath and a quick read. Nothing heavy. Had a few lagers after the set tonight, and my eyes are a bit wonky. Hope I can read this in the morning. Hope it makes sense too... *L*. Night night.

A THIRD PERSON INTERLUDE; AND FINALLY, A MEETING

The Gods, the Fates, those stern Masters of our destinies, circle round us unnoticed, cavaliers who tamper with we mortals' prospects, capricious, flighty, disregarding of everything except their own transient amusement. Time on time after time they thrust together those who should never be united, heaping on them woes and misery; while seeking to part kindred spirits, separating them, ensuring the symbiotic friendships which could have led to eternal happiness can never thrive; and occasionally, just occasionally, they hurl a heap of mismatched elements into their infernal pot, stir, and wait to see what emerges. The results, generally unpredictable, mostly unsavoury, frequently combustible, are nonetheless intriguing. What voyeurs we are; what delight we take in the tribulations of others; how we glory in their melancholy attempts at happiness. We write our fictions and condemn others to our sport; we play God with impunity.

What kind of story can we write about Margaret and Simone? We can choose whatever we want; we can force them to bow to our will, to act out our fantasy, to play the roles we create for them. Do we want a happy ending, or do we prefer to have our hankies ready? Humour, action, description, characterisation, sex? All of the above, or none? You choose, we choose, only Margaret and Simone, poor souls, have no choice. Life's a bitch, especially when you're a character in a fiction.

So here's the deal. You haven't heard from me before. This has been a story blessedly free of that cocky, know-all, been-there-done-that omniscient narrator. And all the better for that, I hear you say. So I'll keep out as much as possible. Leave it to the women to tell their own story, let them stumble unaided from crisis to crisis, allow them to ascend to the heights of happiness without any intervention from me. Allow them the luxury of fulfilling their own destiny.

So you'll hear nothing from me about what they think, or plan, or hope, or love, or despise. No emotion of theirs will be trammelled by being filtered through me. No action, however implausible, will be explicated by me. I will restrict myself to the *dramatis personae minimae*, the supernumeraries, the props we place around our protagonists. The rest is up to Margaret and Simone. And you. So on we go, onward, onward.



The Jenny Dangs stood on stage, affecting exaggerated bows and milking the applause from the sparse but enthusiastic crowd. Don O'Neill hugged his Peter Barton guitar with his left hand, his right raised aloft like Ché Guevara; Marie McColville, her fiddle under her arm, blew kisses and smiled broadly; Jim Thompson, exposed and vulnerable at the front of the stage, without the shield of his percussion kit, grinned sheepishly; Pádraig

Roison, laconic and diffident, struggled to hide his delight beneath the calculatedly casual wave of his right arm; and Simone Clements, standing at the far right, relieved, elated and pumped up with adrenalin, abandoned all attempts at looking sophisticated and experienced, opting instead for an expansive and delighted beam.

The gig had gone exceptionally well.

“Wow!” yelled Don, pumping his fist as they finally, reluctantly, pulled themselves offstage and into the calm of their dressing room, “that was awesome!”

“Whoo,” screamed Jim, incapable, in his excitement, of a rational reply.

“Folks,” added Marie, “that was the best we’ve ever done. Ever! Even in rehearsals. Everything was just perfect. And love,” she continued, dragging an arm over Simone’s shoulder and pulling her into a hug, “you were outstanding. Some of those notes you hit brought me out in goosebumps. I don’t know how you do it. And your sustain... Incredible, girl, incredible.”

Simone grinned broadly. “I just took my lead from you lot.”

“Oh, modesty! We all know Fiddlenose is our star performer.” Don leaned over and hugged Simone, kissing her gently on the brow. “Isn’t that right Patrick?”

The others glanced quickly at Pádraig. Don knew he hated being called Patrick, and for that reason delighted in saying it at every opportunity. Pádraig, for all his studiedly laid-back air, fell for Don’s bait every time, and the rest of the band waited to see what his reaction would be tonight. This time, though, the good humour of the evening refused to be punctured, and Pádraig waved him off with a rueful grin.

“We need a drink!” he said, heading for the bar in the basement of the Arts Centre, leaping down the stairs two steps at a time.

“I’ll drink to that.”

“Almost immediately.”

“And for a fearsomely long time.”

The band trooped downstairs. None of them was over twenty, and they had known each other for years. They were as much a family as a band, close-knit and protective, but subject, like all families, to stresses and tensions. They gathered round a small, oblong table in the corner of the bar, this set of soul brothers and sisters, and Pádraig swept over with a trayful of drinks.

“Cheers!” he yelled, gulping down half of his pint in one. Pádraig Roison was Irish by birth, but had lived in England since he was a baby. This was a source of constant irritation to him, since it denied him the one thing he craved: an authentic Irish accent to go with his sexy Irish name. For a while, a couple of years before, he had affected a Dublin brogue, but was mercilessly ridiculed by the rest of the band and gave it up after

a month. His ongoing attempts to mimic the stereotypical, easy-going approach of the Irish were indulged by the rest of the band with good humour; it was only when, as occasionally happened, his forced demeanour spilled over into arrogance that the others felt the need to bring him back to reality.

Don proposed a toast. "To The Jenny Dangs, best band in the world; well the East Midlands of England anyway."

"The Jenny Dangs, best band in the world; well the East Midlands of England anyway," chanted the other four, glasses raised in salute. Don was the eldest - by three days - of the band, and its tacitly accepted leader. He had a precocious musical talent, but lack of ambition had frittered away much of his early promise. As a child he was a gifted violinist and cellist, working his way through the Grade examinations sufficiently easily to offer hope of a professional career in the classical field; but puberty, testosterone, girls and teenage angst intervened, and for a couple of years in his mid-teens he spiralled into a nihilistic, vacant world of glue and lager. Redemption came, in the guise of Simone, one soggy Christmas, when she found him, incapable, senseless and incontinent, in an alley near the street where they both lived. Despite the mismatch in their size she half-dragged, half-carried him to her house, cleaned him up in the bathroom and without her family knowing, let him sleep off his excesses in her bed. She phoned his mother and told her he was stopping over at hers with the rest of the band, and made elaborate attempts to cover up the episode; neither her family, nor Don's, nor any of their friends ever knew that it had happened.

The following day, long, solid and dismal as only December days can be, was a journey of the soul for Don. Without preaching or judging, Simone forced him to face up to himself; with candour and youthful honesty, she presented two paths down which his life could progress. The decision was Don's and she made no attempt to influence him; implicit in her words, though, Don realised, was the fact that of the two paths presented to him, only one would be trodden by Simone herself.

It wasn't easy; it was no overnight conversion, no Damascene moment, but gradually, over the following three or four months, Don realised how far he had drifted from his friends, how insidiously the destructive process of growing up had overtaken his senses, affected his judgement, turned him into something he wasn't. He never returned to the violin, but instead took up the guitar, instantly discovering an easy mastery of it, and with it an emotional centre for his youthful mind.

And though he never mentioned it, he harboured a deep-seated love for Simone. Simone, if she was aware of it, never alluded to it, and Don's love grew over the years, like a single snowdrop on a bare mountainside, hopeful, transforming, yielding little, but developing, blossoming, blooming. From full-on lust in the early years, it grew into a romantic love, spilled over into idolisation, matured and ripened into the most intense admiration and now sat full-square in his heart, like a kernel, an ever present awareness of perfection and beauty which alone was sufficient to nourish his spirit. Almost.

If Don was the leader, the focus of the band, then Simone was its soul. They each saw in her a delight in living, a free-spirited, whole-hearted lust for life; hers was the first voice, the loudest, the firmest, the gentlest, most assured and most understanding; hers

was the full-throated laugh, the zestful notions, the gumption to get on and do. Simone breathed life into everything. She was vivacious, warm and friendly, easy with her time and generous with her emotions. Such was her importance to the others that when she went to university each of them fretted that they would lose touch, that she would drift away from them, break up their childhood fraternity. But, a year on, Simone had stayed loyal to her friends and remained the spiritual centre of the group.

She drank from her pint of lager and, fixing Jim with an amused stare, began to tease him. "So Jim, the Bulgarian tune, what time is it in again?" One of the band's speciality numbers was a Bulgarian dance tune in 9/16 time. Jim was an excellent percussionist, with a solemn, intense love of music, but this tune, alone, seemed to fox him. Generally at least once in each rendition he would lose his way momentarily and blushing have to halt and re-enter the ferment and fury of the tune at the next available opportunity. And so he had this evening, too. Mostly, the band could carry it off as an intentional shift, and nobody minded, but it was too tempting to tease the serious Jim with it.

He started to formulate a reply, but Simone cut him off with a wave. Standing, she delved into her rear pocket and pulled out a note. "My round," she called and headed for the bar.

As she was waiting to be served, arms rested on the damp wooden counter, she felt a tap on the shoulder, and turned round.

"Excuse me, I'm sorry to interrupt, but do you think we might have a word?"

Simone looked up and saw the peculiar woman who had so annoyed her on two previous occasions. "You again?" she said, stroking her empty glass and biting her lip.

"Yes, me again. I'm really sorry, I think I may have upset you in some way, and if I have I am truly, genuinely sorry. I don't understand what it is I've done, but if I have offended you in any way then I sincerely apologise."

Simone didn't know what to say. The woman seemed genuine. In the instant before she replied her brain calculated and recalculated and recalculated a thousand times. Had she made a mistake? Had she misinterpreted the woman's motives? Had she misunderstood, misread the signals? Or was she toying with her again? And why was she suddenly in her life, there at every turn? What was her game?

"Well, okay," she replied, "I accept your apology."

A look of what could only be described as intense relief waved over the older woman's face, and Simone was taken aback by the naked honesty of the unbidden gesture.

"I'm curious, though. Just one thing. That first time you saw me, you know when I'm talking about, why did you stare at me all night? Don't you know how rude that was?"

"I... well, I... I'm sorry, I didn't realise you had noticed. I had no intention of being rude. Why? Well, it's rather embarrassing really, but I'll tell you." She took a breath. "I couldn't

take my eyes off you because I thought you were the most beautiful thing I've ever seen."

There was a long silence. Simone looked at the other woman incredulously. The barman intervened, sparing her the need to reply just yet, and Simone placed her order. She continued to stare sightlessly in front of her for some moments.

"Well," she said, finally, "I've heard some rubbish in my time, but that takes some beating. What *is* your game?"

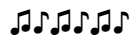
"I mean it. You seem to doubt me, but it's true. I don't mean any offence; quite the opposite."

Simone fixed her with a penetrating stare. She bit her lip again, seemingly cogitating, analysing, determining a course of action. "Okay," she said, "if you think I'm so beautiful, you can pay for these drinks and come and join us over there. And get yourself one..." With that, she turned on her heel and made her way back to her friends.

Margaret Bellamy smiled and ordered a large, dry white wine. Gathering up the tray of drinks, she headed towards The Jenny Dangs.

THE MEETING: OUR NARRATOR'S VERSION

A key moment; a defining point in the relationship, a mini-climax in our narrative. The first genuine meeting, the first conversation, the forming of first impressions. Our two women together: how will it go? How will they respond? How will they react? Will they bond? (I ask a lot of questions, don't I? Unusual for an omniscient narrator, but then again in this story I'm not omniscient am I? I'm as much in the dark as you, dear reader, so let us continue. I'm agog. What will happen next?)



Margaret weaved her way round the assorted revellers standing by the bar, tray held unsteadily in her outstretched hands, and headed for the table where the Jenny Dangs were seated. Curiously, they looked up to see who was approaching.

Simone, on returning to their table drinkless, had enigmatically told the curious, not to mention thirsty troupe that an admirer had insisted on paying for the drinks and would be fetching them over imminently; but despite their queries, she refused to divulge the person's identity. From their seats, because of the throng, they couldn't see the bar, and they waited to see who would emerge. Naturally expecting the admirer to be male and in his early twenties, the band were nonplussed when a thirty-plus year old woman hove into view and settled at their table, dispensing drinks.

"Hi," Margaret said, awkwardly.

"Hello again," said Simone, reaching for her lager, "guys, this is... sorry, I don't think I caught your name."

"Margaret,"

"Yes, Margaret. Margaret thinks I'm the most beautiful thing she's ever seen. Thing, note, not person. More beautiful than The Three Graces, Margaret? More beautiful than the Sistine Chapel ceiling? More beautiful than Shakespeare's poetry?"

"Good god," Margaret replied, "you're quick to take offence aren't you? I've only spoken to you twice and I've apparently managed to insult you both times."

Realisation dawned on Don. "Is this the Fiddlenose woman?" he cried. Pdraig raised his glass in mock salute and Marie glanced defensively at the stranger, appraising her

in the light of this knowledge. Jim sat silently, unsure of the atmosphere, or how this meeting was turning out.

Simone laughed, and the atmosphere lightened immediately. “Yeah, fair play, you’ve got a point there. I won’t give you a hard time. Let’s start afresh. My name’s Simone, this is Don, and Jim, and Pdraig, and this is my fiddle sister, Marie.” As she introduced each of the Jenny Dangs they gave Margaret their own salutation: a brief nod from Pdraig, a bellowed “hi” from Jim, a non-committal raised eyebrow from Don and a polite, distanced “hello” from Marie. Margaret returned each greeting with a forced smile, her unease evident from her stiff disposition and excessive formality.

“So,” continued Simone, “did you see tonight’s gig as well?”

“Yes I did. I thought it was much better than the last one.” Margaret stopped in her tracks, a look of horror flicking across her face. “Not that I’m saying the last one was bad, quite the opposite, it was...”

“It’s okay,” laughed Simone, and the others followed suit; even Marie – shy, uncertain Marie – joined in the laughter. “No offence taken. This time.” Margaret smiled, her shoulders relaxed and she sipped her drink. “We thought it was a really good set as well,” Simone continued. “Didn’t we, guys?”

“Best we’ve ever done,” concurred Jim.

“Best audience we’ve ever had. Best reaction.”

“Spot on,”

“Yes,” said Margaret. “The set went down really well.”

“And why d’you think that was, Margaret?” asked Don pointedly. He mistrusted this woman. What was she doing? Simone was the “most beautiful thing in the world.” What kind of thing was that to say to a complete stranger?

“Well,” said Margaret, not recognising the suspicious undertone, “what I loved the first time I heard you was the unity of the playing. You were sharp together. And that was there tonight as well, but as well as that there was a freshness, an uninhibitedness about it. It didn’t sound rehearsed. It had the *joie de vivre* of an unrehearsed jam and the structured polish of a rehearsed set. Difficult combination to pull off, but you did it.

“And,” she continued, “I thought that musically, each of you was on excellent form. The rhythm guitar was beautifully restrained, but very powerful. Again a hard combination. The other night there were a few flashy bits, a few flatted fifths which don’t work for me, some jazzy minor chords, and such. There were fewer of those tonight. Can’t think of any, actually. And you mostly use dropped D tuning: that makes your playing much more sympathetic to the music. The percussion was excellent too. It was miked up too loud the other night, which made it intrusive. And a lot of reverb at times. The sound was spot on tonight. It was for everyone, actually, which helped too. And Marie was outstanding. You’ve got such a raunchy, driving style,” Margaret addressed the young

woman, "which works really well in the ensemble pieces. A wonderful, thrilling melody line being driven on by the beefy rhythms."

Margaret paused for breath, and realised that the band were silent, staring at her. Embarrassed, she pressed on.

"And you played a beautiful tune in E minor tonight you didn't play the other night. Haven't heard it before, but it sounded traditional. It was lovely. That was where you're guitar really shone, Don. It would have been easy to go over the top with jazz funk rhythms for that, which would have ruined it. You kept it wonderfully simple, a basic 3/4, no embellishments, with dropped D tuning. It added power to the tune without detracting from the melody."

Don was surprised. He had asked the question with the intention of tripping the woman up, showing her to be shallow and superficial; he hadn't expected her to give much in the way of a coherent answer. That she had given a cogent reply, and that most of what she said was accurate, caught him off-balance.

"You could be a reviewer," he replied drily.

"Wish she was," laughed Marie. "We could use reviews like that." The mood was beginning to relax, the suspicion that most of the band initially felt dissipating into a mild curiosity. First Don and then Padraig went to the toilets, and as they returned Margaret was edged up the bench so that she was now seated in the middle of the band, next to Simone. She could smell the younger woman's perfume, Diorella.

"And Padraig," Margaret continued, being careful to pronounce his name correctly, "you have a remarkable style. The way you combined that percussive technique with the delicate picking of the melody in the E minor tune was extraordinary. It was like two different people, on two different instruments. I swear if I'd heard it on a record and not seen it with my own eyes I would have said it was done by two different people."

"That's our Padraig. No one body could contain an ego that size," Don interjected. Even Padraig was a touch embarrassed by this effulgent praise, however, and in his haste to change the subject he overlooked Don's barb.

"You haven't mentioned Simone in your summing up," he pointed out.

"Oh Christ, I'm too scared to do that. God knows how she'll take it."

Everyone laughed.

"Nice one," roared Jim.

"Yeah, one false move and you'll be wearing that lager."

"Brownie's honour," Simone laughed, "I won't take offence. Not unless it really is offensive..."

“Well,” Margaret paused, “I was disappointed you didn’t play The Otter’s Holt tonight.”

“Told you,” shouted Jim triumphantly. “I said we should have played it.”

“I heard it the other week,” continued Margaret, “and thought it was the most stunning version of it I’ve ever heard. It’s always been one of my favourite tunes: I used to play it myself at one time. But your version was out of this world. The tune has a wonderful quality. I can’t quite explain it: hope, I think, it just exudes a sense of hope, a feeling that all is well, or all is nearly well, or all could soon be well. It’s on the edge of happiness, a promise, a premonition of future joy.”

“Wow, philosophy,” said Jim.

Simone stared at Margaret, an enigmatic look on her face. Don, who knew her better than anyone, couldn’t read it, couldn’t fathom what she was thinking. And Don, too, was perplexed. What was this? Was this some elaborate come-on?

“You seemed to disappear into yourself when you played it. I guess the concentration was so fierce you just shut out everything around you, went into a cocoon, just you and the tune.”

“Yeah,” said Simone, “something like that. That was the first time we’d played it live. I wasn’t entirely happy with it; we’re still working on it, which is why we didn’t do it tonight. Did you say that you used to play yourself? What, in a band?”

“No, nothing as formal as that. I used to play in a pub session every week at the Three Tuns. Irish stuff. There were about eight of us regulars, and some who turned up now and again. We weren’t much good really, but it was good fun. Most of the pub locals used to hate it when we turned up: too much bloody noise, disturbed their doms, but the landlord encouraged us because we drank a lot.”

“What do you play?” asked Don.

“Guitar, like you. I’ve got a tenor banjo as well, but I could never get the hang of it, somehow. And I did a bit of singing, too, at one time.”

“Cool,” said Simone. “You’ll have to give us a tune later on.”

“Not a chance,” laughed Margaret. “Haven’t played for about three years now.”

“Give us a song then. Bet you still sing. In the car? In the bath?”

“In the bath, yeah. Great acoustics. Appreciative audience too.” She paused, aware that this could be misconstrued. “Myself, I mean.”

“Of course. So you can give us a song later, then. That’s agreed.”

“Ha! I’ll need a few more drinks before I do that.”

“Excellent idea,” chimed in Pdraig, rattling his empty glass on the formica covered table. “Whose round?”

“I’ll get them,” said Margaret. “To show my appreciation for the gig tonight.”

Margaret squeezed out of her seat, gathered the empty glasses on the tray and headed through the by now thinning crowd to the bar. The Jenny Dangs looked at one another. Pdraig gave an expressive shrug of his shoulders, at which the others burst into spontaneous laughter.

“She seems alright, this admirer of yours,” said Jim.

“Good looking, too,” teased Pdraig. Don remained silent, picking restlessly at a frayed thread on his Doctor Marten boot. Marie, too, looked pensive

“Yeah,” said Simone. “And at least we’re getting some drinks out of it. Play our cards right and we could be on freebies all night. Hey-up, here she comes back.”

By the time they finished the next round of drinks it had gone closing time, and the Arts Centre bar was empty apart from the Jenny Dangs, Margaret and the bar staff.

“What d’you reckon?” said Pdraig.

“Dunno. Worth a try?” Don replied, looking at the bar.

“Go for it.”

Don nodded and approached the bar. After a brief discussion with Greg, the barman, he turned and nodded at the group, and dug into his pocket for his wallet, while Greg began to pour drinks. “Lock-in!” he exclaimed a few moments later, setting the drinks on the table. Lock-ins were known to be reasonably regular occurrences at the Arts Centre. Deep in the bowels of the building, it had no external windows through which tell-tale lights could be seen and, in any case, the Police cast a blind eye to it, knowing that whatever late night drinking went on was regulated and never got out of control. Greg the barman appreciated his music, and since he rarely got to hear the gigs upstairs, was happy to let bands play on into the night in impromptu jam sessions in his cellar bar, at which he would invariably get out his own, battered twelve-string guitar.

Pdraig and Jim disappeared upstairs, and returned a couple of minutes later carrying an assortment of instruments; contentedly, the band settled down to play.

“Now then,” said Simone, wiping her fiddle neck with a cloth and easing her bow from the case, “what was it you were disappointed not to hear tonight? “The Otter’s Holt” set, wasn’t it? Let’s go, then, one, two, three, four...”

The fiddle duo scraped the opening bars of “Music in the glen”, the first tune in “The Otter’s Holt” set, and immediately it was obvious that the band were relaxed and comfortable. For all that Simone had said she wasn’t satisfied the arrangement was finished, it was an enchanting piece, and neither Margaret nor Greg could imagine how

it might be improved. Freed of the nerves of performing, and buoyed by the good spirits and friendly banter, the Jenny Dangs flung themselves into the music with abandon, quickly becoming oblivious of everything but their instruments and their music.

Tune after tune flew by, sometimes played by the whole band, sometimes by one of the main instrumentalists with only Don adding backing, and on a couple of occasions solo pieces by Padraig and Marie; and in between each tune, just as important as the music itself, was the talk, the jocular, animated, convivial chat of friends comfortable with each other and with the moment.

Sessions are timeless; they take on an existence of their own, outside the normal laws of physics. What seems like five minutes in reality takes an hour; the funniest jokes, the wittiest remarks, the tartest replies float into the ether and disappear, too perfect to be trapped by time; one tune melts into another, and then another, and then another, a beautiful, fluid, organic process, the distillation – simply – of joy, the creation of happiness. The session is a moment. A moment which lasts all night.

Greg, as expected, fetched his twelve string guitar and added some powerful and mostly inappropriate backing to a few of the tunes. Nobody minded: the session is no place for prima donnas, and even Padraig, the most likely to become precious if he thought his music was being compromised, relaxed and let the music flow around and through him.

After his fourth whisky, Greg even unleashed his party piece, a seldom heard but surprisingly competent rendition of Leo Kottke's classic "Side One Suite" from "Guitar Music". He started nervously, because despite his banter and jocular dismissiveness of his musical accomplishments, he practiced for a couple of hours every day, and this ten minute piece was his touchstone, the mastery of which he had aspired to since the day, fifteen years before, when he first heard it: this was his Everest. His intensity shone through, and the band recognised what most didn't, appreciated his devotion to his music and rewarded him at its conclusion by a sustained ovation, standing on the tables and bar counter, whooping and stamping their feet in perfect 4/4 time. Greg, embarrassed beyond words, but prouder than he had been for many years, could only quell their enthusiasm by pouring another round.

And so the chaotic, frenzied, wonderful and personal session spun round. Each of the Jenny Dangs was in their element, alive, buzzing, living through their music, senses at fever pitch. Margaret, seated amongst them, must have thought she had gone to heaven. And then, inevitably, things swung towards her.

"Margaret, your turn," shouted Jim.

"Yes!" concurred Padraig. "Give her the guitar, Don."

Margaret looked aghast, a flicker of terror crossing her face. Even Jim, not the most perceptive of souls, recognised it.

"Don't worry," he said. "Tell me what it is and I'll accompany you. No sweat."

Margaret still looked uncomfortable, and tried to deflect the conversation by requesting they play the E minor tune. Simone touched her on the arm lightly and leaned towards her. Margaret sat back and their heads nearly touched.

“Relax. It’s Christ knows what time in the morning, we’ve been drinking for hours, everyone’s on a high. Go with it. No-one’s judging anyone here. It’s just the music. The music’s all that matters.”

Margaret looked long and hard into Simone’s eyes, and Simone returned the stare, implacable, calm, resolute.

“Okay,” she said.

“Yo!” yelled Jim. “Give her that guitar, man.”

“No, I don’t want a guitar. I’m going to sing a song. I’ll do it unaccompanied, but if you want to help me, Don, it’s in D.”

The group was silent now, attentive, supportive. Greg moved aside to give Margaret more room. Her hands clasped on her lap, Margaret looked downwards, focusing on the ashtray, for want of anything better to look at, and prepared herself.

She began to sing.

*“I wonder what is keeping my true love this night
I wonder what is keeping him out of my sight
I wonder if he knows of the pain I endure
And stays from me this night I’m not sure.”*

She began tentatively, her voice reedy and shrill, slightly sharp on the high notes. Despite what she had said earlier, Margaret had never sung in public before. Gradually, as the song progressed, she relaxed and grew into it. It wasn’t a perfect rendition: she had sung it far better thousands of times in the privacy of her own bath, but she acquitted herself well.

*“The spring grass grows the greenest and spring water runs clear
I’m sorry and tormented for the love of my dear
Your love it lies so lightly as the dew on the thorn
That’s there in the evening and away with the dawn.”*

“Sorry and tormented” was Margaret’s favourite quote, and as she sang the words she freed herself, unwittingly, from all her inhibitions and gave full rein to her expressive voice. She soared, she explored, her voice plumbing the depths of despair as she sang of unconditional love spurned. Don, who had begun by giving a fairly raucous backing for Margaret, realising her unease, gradually reined himself in as the song progressed, an ironic reversal of the usual role of the rhythm guitar.

“Away with the dawn,” repeated Margaret, and slowly, achingly trilled the song to its conclusion. Don, who knew it, concluded with a resonant picking of the final few notes

and they fell silent. Margaret, the song over, her creative muse departed, was revisited by all her old anxieties, and could scarcely bring herself to look up.

The cheers, whoops and stamps told her what she wanted to hear. It had gone down well. Margaret looked up at the excited, drunken, merry faces of her new-found friends, her heart thumping in her chest, eyes seeing but not really taking it in. There was no denying it, this was no polite applause. Margaret had been accepted.

“Su-u-u-perb,” shouted Jim.

“Lovely stuff,” said Greg.

“You have an amazing voice, you really do,” said Marie.

“Nice one, great song,” said Pdraig.

“Cool, really nice. I enjoyed that,” said Don, nodding his head

Margaret looked from face to face, happier than she could remember for a long time. Tonight had seemed a long journey, a difficult process, but it had borne fruit.

“That was gorgeous,” said Simone. “You’ve a lovely voice. You should use it more.” She leaned forward and pecked Margaret lightly on the cheek.

THE MEETING: MARGARET'S VERSION

Where do I begin? How do you write of triumph and joy? How do you relate the soaring of the spirit, describe the process of fulfilment, convey the thrill of attaining Elysium? You'll have to pardon my fruity language, but I am in such an excited state I can hardly contain myself.

I now know Simone Clements. I now know the woman I love. I now know my Goddess...

And to think I thought it was all heading for disaster.

She is astonishing. So calm, so assured. Everything I had thought about her, observing from afar, is true. She dominates any scene merely through her presence. "Well, if you think I'm so beautiful, you can pay for these drinks and come and join us," she said to me, turned on her heels and walked away. No debate, no hesitation, just the complete assurance that I would do it. And of course I did. How could I not? A goddess...

She's not an easy person. She knows her mind, and doesn't suffer fools gladly. That much was obvious straight away, when she chastised me for calling her a "thing". I was pardoned, but the implication was clear: don't mess with Simone. What a goddess...

I got so flustered I put my foot in it virtually every time I spoke. I practically accused the band of being rubbish the first time I heard them, which of course is the opposite of the truth. I followed that by wittering about how well they played, how I loved their style, how they sounded unrehearsed. My God, talk about damning with faint praise... They looked at me as though I were a madwoman.

Towards the end I began to relax and enjoy myself. I got pretty drunk, I have to say, which probably helped. I had paced myself until closing time, but we ended up in a massive lock-in, and I didn't get home till four o'clock. I'm not used to alcohol, really, and I had a week's quota last night. The result isn't pretty, and if it wasn't for the excitement of having met my Goddess I expect I would be laid up in bed, groaning, at this very moment.

The others loosened up as well, especially Marie, who I thought took against me at first. She and Don seemed particularly suspicious of me; in Don's case I suspect it is because he has a thing for Simone himself. All of the band seem to worship her (and who wouldn't?) but Don, in particular, seemed to hang on to every utterance.

And then they started a session. It was wonderful, simply out of this world. Being close at hand, watching the spontaneous joy of talented people making music was truly delightful. They are all such instinctive players, natural, without artifice. They play tunes, and they play them wonderfully well, letting the tunes express themselves, not imposing their pre- and misconceptions on them, freeing them from the usual straitjacket of over-fussy orchestration. It felt like I was taking part in a centuries old ritual, the passing on of music, participating in a rite of culture. It was a special, special event.

Which I ruined.

Why did I have to sing? I thought that they had genuinely enjoyed it, but on reflection I can see they were humouring me, congratulating me on the act of singing, rather than for the singing itself. I feel terribly embarrassed when I think about it: I'm blushing as I write this. I wish I hadn't done it, wish I had left the music-making to the experts. But too late now, and I won't be disheartened. The evening started and finished badly, but in between was wonderful. And I now know my Goddess. Despite my throbbing hangover, I am the happiest woman alive.

THE MEETING: SIMONE'S VERSION

SIMONE'S DIARY, JUNE 14TH

God, what a night. Christ, what a hangover. I feel as if my insides have been hoovered out and replaced with crêpe paper. Every time I move my whole body seems to rustle, which makes my head throb. Never again.

What a night. Possibly the strangest night I've ever known. I can't think where to begin.

She was there. Fiddlenose, as Don calls her, though her name is Margaret. She came up to me after the gig, when I was at the bar. (I'll have to tell you about the gig later, my brain can't focus on that far back right now.) I was about to have another go when she apologised. She gave such a genuine sounding apology I couldn't help but accept it. I still couldn't figure out (and still can't) what her game was, though, so I asked her why she had continually stared at me that time in the pub.

"Because you're the most beautiful thing in the world."

What the hell does that mean???. I had absolutely no idea how to respond, I was totally gobsmacked. I muttered something about her buying the drinks and joining us and left as quickly as I could, to give myself time to get composed, figure out how I was going to deal with this. I didn't really expect her to do it, but she did.

I was so nervous I started laying into her big time. Gave her a hard time, which I felt sorry about afterwards. I couldn't make up my mind about her. Don didn't take to her, I don't think, and Marie was even quieter than usual. Padraig was pleased to have someone new to show off to, particularly when she praised his playing, and Jim, well Jim was Jim, I guess...
G

So is she trying to make a fool of me? What is she up to? Don asked her what she thought of the gig, and she gave a really impressive summary of it. Spot on. She knows what she's talking about. Even Don was impressed, bless him. I know what he was trying to do: trying to trip her up, expose her as a music fraud, but she put him in his place pretty smartish. He likes to think he knows more about music than anyone else, and doesn't like it when he meets his match.

She said something really interesting at one point, when she was talking about my playing: "You sort of disappear into yourself, into a kind of cocoon." Well, of course I do, of course I do, but nobody ever notices. She is the first person who ever has. Curious. I changed the conversation smartish at that point.

She's pretty cool. Quiet, but very confident in herself. She can knock back the drink as well, and I suspect she is out for a good time. Doesn't look the sort to commit to relationships.

Very detached, I would say.. She'd get on brilliantly with John: no commitment, just fun. I'd introduce them if John ever spoke to me again...

We had a session after closing time which was just wonderful. Awesome. Sometimes you hit the Wall, and just fly through it. You don't get it every time, but when it does you know the exact moment it happens. It happened last night during "Across the Hill". It's a weird sensation, and I'm not sure how to describe it. It's like the rhythm of the music takes on an extra dimension, so that you're not just hearing it, you're feeling it, breathing it, living it. It kicks in like an adrenalin surge and you feel like you're levitating; the hairs on the back of your neck stand up, and it's like the ghosts of all the musicians of the past are flowing through you, urging you on, helping you, improving your playing. Then time stops. Only music exists, only your music exists, and it feels like all your other senses diminish to allow your hearing to become accentuated. It gets darker, you don't smell anything, or taste anything. You hear differently. You hear notes, nuances, phrases no-one has ever heard before, or will ever hear again: it's yours and yours alone. A personal joy in the middle of a public celebration. Only musicians can hit the Wall, and even then, they only do it when they're perfectly attuned. I've sat in, just listening on loads of sessions, brilliant ones, thrilling, exciting ones, and it hasn't happened. You can only feel it when you play it.

But when it happens it's the most intense feeling in the world. Like a thousand orgasms all at once. Or so I imagine...

The final surprise of the evening was when Margaret sang. It was lovely. A beautiful song I think I've heard before somewhere, very sad. She has a lovely voice, a bit thin from lack of practice, but she could be really good. She let on she didn't want to do it, but she carried it off with such ease I'm sure she's sung in folk clubs loads of times before.

So anyway, we've another gig in a couple of weeks and she said she might come along to that. I'd quite like it if she did actually. Still don't understand her, don't know what her game is, but I quite liked her.

Now, I have an appointment with an aspirin and my bed.

Bye bye

I WONDER WHAT IS KEEPING MY TRUE LOVE THIS NIGHT

"I wonder what is keeping my true love this night?
I wonder what is keeping him out of my sight?
I wonder if he knows of the pain I endure
And stays from me, this night I'm not sure.

"Oh love are you coming your cause to advance?
Or yet are you waiting for a far, far better chance?
Are you coming for to tell me you've a new love in store
Or are you coming for to tell me you love me no more?"

*"For I can love lightly and I can love strong,
I can love the old love till the new love comes on.
I only said I loved you for to give your heart ease
And when I'm not with you I'll love whom I please."*

"There's gold in my pocket and pain in my heart,
For I can't love a man with too many sweethearts.
You're my first and only false love but it's lately I knew
That the stronger I loved you, the falser you grew.

"The spring grass grows the greenest and spring water runs clear,
I'm sorry and tormented for the love of my dear.
Your love it lies so lightly as the dew on the thorn,
That's there in the evening and away with the dawn."

Traditional folk song

PADDY FAHY'S REEL

After the tumultuous evening in the Cellar Bar, I saw Simone again on a couple of occasions in the following weeks, both after one of the Jenny Dangs' gigs. She was still attending university in Derby, only returning home at weekends, so opportunities to be with her were frustratingly rare, and always with the accompaniment of the rest of the band. Most of all, I wanted to be alone with her, and that was proving impossible to arrange.

With each passing moment in her presence, my infatuation with Simone deepened, ripened, swelled and matured, growing inside me until it was such that I could scarcely get her out of mind. Unbidden, thoughts of her would interrupt me while I was at work; my concentration suffered, my work deteriorated and yet, in my enamoured state, I didn't care. I was happy to sit at my desk and stare out of the window, dreaming of the sweet moment when I would take her in my arms, enfold her to my breast, run my finger down her cheek and... oh dear, such thoughts, such torment.

She radiated serenity, and that was her attraction. She had a luminous, extraordinary, intoxicating physical beauty, of course; this was what had first attracted me to her, but had I still only lusted after her looks it would have been a shallow love, a narrow, impersonal burst of emotion scarcely worthy of note. It was her presence, the sweetness of her nature, the calm perfection of her outlook which dazzled me. I have never known a feeling like it. In her presence my heart fizzed and fluttered, racing like a field mouse's when the timid beast's refuge is exposed by the threshing machine; my head felt light and a cold sweat developed on my brow; my fingers tingled and my palms went clammy. But the clincher was the music.

I have always been sensitive to the power of music; it has always struck me as the most perfect art form, the one best suited to defining the casual, terrifying power of love, its transience and ephemerality a perfect mirror of the fleeting fragility of heightened emotions. And when I fall in love I always hear music; each individual to whom I attach myself is surrounded by a piece of music, a motif which I hear whenever they are in my presence, or when I think of them. So it was with Simone. When she was in my mind I had a constant backdrop of Paddy Fahy's Reel, an eerily beautiful, ethereal melody, unresolved, ambiguous. It flits in at the end of a Planxty album, unheralded and unannounced and once heard can never be forgotten. At times it seems like the saddest tune in the world, at others an uplifting, wonderful paean to hope; it plumbs the depths and soars to the heights, casting a spell around you, drawing you in, enticing you and ensnaring you with its simple perfection. Beautiful, cyclical, a tune with no beginning or end, a piece of magic floating in

its own space, creating its own history, defining its own meaning, the tune became my inspiration: the musical reflection of my goddess, Simone.

I was sitting at home, a relaxing bottle of wine by my side, attempting to read the new novel by one of my favourite authors, Andrew Greig, when the crunch came. The music was floating round and round in my head, and I couldn't see the words on the page for it. The sense of it was so powerful it felt almost physical, burning me, tormenting me, too perfect to be contained within the shell of my body, and bursting to be released. It was no good. I had to see her. I had to be alone with her.

Shaking, more nervous than I had felt since I did my A-Levels many years before, back in the days before I had learned to conquer my nerves, I dialled her mobile number. We had exchanged numbers the week before, a rite of passage which thrilled me with its potential significance, but seemed to be no more than a matter of routine to Simone. I had sat staring at it each night since she gave me it, knowing that this string of seemingly random numbers was all that separated me from hearing her velvet voice once more. As I heard the phone ringing I waited in dread anticipation, my heart leaping in my mouth, a feeling of nausea rising in my throat. Ridiculous, I thought, to get into this sort of state. And then it connected.

"Hi," she said. My Goddess's voice.

"Hi, it's me, Margaret," I replied, instantly feeling foolish, regretting having made the call.

"Oh, hiya," she said breezily. There was a lot of noise in the background, chatter and laughter and chinking glasses; she was evidently in a pub. A feeling of jealousy swept through me. "Hang on," I heard her say, "it's just someone from home." That cut me to the quick. Just someone from home... I tried to ignore it and prevent myself from creating in her words nuances of meaning which weren't there.

We chatted absently for a couple of minutes, Simone still half connected to the conversation flowing around her in the pub, while I was suffering a torment of self doubt. Finally, I summoned up the courage to ask. "Listen," I said, trying to sound confident, "there's an exhibition at Tate Modern just now, Arte Povera, which sounds really interesting. I wondered if you'd like to go to it. I was thinking of going down on Sunday..." I held my breath.

"Exhibition of who, did you say?" she replied.

"Not who. What. Arte Povera. It's an art movement, Italian, from the fifties." I was deeply regretting this conversation now. What kind of lame-arsed chat-up routine was this? Come and look at some 1950s Italian art... She was clearly not going to be interested in it. Why should she? I'd made a fool of myself again.

“Yeah, cool,” she said. “I’ve not been to Tate Modern yet. Is that giant spider still there?”

“No,” I heard myself saying. “It’s been replaced by Juan Muñoz now, those grey sculptures hidden above you, looking down at you.”

I was barely aware of what I was saying, the euphoria of success leaving me light-headed and dizzy. She had said yes. Instantly, my jealousy of those fortunate enough to be with her in the pub was eradicated; immediately my sense of foolishness and clumsiness vanished. I would have her to myself on Sunday; she wanted to be with me. As I put the receiver down, Paddy Fahy’s Reel swirled through my head, sweeping and soaring in its splendid beauty, rising in volume until it occupied every fibre of my being.

LONDON EYE

We set off at some ridiculously early hour on Sunday morning, as a consequence of which there was no surfeit of conversation. I tried to generate some interest as we passed various places - Huntingdon, Sandy, Stevenage - where I had had lovers and went into some sordid details, but Simone wasn't responsive. I drove to the edge of London, about a hundred miles, which we did in just under an hour and a half. It was a pleasant morning, grey and overcast, but with the certainty that the sun would burn through within a couple of hours and leave us basking in the low thirties. It is one of my favourite times of day, full of summer hope, pregnant with expectation, but still fresh and clear, before the heat becomes oppressive.

As I drove I was very conscious of Simone's presence by my side, and it was torture for me to concentrate on the road and not turn to stare at her. She was wearing Diorella again, and its sweet, sensual aroma filled the car. I would smell it for days and be reminded of her, a lingering trace of her beauty which would toy with my senses. She was wearing low waist, cream, cotton trousers which were three-quarter length, and her midriff and ankles were delightfully exposed. She looked stunning, the tight fit of the trousers accentuating the smooth, creamy curves of her bottom and the short trouser legs affecting to make her own look longer and more shapely. I couldn't believe how lucky I was to be in her company.

We parked in a side street at Swiss Cottage and took the tube into the city. Simone had asked if we could visit the London Eye, and as it was only a ten minute walk from Tate Modern we agreed to stop there en route. The tube journey was simple, a straight run through from Swiss Cottage to Westminster on the Jubilee Line, six stops and about twenty minutes. It was a little after ten when we stepped out of the newly refurbished Westminster Station - a monstrosity in black - and were faced with the vision, across the Thames, of the London Eye.

Whatever you may have read about the London Eye, it is a truly spectacular sight, a marvel of our times. The overriding culture in Britain at the start of the millennium is one of laboured and unpleasant cynicism, a sour refusal to look at anything in a positive light, but the Wheel is a true triumph, an aesthetic delight, a cultural treasure and a shared experience which can unite a nation riven by self-made divisions. It is, simply, beautiful.

Simone and I stood on the steps beneath Westminster Bridge, looking over the Thames at its splendid steel frame, glinting proudly in the emerging sun, with the grandly functional County Hall forming a sober backdrop. It was so big. No

matter how many times one hears how big it is, the first sighting is always a shock.

“It’s fantastic,” Simone said, unable to tear her eyes from it. “Stunning. I had no idea it would be that good.” She turned and looked at me, and for the first time her cool demeanour slipped and a look of unrestrained excitement invaded her features. “We’ve got to go over the bridge and get close up.” She grabbed my hand and dragged me up the steps onto Westminster Bridge, adroitly slipping past the hot dog sellers and photograph-snapping tourists. At that moment, I felt such a deep-rooted love for her I could barely contain myself. The touch of her hand in mine was intoxicating. Her chestnut hair, shining silver and gold in the sunlight, flounced around her neck as she hurried over the bridge, her eyes big and bright and sparkling with excitement, her nose, that superb, stunning nose which had first attracted me to her, looking vital and alive under the growing sun. As she walked, I was entranced by the fluidity of her motion, the graceful, feline slink of her hips, the sensuous, languid roll of her buttocks, her back straight and proud, and her breasts, beautiful, firm and shapely, quivering with each footfall, perfection beneath her cotton top.

We manoeuvred ourselves past the various stalls and eateries on the bankside and headed down past the former County Hall, now a collection of glitzy restaurants and gift shops, towards the Wheel. As we stood underneath it, staring up in awe, its sheer scale hit home. There were around forty pods attached to it, and each one could easily hold thirty people. As you stood below, watching it, you could discern it turning, slowly, very slowly, a stately progression one thousand miles removed from the garish, speedy rotations of fairground big wheels. This was in a different league, a different class, a sight to behold.

“We’ve got to go on it!” Simone exclaimed, jumping up and down on the spot. She was like an excited teenager, although, I realised, why shouldn’t she be? She was only twenty, after all. And, it has to be said, I shared her excitement; I hadn’t expected to be so moved by it, but seeing the Wheel for the first time I, too, felt I had to experience it for myself. Looking at one another, we nodded and laughed, then rushed into the ticket office. Since it was still early in the morning, there was not much of a queue, and we purchased tickets with a boarding time of only thirty minutes later.

Outside, we joined the back of a short, snaking queue waiting to get on. Progress was fast, and it was only a matter of minutes before we stood at the entry gate, watching the giant pods slide majestically anti-clockwise towards us. Those who had just been round disembarked with an excited chatter, and we were ushered towards the now empty pod. Because it moves so slowly, it never actually stops and you just step on to it, like walking on to an escalator. With great anticipation, we jumped aboard and were followed by about fifteen or so other people.

At first, while we were still at the bottom and running past the central columns and infrastructure, we could gauge the speed of our movement and it seemed as though we were moving quite fast. I was vaguely disappointed, as it would make the experience seem shorter. When we cleared the metal framework, though, and had nothing to track our movement against, it was difficult to tell we were moving at all. The pod was incredibly smooth, with no jerking or swaying whatever. I am not very good with heights, and had been slightly apprehensive about how well I would cope with being several hundred feet in the air in a completely glass pod, but I felt totally secure. We were both too awestruck to say anything much, and instead roamed round the pod, taking in the views.

Upwards we sailed, sedate and calm, and London began to unfold before our eyes. Buckingham Palace, where the constant flash of cameras suggested that the Changing of the Guard was taking place; Parliament, with Big Ben standing guard over it; at first the top of the Telecom Tower, then, piece by piece, moment by moment, the entire edifice, satellites sprouting from it like metallic mushrooms; a whole vista, the teeming, swarming swathe of London life. Wandering round the pod, we gasped in amazement at the beauty of the sight. St Paul's Cathedral, looking small and insignificant, hemmed in by lesser buildings; the Oxo Tower and, just behind it, the tall, square stack of Tate Modern, our next rendezvous; and in the far distance, a few miles down the Thames, the faint outline of the Dome, our other, less exalted, Millennium experience. Higher and higher we went, a gradual, graceful ascent, until we reached our zenith, the pods on either side of us at exactly the same level, a few feet below us; and then, after our all too brief moment of superiority over the rest of London, we began our descent; fifteen minutes up and fifteen minutes down, although the descent seemed faster somehow; and in total, a magical thirty minutes, a shared experience, our first together.

"Fantastic," I murmured.

"Amazing. Thanks for bringing me."

"Thanks for suggesting it."

"You get a different perception of the city, don't you? It seems alive. It's, like, got a life of its own. Down on the ground all you see is individuals, flying to and fro, living their own lives, having their own experiences, disjointed, unconnected. Up here, it seems like it's all connected. Like *we're* all connected."

"Just one community," I agreed. "If only we could see it like that when we're on the ground."

As the wheel spun round its 360° cycle and approached the landing area we trooped off, somewhat saddened that the experience was over: it had been a

very quick thirty minutes. Simone grabbed my hand and dragged me towards the shop.

“I want to thank you for taking me on it,” she said. “Let me buy you something to remember it by.”

I would have no difficulty remembering this occasion, I knew, but I didn’t want to be churlish and allowed myself to be led into the rather disappointing shop, where I asked Simone to buy me a glittery, lilac mug.

“Tea breaks will never be the same again,” I laughed as she handed over the money and accepted the bag with my mug in it.

“Right,” she said, fixing her arm in mine, “that’s my little treat over. Now it’s time for yours. On to Tate Modern. Where do we go from here?”

“Follow the river,” I replied, pointing grandly down the Thames, “and look for the giant chimney stack.” And, arm in arm, we sauntered down the bankside, the sun warm and encouraging on our backs.

TATE MODERN

It was a day of grand scales, fitting for the occasion of my first outing with Simone without the chaperones of the Jenny Dangs. However lofty, however striking the London Eye may be, it cannot compare with the glorious majesty of Tate Modern. That Britain, tight-arsed, philistine, penny-pinching Britain could produce something as truly noble, truly cultured and truly heroic in its scale as Tate Modern is extraordinary. As we entered through the main doors and began our dramatic descent into the huge Turbine Hall, the sheer, overwhelming size of the place began to sink in.

“My God,” I breathed, looking around me in wonderment. Down, down, about a hundred and fifty yards or so long and fifty wide, swept the huge avenue, falling dramatically, perhaps as much as twenty feet, inducing in me the sense that I was being pulled inexorably into the centre of this amazing building. Above us space, so much space, an incredible, living expanse, a vibrant, thrumming immensity.

“Awesome.”

It was here that Louise Bourgeois’s giant spider had sat for the first year of Tate Modern’s existence, an enormous metal sculpture with stairs to an upper balcony, which the viewer could walk around, reinterpreting the notion of allowing the audience to engage with the art. It had recently been replaced by Juan Muñoz’s eery grey sculptures, and Simone and I skipped down to look at them.

They are an extraordinary spectacle, an intriguing use of the epic space of the Turbine Hall. The whole installation is divided into two parts and can be observed on three levels. From below, where we were initially, it is a gloomy, slightly edgy expanse of space, mostly dark but with shafts of light falling from an upper level. Two empty elevators ascend and descend in a constant, but uncertain rhythm. As you walk beneath it, looking upwards, out of the gloom a series of grey sculptures, in a variety of poses, can be seen. What are they doing? What are they thinking? They are enigmatic, detached, involved in their own personal existence, their own private drama. On the upper level of the gallery the scene is transformed into something lighter. It appears that there are a number of shafts, which one presumes to be the tops of the ones which have just been observed below; some of them, however, are illusions, painted on the surface. And the third level can be seen from above, from the walkways running alongside the permanent galleries: from the windows one can look down on the patterned floor, spotting which are the illusory shafts and which

the real, and, within the real ones, glimpse once more the vague, curious figures of the grey sculptures. Eery, curious and engaging.

Once we had finished looking at Muñoz, we purchased tickets for the Arte Povera exhibition and took the escalators to the fourth floor. “What can you tell me about this, then?” asked Simone.

“Hmm, not that much actually. I’d never heard of Arte Povera until a few weeks ago. I was in the Pompidou in Paris...”

“You were in Paris?”

“Yeah, for the weekend.”

“I’d love to go there. Never been.”

“I’ll take you sometime,” I said casually. I wish, I thought.

Simone laughed. “I’ll hold you to that. So anyway, you were in Paris?”

“Yeah, and in the Pompidou Centre there was this amazing installation. It took my breath away. It was by an artist called Guisepe Penone. Basically, it consisted of a room full of laurel leaves, thousands and thousands of them, covering the walls, ten, fifteen thick, held in place by chicken wire. The smell was fantastic. So fresh, so clean. Really beautiful. It was such a wonderful experience, a world of calm. I adored it. I stood in there for, God knows how long, minutes, an hour, I don’t know. It was one of those moments, you know, when you can feel all the stresses coming out of your body, when you can feel yourself relaxing, coming down...”

“Chilling out.”

“Yeah, just so. When I got back I did some internet searches on him and found a bit of background information. Then I found out he was part of the Arte Povera movement from Italy in the sixties and seventies, and by extraordinary coincidence, there was this exhibition on here. So I don’t really know what to expect.”

“Cool. So is it all going to be, like, installations, and rooms full of leaves?”

“Don’t know. Arte povera means poor art, apparently. They were very experimental, at a time when pickling sharks or cutting cows in two or displaying an unmade bed would have been considered certifiable rather than just tediously arty. They used ordinary materials - dirt, trees and stuff - which was “poor”, or ordinary - everyday sort of stuff. But what they wanted to do was get rid of the notion of the artist as genius - the tortured van Gogh idea - and look at the art itself, without boundaries, without restraints. The essential

thing, I think, is the link between the art and life itself." I stopped, realising I was descending into meaningless waffle.

"Wow," said Simone. "There won't be any Green Ladies then?"

"No," I laughed. "Nor puppies with sad eyes, or Constable's Haywain, or van Gogh's insanity."

"Oh well, it can't be that bad, then. Though I quite like van Gogh. Is this it?"

We had arrived at the entrance to the gallery; I handed over the tickets and ushered Simone through. My heart sank. The first few exhibits were everything you would expect in a pastiche of a modern art gallery: a few pieces of metal wire moulded into interesting shapes, some scraps of cloth hanging on a wall, an empty box. Visions of Tony Hancock in *The Rebel* floated through my head. After the build up I had given it - the link between art and life and so on - we were going to be treated to a collection of junk dressed up as art: Tracey Emin with an Italian accent.

Simone, bless her, tried to be enthusiastic, attempting to draw meaning from the seemingly meaningless. I put a brave face on it and joined in, but I was aghast. Please, God, don't let it all be like this, I thought.

And lo, my prayers were answered. The exhibition came to life in the third room, where a painting by Michelangelo Pistoletto was hanging. Called *Three Girls on a Balcony*, it was an extraordinary work, in that we, the viewers, were an integral part of it. It was a mirror painting, featuring three women leaning on a balcony looking outward. The rest of the painting was a mirror, so it appeared that it was we, the viewers, whom the three women were observing. As Simone and I stood before it, we were drawn into the painting itself, unwitting participants in a timeless drama, the focus of attention for these three, nameless Italian women.

"This is cool," said Simone, posturing before the painting, observing herself in it. We laughed at our reflections. Simone grabbed me by the waist and pulled me towards her, so that we were in an embrace before the watchful trio. Ah, but what did they see? As we embraced before our two-dimensional audience, I wondered: what are we? Two lovers, conscious only of themselves and oblivious of the world? Or two friends, close, happy and trusting? Or even, let's face it, it's physically possible, mother and daughter? What did people see? How did the world perceive us? How did the painting perceive us? Watching the neutral reflections of our bodies as they integrated with the exhibit, shimmering, changing, moving, I gloried in Simone's touch, revelled in the feel of her silky soft skin, but the questions rampaged through my mind. What were we? And what did people think we were? What did I see, and what did they see?

"We look like a pair of good-time girls, under the disapproving eye of the locals," Simone laughed, affecting a jaunty pose. "Look at them, they're just

jealous.” She raised her head coquettishly and flicked the back of her hair, shaking her head as she did. Such youth, such confidence. I wasn’t sure on which side I belonged: with Simone and the good-time girls, or the reprovng women on the balcony. Perhaps, soon enough, I would find out. For now, I was content merely to be with Simone, to feel her arm around my waist, the thrilling touch of my hand on her bared hip, the whisper of her breath on my neck.

The exhibition improved dramatically after the mirror painting interlude. The next gallery, a huge, extended room with an amazing variety of exhibits, was riveting. What really struck me about arte povera, what attracted me to it, was the simplicity of its composition. Through saying, or showing, very little, it inferred sometimes enormously significant meaning: the seemingly inconsequential – a shoe, perhaps, or a tobacco leaf – assumed greater importance through being placed in its artistic context, its underlying meaning revealing itself, the connectedness of objects, of events, of moments, becoming clearer. Arte povera allowed us to see the layers of meaning in any given object; life was revealed as the multi-faceted, joyous celebration we know it to be. Through artistic minimalism came intellectual inquisitiveness: a chance to understand.

It was art without preconceptions and free of philosophical or theoretical baggage. It gloried in experimentation and revelled in new materials – earth, industrial by-products, mounds of tea leaves, household rubbish and living things; and not only physical objects – moisture, air, sound and energy were harnessed, too, in the mission to explain. Giovanni Anselmo, for example, created works like ‘Eating Structure’, which combined animate and inanimate objects to create living, breathing sculptures which possessed natural functions.

“Look at that,” I snorted derisively to Simone when I first saw it. It did, indeed, look ridiculous, a caricature of pretentious modern art, comprising a clump of lettuce leaves stuck between one large block of granite and another, smaller block, with a band of metal clamping the two blocks together.

“Well,” she replied, sharing my amusement, “it’s not every day you see a head of lettuce exhibited in an art gallery. Flower show, maybe, but not an art gallery...”

We crossed the room to inspect it and, despite ourselves, our cynicism was stripped away as we read the explanatory text. If the lettuce was allowed to dehydrate it would wither, the metal band would lose tension and the smaller of the granite blocks would fall off. The sculpture had to be constantly fed with new lettuces in order to exist.

“Actually, I see his point,” Simone said, inspecting it closely. “Feed the need. The story of life.”

“Cause and effect. The natural flow. Things happen. People fall in love, for example,” I averred, “and that love has to be nourished or it dies.”

“Withers and dies’...” We laughed at the quote from Richard Thompson. It was a song we both knew and liked, a sad song of disconnected emotion. “It’s quite true, though,” Simone continued. “My dreams have withered and died’; through lack of nourishment the lettuce withers and dies, and the force which helped bind the blocks together dissipates. The bond is lost...”

“And so the moral is: feed your dreams,” I concluded. And just give me the chance, I thought to myself, just give me the chance.

We rounded the corner and came upon the section in which I was most interested, the artist who had first alerted me to arte povera, Guiseppe Penone. I had seen pictures of some of the works in this exhibition, but I had not grasped quite what they were, and I was unprepared for the beauty of the objects or the feelings they would awaken within me. They were tree sculptures of the most profound beauty, objects as piercingly perfect as anything I’ve ever known.

And it was Simone who explained them to me. The definition of beauty from the epitome of beauty.

There were three of them in the exhibition, though I believe Penone has created more. They were living sculptures, trees which had been pared down to reveal their essence.

“They’re stunning,” sighed Simone, cricking her neck and staring closely at the curious objects. They were each about twenty feet long, beams of timber which had seemingly been chiselled, with spindles and spikes emerging from a central core at random points and in random directions. “He’s cut away all the dead wood, revealing the living tree, with just the knots showing,” she explained.

All of a sudden, the piece made sense to me, and before my eyes it transformed from a lump of wood into an object of unimaginable beauty. Following the irregular growth rings, he had stripped away all the extraneous wood from around the knots until he arrived at the the young, living, growing core of the tree. There, delicate and lovely, in the middle of the wood was a spindly, fluid, living object: there was the shape that the tree had been at a certain point in its existence, when it was still a fresh, young sapling.

“Extraordinary,” I replied. I had such a strong temptation to touch it, stroke it, caress that beautiful wood, feel the buzz of life within it. It was so beautiful I felt like crying.

“It’s turning man-made objects back into natural, living things.”

“Showing that seemingly dead objects have life still inside them.”

“And each being has, buried within it, the core of its past experience. For all eternity.”

Unconsciously, I found myself holding Simone’s hand as we gazed in wonderment at this exceptional thing, trying to understand it, trying to fathom its depths of meaning. Within us all is the kernel of beauty, the moment of our genesis. Where does time start, what is the physical moment of birth? And can that moment, years later, through the ravages of time, the sterile advance of experience, be reclaimed? Is that core waiting, hiding, lurking, hoping one day to be re-discovered?

I stared into Simone’s eyes. She looked so beautiful, alert and bright, face beaming with curiosity and wonderment. I felt as though I could see her soul, felt that I could connect with the beauty inside her. Momentarily, I was overwhelmed with longing for her, a pining to love her, cherish her, adore her every movement. The beauty of nature and the beauty of art had come together, inseparable, bound to one another by the innate perfection of each. I almost shouted “I love you” to her, but somehow restrained myself. Too soon, I knew, too soon.

But sometime, somewhere, I had to share my feelings. Simone was in my mind, my dreams, my body, my heart. Every waking moment, every dreaming second, at work, at leisure, conscious and unconscious, she inhabited my very soul. I needed Simone Clements.

SIMONE'S DIARY, JULY 5TH

I find it difficult to fathom Margaret. I can't really work her out at all. She gives off this vibe of being a good-time girl. She acts all frivolous, taking life by the scruff of the neck and doing whatever the damn hell she pleases. When we driving down to London, she was telling me all these stories of what she got up to when she was younger, like she was really proud of it, all the affairs, the guys, the one-night stands. It was like she was trying to impress me.

*And yet, beneath all that I sense something different. Walking round Tate Modern she showed such sensitivity. She was genuinely interested in it, and seemed really moved by some pieces. The trees that were carved away to show their earlier growth, for example. I don't think she understood what they were at first, but when I explained how the artist had created them she seemed, like, in awe of them. Took ages to drag her away from them... *G* But she kept looking at them, getting really close up to them. I thought she was going to start stroking them, and so did the guard, I think, because she kept a very close eye on us while we were there.*

"The beauty within us all," she said. "If only we could strip our lives back like that, and start all over again, get it right this time."

"Yeah, but they're dead now. Just blocks of wood," I joked. She didn't like it. She kind of looked at me with a funny expression. I thought she was going to cry so I tried to mollify her. "He's turned man-made objects back into natural, living things," I said.

"Yes, and showing that what look like dead objects still have life in them," she replied.

*"All of us have our past experience buried within us. For ever." Of course, you know what I was thinking of as I said that. But as I said it, Margaret had the most curious look on her face. Like I said, I can't fathom her. This wasn't the same woman who had earlier been bragging about her easy sex life. I couldn't work out what she was thinking, but a most peculiar thought entered my head at that moment. I've no idea why. This woman, I thought, has just fallen in love. Crazy, I know, but people do have that kind of car-crash glazed expression when they fall in love, like there is so much going on in their brains they haven't got the spare capacity to bother with facial expressions as well. That's what she looked like. Christ, I thought, falling in love with a lump of wood, even if it is exquisitely carved. Freaky... *LOL**

I actually really liked the exhibition. It was cool, much better than I'd expected. One thing I really liked was a series of pictures of a factory canteen. It demonstrated the Fibonacci sequence, which I'd heard about. It is a proliferating number sequence, where the sum of the last two numbers makes the next number in the sequence: 1 1 2 3 5 8 13 etc. I find this a really curious phenomenon, because numbers are an abstract invention of mankind, but the Fibonacci sequence can be seen for real in the natural world. A flower, say, will have one stem, branching off into two, which in turn branch off into three, and from these there

will be five stems holding eight petals. It is a natural phenomenon. Anyway, this series of pictures took up a whole wall. In the first picture there was one person in the canteen, sipping a cup of tea or something, and again just one person in the second. The third picture had two people, and the fourth had three and so on, until in the last picture the canteen was crowded with 55 people. Above the series there was a continuous strip of neon which was contorted above each individual picture into the number of people who were in it. I loved that. It's the fact that the sequence is a natural one, which you can see in everyday life, which I love: connecting abstract thought and nature. Cool.

Back to Margaret again. I've been thinking about her. Been thinking about her a lot, actually. She really intrigues me. I like her a lot, but don't know if I can trust her. Like I say, I can't figure her out. It's like there are two people there, the flirt and the sensitive artist. But which is real? What I really want is someone I can trust. After Steve, I need that. I know it's been over three years, but I can't just forget. Pretend it never happened. And that's the trouble with Margaret. Even though I really like her, I can't trust her: I don't know enough about her, don't understand her, can't work out which the real Margaret is.

TELEPHONE CONVERSATION, JULY 10TH

M: So then, what have you been up to this week?

S: Oh, the usual. Clubbing on Friday night, picked up a couple of blokes. [Laughs ironically.] Stoned out of my brain most of Saturday, acid trip Sunday, wild orgy on Monday night. Quiet night in with my knitting on Tuesday, then picked up a football team after the match on Wednesday. Took them back to my place and showed them a few attacking formations. That sort of thing....

M: Normal sort of a week then?

S: Yeah, pretty much. How about you?

M: Well, there was this guy in the IT department the other day. Hadn't seen him before, think he must have been a temp. He was giving me the eye, kept coming up to me, asking me where things were, you know? Inventing reasons for talking to me...

S: Some things never change. Picking up the guys again...[Laughs]

M: Nothing to do with me! Can I help it if I have raw sexual magnetism? Anyway, he was really quite attractive. Bit tubby, maybe, but nice face. [Pause]

S: And?

M: Yeah, nice bod too. As I say, a bit tubby, but he had a nice bum, not too lardy, you know?

S: Yeah, yeah. You like 'em tight and firm, I know...

M: So to cut a long story short...

S: Don't you dare! I want the full goss, woman!

M: The **full** goss?

S: Every detail, sister. [Laughs]

M: Okay then. Settle back. Are you sitting comfortably? Then I'll begin...

S: Get on with it. I'd like to get to bed sometime this evening.

M: Wouldn't you just. And who with, may I ask?

S: Hey, this is your story, not mine.

M: [Laughs] Okay, so he came up to me for the fiftieth time, asking where the pencils were kept or something banal. It was nearly lunchtime, so I said to him 'D'you fancy a drink?' All nonchalant, he said yeah, okay, and we went down to O'Driscoll's...

S: O'Driscoll's? Where's that?

M: New Irish bar on the left as you come in Orchard Street. Peat fire in the corner and raw fish curing behind the counter, that sort of thing.

S: Bowls of mashed potato on the tables?

M: Yes, that's it. And a band of genuine leprochauns playing the music from Riverdance.

S: With some long-legged Colleens doing the dancing?

M: The usual stuff. Stiff as a board down to the knees, and then all hell breaks loose.

S: Like flapper girls on acid. Okay, I've got the picture now. Continue.

M: So we had a bottle of wine between us. Nine quid, if you please...

S: Do they have wine in Ireland?

M: 'Course they do. They're Catholics. Drink it at Mass, don't they?

S: Can't remember. So long since I was last at one.

M: Are you Catholic?

S: Only nominally.

M: Well, that's just as well. Imagine the confession you'd have to do...

S: I'd have to book myself in for a couple of days. Overnight stop...

M: Hmm, that'd be fun. You could get it on with the priest. What do they wear under their cassock?...

S: That's blasphemous, or something.

M: Not blasphemous, darling, just kinky. I've always fancied a priest. Something about the forbidden, I think.

S: Doubt they'd be interested. You're the wrong side of puberty. [Laughs]

M: Either that or not enough testicles. Guess you're right. [Laughs] Anyway, wine, nine quid a bottle. *And* he let me pay for it...

S: He'll have to go...

M: He's already gone, dear. No wedding bells at the end of *this* story.

S: Ha! We'll never get to the end of the story at this rate. [Laughs]

M: Impatient for the gory details, are we?

S: Every time.

M: So we had our wine. Bog standard stuff...

S: Well it would be bog standard in an Irish bar, wouldn't it. Peat bog standard.

M: That's probably racist.

S: I'm allowed to. I've got some Irish in me.

M: Oh yeah? He's very quiet. What's his name?

S: Michael.

M: [Croons] Hello Michael.

S: [impersonating a ventriloquist] Hello there. How are ya?

M: Sounds like a nice boy.

S: Hope not.

M: And we were chatting away. You know, this and that. Inconsequential rubbish. He talked about cricket, or rugby, or something. Either chasing a ball or hitting it. Why can't they just leave the poor balls alone?

S: Men can't ever leave their balls alone.

M: Hmm, yes, the 'fondle through the trouser pocket' routine. You've noticed that too.

S: It's impossible not to. Have you seen Jim the drummer? Looks like he's kneading a loaf of bread.

M: A baguette, presumably.

S: One of the short ones.

M: I'll take your word for that... [Laughs] Bless him.

S: I know. Thick as a plank. Totally stereotyped drummer. You couldn't create a character like him in a story. No-one would believe it. But he's so sweet.

M: Very loud though.

S: [Laughs] Yeah, I know. I think it's all that drumming. He's deaf...

M: Thick as a plank and deaf as a post. We ought to call him Jim Beam...

S: [Laughs aloud and at length. Sobbing...] Poor Jim...

M: But anyway. [Faux indignation] Back to my story...

S: Yes, sorry. Where were we?

M: O'Driscoll's.

S: God, are you still in there?

M: This story is taking a damned sight longer in the telling than it did in real life.

S: I can believe that. I know how fast you work. Five minutes from first meeting to wiping up time...

M: That's only at weekends. ANYWAY... [Pauses] somehow the conversation turned round to more interesting subjects, like sex...

S: Oh yeah, I wonder how that happened. [Mimics Margaret] 'So, big boy, what's your favourite position?'

M: Well, funny you should say that...

S: You didn't? [Laughs disbelievingly] You didn't ask him that?

M: Well, not straight away. I'd only just met him. This was near the end of the bottle. After we'd discussed exes, and teenage acne, and the difficulty men have with the concept of contraception.

S: Men have no difficulty with the concept of contraception. Contraception and menstruation: women's things...

M: [Laughs] And cleaning the toilet...

S: [Laughs] Yeah. [Mimics male voice] 'What's the point in cleaning a toilet? You're only going to piss in it and get it dirty all over again.'

M: [Laughs loudly] I wouldn't mind if they *did* piss in it. It's when they piss all over it...

S: Oh, don't go there... So, what was his reply?

M: Whose?

S: The guy. When you asked his favourite position?

M: Oh... he looked me in the eyes and held my gaze, and said 'Margaret, whatever my woman prefers. I just live to make women happy.'

S: [Screams] No!

M: Yeah, honest, that's what he said.

S: That's like, so yuck! So corny! What did you say?

M: Well, I wasn't going to pass this one up. 'Mark', I said; that was his name, Mark; "Mark, I'm so pleased to hear you say that. Not many men are so *enlightened*...

S: [Screams] Wooohoo...

M: 'And do you know what?' I said. 'No,' he replied. 'I just love a man who likes to please a woman.' 'You do?' he said. 'U-huh.'...

S: Is this going to get gross?

M: Not for me, honey, not for me. 'Well,' I said to him, 'I could do with some pleasing right now.'" He went kinda pale at that...

S: Not surprised. Most men would when confronted with the Praying Margaret...

M: I went to the loos and took off my tights and panties. When...

S: [Exclaiming] You didn't!

M: Yeah, seriously. It's not that unusual. Not in my office anyway.

S: That's you who's done that, though. You're a bad influence. Teaching them lascivious ways. A bad example...

M: And they love me for it. So I stuffed the tights in my bag, but kept the panties in my hand. When I got back to the table I stretched out my hand and put them in Mark's. He looked down at them with an expression like I'd just handed him a live scorpion. Talk about terror-struck. [S. laughs throatily.] 'When we get back to my office,' I said to him, 'I want you under my desk and making sure that I am 'happy', as you so nicely put it.'

S: Never!! You'll get the sack!

M: No! I have an office of my own. When the door's shut everyone knows not to disturb me. 'Margaret's in a mood' they say, and leave me alone. I was quite safe. But he didn't know that. Poor man was petrified the whole time, waiting for someone to come through the door and find us.

S: So you did it? [incredulous laugh]

M: Too right I did, hun. And very good it was too. I made a couple of phonecalls while he was at it, too. Nothing important; I just did it to see what it felt like...

S: And what did it feel like?

M: *NAUGHTY!* [Laughs] Just imagine it. Talking to someone about boring work things, when there's someone under your desk licking you out. You should try it.

S: [Laughs] Might just do that. Anyway, really sorry, but I've gotta run. It's band practice tonight. I'm already late. That means I get fined. Have to buy the first three rounds at the bar.

M: Oh sweetie... Never mind, I'll sub you when I see you next. When are you playing again?

S: Next Friday. The Scar and Batter again, I'm afraid. Wanna come?

M: Yeah, sure. Guarantee you an audience of one at least.

S: Cheeky bugger. Okay, it starts at eight, come at seven, we'll be doing the sound check and stuff. You can buy the drinks and keep Jim amused. He just gets in the way otherwise.

M: Jim Beam?

S: Yeah, [laughs] Jim Beam. Hey, you're not doing anything tomorrow are you?

M: Nope, nothing. It's my usual day off.

S: Thought it was. How do you fancy going cycling? At Rutland Water?

M: Haven't got a bike.

S: You can hire them there. Cheap.

M: God, I haven't been on a bike in twenty years.

S: You never forget. You'll pick it up in no time.

M: Jeez, what am I saying: okay, I'll do it.

S: Brilliant, come round for me at 10?

M: Okay, will do. Can't help thinking I'm going to regret this...

S: Okay, I'm off then, before you change your mind. Bye.

[Click.]

SIMONE'S DIARY, JULY 11TH

Hiya. Been neglecting you for a few days. Sorry, diary. *G* Been busy, rehearsing and such. Summer holidays it may be, but I'm busier now than when I'm at uni. Of course, working in the pub doesn't help. Don't like it much, to be honest, but it brings in some money. I wouldn't mind, but for the leering blokes at the bar, George and Dave. Every bloody evening when I arrive, there they are, blowing smoke in my face and calling me love and making smutty remarks. George, in particular, seems to fancy his chances with me. I mean! He's in his fifties, fat, unfit, alcoholic, smokes 60 fags a day. What a catch... *G*

Margaret phoned last night, just as I was going out to band practice. The woman is incorrigible. She related an extremely seedy account of what she did one lunchtime this week. My God, what a lifestyle! I couldn't do it, I just couldn't. Where's the romance, where's the passion, where's the emotion? It's all so hollow, so empty. A quickie at lunchtime with someone she'd never met before, some furtive oral sex under her work desk... I expect she gave him a blowjob after that, but I couldn't wait for that part of the story. I'll no doubt get the full story tomorrow. We're going cycling round Rutland Water, which should be fun...

I like her a lot. She's really funny, a great sense of humour, and very quick-witted. But I do struggle with her amoral lifestyle. I couldn't live like that.

Anyway, been practicing my singing a bit as well, recently. I don't know why I'm so hung up about singing in public, when I'm happy to get on stage and play the fiddle. I've been determined to conquer it ever since that time when Margaret sang in the Arts Centre Bar. She just got up and did it, no worries, no nerves. Really cool. I want to be able to do that. So I've been practicing hard. Working on "I wonder what is keeping" and "Withered and died" mainly. I'll maybe give it a go at the gig next week. Then again, the Scar and Batter isn't the best place in the world to try out a tender song of unrequited love... *G* "Bang Bang Maxwell's Silver Hammer" would be more in keeping...

Where has my love life gone? Twenty years old, and not a man in sight. Not that they're in short supply, right enough, but where are the decent ones? The ones I can trust? There's only so often a girl can lie in bed diddling with herself before she goes mad, and I think I'm getting there. Fast! *L* Must be the hot weather, but I'm at it every day just now. And the strangest things go through my mind. Such fantasies...

Last night, it was really, really hot. Kicked the blankets off early and just lay there. I couldn't hold back from stroking myself. The air was hot, and so was I. Unconsciously, the strangest thing came into my mind, and it is really horrible, when you think about it. I can't actually work out whether it was a fantasy or a dream, whether I was awake or sleeping. Sort of half way between the two, I think. I was playing with myself as it happened, and I was aware that I was doing that, so I must have been at least part awake, but the story itself just seemed to come out of nowhere, and it proceeded in a kind of dream-like haze, and I had no control over it.

*I was working in the bar. It was afternoon, I think, anyway there was only one person in, sitting at the bar. It wasn't George or Dave. At least I hope it wasn't!! That would be too much. If I ever start having erotic dreams about them, take me away and lock me up! It was a guy, just somebody, no-one specific. He was making small talk, the usual pub chat you hear every day. Then he started getting a bit explicit. Told me his wife was frigid, and he wasn't getting any. A question kind of hung in the air: Sort of: "and what are you going to do about it, missy?" He started complimenting me on my figure, things like "you have fantastic tits" (well, I told you it was a fantasy! *G*) and "turn around, let me see your gorgeous rear", that kind of stuff. Subtle. I ignored it and carried on with what I was doing. I went to wipe down the tables and bring back the ashtrays.*

As I returned to the bar, he gripped me by the hand. I shouted to him to let go, but he just gripped me tighter, smiling at me with an evil look.

"What are you playing at?" I shouted.

"Not playing," he said. I didn't know what he meant. He was still gripping me, and he pulled my hand down towards his crotch. I saw what he was doing and tried to pull away, but he was too strong. He pressed my hand against his crotch, and I could feel he was hard.

"Please," I said, but he ignored me and kept pressing my hand to him.

"Unzip me," he said.

"No way!" I shouted. "Get off me." I really meant it, and wouldn't ever have done it, but then the dream (or fantasy, or whatever it was) went freaky, you know the way they do. Things don't follow logically, the story chops and changes. The next thing I knew I actually had done it, I had unzipped his trousers and was rummaging about in his knickers. I slid my hand under them and grasped his thing. It was huge, long and really fat. He smiled at me and told me to wank him. And of course, in this dream/fantasy, I did. Why would I dream something like this? But I did, anyway. I started to wank him, harder and harder and harder until - and this is when it all went so totally leftfield it just defies explanation, just as he was about to come he turned into a woman! What is that all about??

*Of course, this being a dream, I just carried on like nothing had happened, so now I was standing at the bar stroking a woman's pussy. I have never had any lesbian fantasies in my life, so it is just bizarre. What does it mean? Anyway, I carried on, and she pushed me down between her legs and made me lick her. I was down on my knees, looking up her thighs at her privates, and she had her hand on my head pulling me towards her. In real life I came at that point (hard!) and woke up or came to my senses, or whatever, probably because even in my subconscious I had no idea what would happen next!! *G**

*But hey, weird huh? Really weird. Don't tell me I'm turning into a dyke! That would just put the tin lid on things. *LOL**

Off to bed now. God knows what I'll dream about this time, but if a dog wanders into the story, for Christ's sake wake me up and call me a shrink...

Night night

ONCE AND FOREVER

I could have bitten my tongue out when I said I hadn't been on a bike for twenty years: I hate making references to anything which emphasises the age gap between us. Twenty, of course, is Simone's age, so the last time I was on a bike she would still have been hanging from her mother's breast. A few years ago I had a short-lived fling with a man much older than me – I would have been about twenty-seven and he was in his early fifties – which he eventually ended because he couldn't live with the age difference. He couldn't stop himself, every time a historic event was mentioned, or he remembered something from his past, calculating how old I would have been at that time, and this constant reminder of the gap between us gnawed at him until, finally, he couldn't take it any more. I told him it didn't bother me, which was true, but it ate away at his belief in our relationship, and the end was inevitable; it still doesn't concern me, but I hate mentioning ages now for fear of frightening Simone off in the same way.

I also had rather more prosaic concerns as we drove through the blinding mid-morning sunshine towards Rutland Water. It *had* been twenty years since I had been on a bike, and even then I wasn't what you might call proficient, nor confident: when cars approached from either direction I would jump off and wait until the road was clear again. Different scenarios flitted through my imagination, ranging from the merely embarrassing – falling off or missing a corner – to the fateful and even, in the darker moments, the fatal... Not to mention, of course, numb bum syndrome.

But Simone was bright and breezy, and her easy good humour quickly swept my concerns aside. She looked gorgeous that morning, her hair sleek and bouncy and her face lightly tanned; her normally moon-pale skin had taken on a glorious, summer-enriched, light gold hue, emphasising her superb nose, alert, lively eyes and thin, pastel lips. Her face was set in that wonderful, self-contained expression of hers which I so adored; dreamy, slightly aloof, a mellifluous smile floating on her lips as her eyes hovered above, keenly appraising every experience, draining life from every moment.

We fixed ourselves up with some rented bikes, not without difficulty as my gaucheness and unproficiency quickly came to light. I was spared the ignominy of falling off even before we had left the shop and crashing into a row of gleaming, new and expensive bikes only by the quick thinking and strong arms of the salesman, who saw me wobble and topple and grabbed me before I fell over.

“I think you should probably hire a helmet, too,” he laughed, his light tone alleviating my embarrassment. We took his advice, and soon I was sporting a silver helmet which made me look like a wood nail, while Simone was bedecked in a Jackson Pollock effort, garish yellow, blue, red, white and every-other-colour splashed madly against one another; somehow, she managed to make even that look sexy. I was given rudimentary instruction in the use of the gears, which appeared to have evolved considerably from the three Sturmeys Archer gears – fast, slow and uphill – to which I had been accustomed; presented by this overwhelming choice, eighteen in all and confusingly controlled by two separate mechanisms, I was briefly bewildered. I rode round the car park a few times, feverishly crashing through the gears and wobbling alarmingly into the line of oncoming traffic, until we decided I would be safer out on the trail itself.

Rutland Water is the biggest man-made lake in Western Europe, twenty-six miles in circumference. It was created in the 1970s by flooding 3000 acres of the county of Rutland and in the process drowning the old village of Nether Hambleton. It is now, year round, a world famous bird sanctuary, in summer a colourful cavalcade of families and lovers, and in autumn an oasis of serenity in a breakneck world. A cycle track runs round the entire perimeter, with only a small section of it using the busy public carriageways, making it ideal for families or, like me, inexperienced cyclists.

We headed west from the hire shop and immediately came to a sharp incline. Still troubled by the gears, I approached it in far too high a gear and almost immediately ground to a halt; instantly I toppled over and crashed to the ground, the bike landing heavily on top of me: it must be the lowest speed bike crash in history. Simone, a few metres ahead of me, heard the commotion and turned to see me sprawled on the track, rubbing my elbow and adjusting my helmet. She rushed back towards me solicitously, and a wave of embarrassment shuddered through me.

“I’m okay,” I said, “no damage. Think the picnic’s okay, too.” Our picnic was in a rucksack on my back, and it appeared to be unscathed.

“What happened?” she asked.

“A bird flew past and startled me,” I lied.

“Ah, dive-bombing sparrows, get a lot of them here,” she consoled. Clearly, she didn’t believe me, but was prepared to collude in my pretence to spare my feelings. “Have to watch out for the rabbits too. They hide in the undergrowth till the last minute, then jump out in front of your bike and waggle their ears at you.”

“I’ll look out for that,” I laughed, wheeling my bike – which fortunately appeared as undamaged as me – up the hill. At the summit, I settled myself back on the saddle and said a silent prayer to the god of cyclists.

“Ready?” asked Simone.

“Go for it!”

Simone streaked off, pedalling furiously, and I trundled behind her, anxiously watching every stone and hole on the rough surface, feeling the bike move steadily faster and faster, until I was careering down the hill in her wake. The air zipped past me, making my eyes stream, whipping at my clothing and strafing my bare arms with its cool, electrifying intensity; the hedgerow flitted past, a whorling, whirling variegation, colours tumbling and clashing, merging finally into a single, streaked canvas of grey-brown; it was exhilarating, terrifying and invigorating in equal measure. Barely in control, towards the bottom of the hill I sped past the laughing Simone.

“Slow down,” she cried, “...but gently...”

Frankly, I had no intention of slowing down. I knew if I touched the brakes I would send myself head-first over the front wheel, so I continued, hands throttling the handlebars and face fixed in a grin of sheer terror. I hurtled on grimly and lost my footing on the pedals; without me, they circled erratically on their own, painfully knocking my shins with each rotation, and I swung my feet up and out to avoid them. Think of Paul Newman in *Butch Cassidy and the Sundance Kid*, but not so cool: that was me, cannoning down the hill. Fortunately, it was bottoming out and we were approaching a mild incline again; unfortunately, at the bottom it went round a sharp corner, which necessitated steering, a manoeuvre I had been spared until now.

I’m not really sure what happened next. I pressed the brakes, closed my eyes, and felt the back wheel slide sideways away from me; for a few, terrifying moments I skidded towards the bend in the track, heading straight for the hedge beyond it; by now I was completely out of control and simply waiting for the inevitable crash into the onrushing greenery. I braked again, and once more the back wheel slid away from me; the bike turned ninety degrees and skidded to a halt inches from the edge of the track, facing perfectly in the direction of the corner as though ready to continue, and I slammed my foot onto the track to steady myself. Standing once more on solid ground, I stared in disbelief at the ten yard long skid mark I had just made, my heart pounding and body trembling.

Simone screeched to a halt beside me, laughing uproariously. “You’re a madwoman!” she cried. “Mad! I’ve never seen anyone do a handbrake turn on a bike before, and certainly not with their feet stuck in mid-air! Crazy woman!” Well, I wasn’t going to tell her it was unintentional, so I grinned nonchalantly.

“It’s all coming back to me,” I replied.

“Coming back to you? What were you before, a trick cyclist?”

My heart was racing and my hands were shaking, but I pressed on. We had a relatively flat section for the next couple of miles, and we continued uneventfully. Simone took the lead, and I followed, admiring the neat way she cycled, her back tyre following perfectly in the tracks of the front; by contrast, mine weaved erratically, forming crazed arabesques on the sandy surface. She pedalled hard and made swift progress; I struggled to keep up, my thighs creaking and aching as I trailed behind her. The wind billowed in her tee-shirt, ballooning it and turning her into a Michelin woman; then it would subside and the shirt would gather once more around her slim frame, crinkled along the back and sticking to her skin with the sweat from her exertion. She was so graceful, so elegant, it was a delight to sit and watch her.

After about an hour and a half we came to Normanton Tower. This was a remnant of the previous inhabitation of the area, a semi-submerged church at the edge of the Water; only the tower remained above water, an eery, haunting and beautiful reminder of the past. We had worked up a hunger, so stopped to have our picnic. Simone had a rug in her rucksack, which she unfolded and lay on the grass at the edge of the track, and I unloaded the food from the chillbag in my rucksack. Finally, I produced a bottle of still cool chardonnay and a bottle opener. Simone laughed.

“D’you think that’s sensible, since we’re cycling?”

“Hah,” I replied. “The way I cycle it can’t make me any more unsteady. It’ll probably have the opposite effect: make me cycle in a perfect, straight line...” I popped the cork and poured it into two plastic beakers. “Cheers, my dear,”

“Cheers,” she said, raising her beaker and knocking it against mine. “What have we got then?” I unwrapped some chicken drumsticks and a quiche, some garlic mushrooms, blue cheese pasta and vegetable rice, and laid them on the rug between us, handing Simone a plastic plate. We worked our way through it, chatting and chomping in equal measure, the crisp, steady lapping of Rutland Water providing a calming backdrop for our afternoon idyll. I felt as relaxed, and as happy, as I had in years. I loved watching Simone eat: she would select something and hold it aloft like a trophy, before nibbling at it and then resuming her outstretched pose, fingers pincerd around the food; when each piece was finished she would delicately lick her fingers, then her lips and pause for a moment while she chose her next item. She was so neat, so unfussy, and she appeared to be enjoying herself immensely.

“What a spread,” she remarked. “I’d have done a few mouldy sandwiches; this is really classy.”

“D’you do much cooking?” I asked.

“No, not much, really. Spag bol, curry sauces from a jar, that sort of thing. Never had much time to learn.”

“I love it,” I said.

“Really? I’m surprised. I wouldn’t have taken you for a cook.”

“No? Why not?”

“Don’t know. Sounds a bit domestic, somehow. I can’t imagine you having time for it, with your lifestyle.”

My lifestyle was a great deal quieter than Simone took it to be, of course. Not wishing to seem to her like a middle-aged frump, I tended to embellish details, and even completely fabricate some incidents. Only the other night I had regaled her with a completely spurious tale of the IT man and me one lunchtime. The reality was that he was a fat, balding, sweaty and smelly oaf who continually leered at me and asked me out on a date. Somehow, I managed to turn this into a steamy afternoon session of cunnilingus in the office. I worried that I might be overdoing the depiction of my louche lifestyle, but I knew that Simone and the Jenny Dangs were from a different generation and I didn’t want to come across as stuffy and dowdy.

“Well,” I said, “you’ve got to take a rest from rogering some time...”

“Yeah, right,” said Simone, a faraway look on her face.

“It’s very relaxing. My idea of perfect happiness is peeling and chopping an onion. Quite the most relaxing thing I know.”

“No! It makes you cry...”

“You get used to it.”

“You never get used to crying, Margaret.”

That was such an odd thing to say, so melancholy. Suddenly, Simone looked strangely vulnerable; where previously she had had a dreamy expression, she now stared introspectively at the grass. You never get used to crying...

“Oh you haven’t had time for tears yet,” I replied brightly. “You’re too young for that.” Damn, there I went, mentioning age again.

“Yeah, whatever.” The mood had changed. Simone had gone silent and a pregnant air hung around us. I was confused, not sure what had happened.

“Nice chicken, this,” I said, trying to change the subject. Simone seemed to snap out of her reverie, and gave me a bright, beaming smile. Instantly, she looked like herself again.

“Yes, it is. Thank you for preparing all this. It’s lovely.”

I shrugged, jokingly. “Nothing to it, my dear. Knocked it up in half an hour.” I sipped my wine and stretched out on the rug. Something strange had just passed between us, but I didn’t understand what it was. It was, though, clearly something which neither of us wished to pursue, so I let it lie. Still, it troubled me; it hinted at some disquiet in my beloved Simone’s disposition, and I felt alarmed for her sake.

“Is your knee alright?” she asked, pointing at a graze where I had fallen earlier. Truth to tell, now that we had stopped it was beginning to stiffen up and ache.

“Yeah, I’ll live. Getting a bit stiff, though.”

“You need a massage.”

“Ooh, yes please, that’ll fix it.” Simone reached out and placed her cool hand on my lower thigh, just above the knee, and began to knead gently. “Mmm, perfect,” I murmured and lay on my back. Simone laughed and continued to stroke and rub my thigh for a moment. The touch of her hand, soft and gentle, was exquisite, and a tremor of excitement ruffled through me. “Pity I didn’t land on my bum.” Simone laughed again and playfully slapped my shoulder.

“Cheeky.”

“What, my bum? Yes it is a bit. Need to go on a diet.” She giggled again, her tinkling laughter trilling into the air and enlivening all around it. Simone stretched out beside me, her feet overhanging the rug and scuffing at the blades of grass below it. She wore pale blue shorts, and my eyes were drawn to her creamy-soft thighs, her skin the texture of soft wax, beautifully smooth and with a nap of gossamer fine hairs, translucent in the afternoon sunshine. The shorts had ridden up between her thighs into a vee pointing towards her crotch, and the fabric lay tight against her, revealing the contours of her body. Lying on her side and leaning on her arm, the shape of her hip was exaggerated, creating a wonderful, undulating, flowing form from her shoulder to her knee. She was so beautiful, so radiant she almost made me want to cry.

“What?” she asked, a curious smile on her face.

“What what?” I replied, blankly.

“You were gone then. Just staring. What were you thinking of?”

“Oh... Life, love, romance.” There was silence. Simone played with a blade of grass, rolling it between her fingers, attempting to tie it into a knot.

“The first exists, the last two are myths,” she replied.

“Cynic. Have you never been in love?”

“Once.”

“Yeah? And what happened?”

“Oh, you know, stuff. Life intervened.” She clammed up again, tossing the grass away and picking up a piece of quiche, her look slipping off towards the top of Normanton Tower. It was becoming obvious that Simone was deeply reticent about revealing any intimate details about herself. She scarcely even talked about her family. Generally, she would adroitly change the subject; otherwise she would simply turn mute. “It’s lovely here,” she said at length.

“Mmm, it is. I find it a bit melancholy, but in a nice sort of way. Like, things change, but they continue. Nobody lives here anymore, nobody uses the church, nobody prays or does ordinary, day-to-day things, but it’s still a friendly spot, somewhere people still come to relax, to be happy.”

“What I like about it is that nature is reclaiming its own. Even if it is with the help of man, seeing as it’s a man-made lake, I like the idea of civilisations crumbling, the planet taking over again, things returning to their natural state.”

“Gaia,” I said.

“Yes, absolutely. I love Gaia. It’s a wonderful philosophy. Mother Earth, stronger than all of us put together, as old as time. She’s indulging us, tolerating us.”

“She’ll outlive us all,” I concurred.

“Yes, that’s it exactly,” she replied, rising up and sitting before me, suddenly animated. “I’m glad you think that, too. It’s why I can’t be bothered with all this ‘save the planet’ stuff. The bloody planet doesn’t need saving. It’s been here for billions of years, it’ll see us off quite happily, just like it did the dinosaurs. And something else’ll come along, ants or apes, or whatever, and form new civilisations, find new ways of messing up. And the planet’ll see them off too. It always will.”

“Yes...”

Simone was unstoppable. “When people bang on about needing to save the planet, they’re not talking about the planet at all. What they mean is we have to save our civilisation. Totally different thing. One’s altruistic, the other’s self-seeking.”

I thought that was a bit harsh.

“Well,” I interjected, “I wouldn’t go that far. Misguided, maybe. But trying to save our civilisation isn’t such a terrible thing: it’s not ‘self-seeking’ necessarily. It’s about more than that. It’s about preserving the beauty of the world: not just ‘civilisation’, but nature, everything around us. Here,” I continued, gesturing at the Water. “That’s worth preserving. It’s worth fighting for.”

“Fine, as long as nobody pretends they’re doing it for the planet’s sake. It’s all for our sake, so we can enjoy it, so we can continue our nice, easy lifestyle. None of those so-called eco-warriors are in the least bit interested in the planet, just their enjoyment of it.”

“Well, most eco-warriors aren’t interested in anything much except protesting. Every generation has its cause. In mine it was nuclear war, now it’s the environment. In twenty years time it’ll be something else. People grow out of it, new generations find new things to annoy them.”

“But that’s so bloody fickle.” I had never seen Simone so earnest. Somehow, I felt I had seen a new Simone today. It seemed to me that she had momentarily dropped a guard which had previously been so effective I hadn’t even registered it was there: beneath the calm exterior, I thought I could sense some hitherto unnoticed vulnerability. Of course, my heart melted further.

“People change...”

“They sell out.”

“No, it isn’t selling out. Their priorities change. Things which were important to you become less so. New things start to worry you.”

“Selfish things, mostly. A bigger car, a better holiday.”

This was difficult. Simone was charged with youthful idealism and I had to be careful not to come across as the complacent, selfish, middle-aged philistine that she and her generation railed against.

“Not only that. It’s not all Mammon. There’s families too. People have children, their outlooks change, nature takes over: the instinct to protect, make their lives better than yours.”

Simone went silent again. “What about you?” she asked. “Ever been married?”

“No,” I replied. “Never felt the inclination.”

“And have *you* ever been in love?”

“Oh yes. Lots of times, or so I thought. But now I know: only once.” It was my turn to play distractedly with a blade of grass. “Once and forever.”

“Once and forever?” she laughed. “Fantastic. That sounds so intense. So is this still going on then? D’you mind me asking?”

Yes, I did, just then.

“No I don’t,” I replied. “Is it still going on? Well, yes definitely. Like I say, once and forever...”

“So will I get to meet him?”

My heart was pounding, a cold sweat had settled on my brow. A welter of emotions churned through me: terror, excitement, anticipation, dread, love. Mostly love. All of it love, in fact; love in its manifold guises. I wanted to tell her. Looking into her pale blue eyes, staring at me earnestly, I wanted to take her hands in mine, bend forward and kiss her on the lips; wanted to enfold her in my grasp, wanted to whisper to her the truth; the truth, that I loved her, once and forever, that I worshipped her, adored her, needed her.

“No,” I replied, trying to inject levity into my voice, “it’s an unrequited love.”

Simone stared at me, trying to work out whether or not I was serious. I smiled wanly, my stomach lurching, panic rising in my breast.

“I see,” she said, finally deciding I was earnest. “Does he know how you feel?” I was struggling to hold back the tears, struggling to conceal the depth of my emotions.

“No, I don’t think so.”

“Well, do something about it,” she replied, her youthful rationality breaking the problem down into simple terms.

“I’m trying.”

SIMONE'S DIARY, JULY 12TH

Did I make a fool of myself today? I don't know, I can't decide. It was the strangest afternoon. I almost let things slip.

Oh, God! I just can't make up my mind about this woman. I wish I knew whether I could really trust her. I don't think I can, every time I think about it rationally I think, don't be stupid Simone, of course you can't. She goes out every weekend, picks up some bloke and fucks his brains out. Nothing wrong with that, if that's what you like doing. But it doesn't leave her very well qualified for the role of confidante, does it? And yet, when I'm talking to her, when she's being herself, quiet, thoughtful, friendly, not doing all this shit about how many lovers she's had, she's totally different. I find myself opening up to her. Find myself saying things I can't believe I'm saying.

Twice today I nearly found myself spilling out my life to her. Once she said something about chopping onions, and I said they make you cry, to which she replied you get used to it. I said something like "You never get used to it." All the time I was thinking about Steve, of course, going through the old history again. I swear if she had probed a bit more, I might have ended up telling her about it. I was that close. I've never been so close to talking about it before, never. But then she changed the subject, and the moment passed.

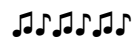
Later on, I nearly did it again. This time I was on the verge of talking about it, because I'd had Steve on my mind since earlier, and it was preying on me. "Have you ever been in love?" she asked. "Just the once," I said. She asked what happened, and I said "life, you know", etc etc. It almost came out then. It actually did, once, but in a voice so low it was only barely audible, and Margaret missed it. I was in such a state. I was so confused. I've never wanted to talk about things before, but now I don't know, maybe I do want to talk to her about it. But why her? Why Margaret? It's crazy. She wouldn't even be interested, goddammit. She'd think I was bloody mad.

She said a lovely thing later on, though. I asked if she'd ever been in love. "Once and forever," she said. Isn't that beautiful? So romantic, I love that. Once and forever. I keep saying it in my mind. Once and forever. Oh to love, and know it is for once and forever. And to be loved, loved once and forever. How lucky a person could be.

*But the thing about Margaret's once and forever love is that it's unrequited. The bloke doesn't know about it. How ironic is that? The woman has a love life like Joan Collins, and the bloke she really loves doesn't know anything about it. I said to her "does he know?" and she said no. So I told her to do something about it, sort it out. Here am I, Miss Relationships 2001, handing out the advice... *L* But I'm right. No use letting things fester, no use concealing these things. Get them out in the open, talk about them. If only Steve and I had done that...*

THE RAJ: OUR NARRATOR'S VERSION

Now then; it's me again; your all-seeing, all-knowing (almost) omniscient narrator. Haven't been around for a while, have I?; but I'm back, with another tale, another chapter in the saga of Margaret and Simone. And what will happen this time? What will be our nerve-shredding, nail biting, heart-tugging dénouement?: read on, brave reader, read on. The *mise-en-scène* (I like that, an acute and a grave in successive sentences; you get your money's worth when I'm narrating, don't you?) for this little vignette (ah, a wonderful language, French, don't you think?) is an Indian restaurant, the Raj of India. And very good value it is, too; if you ever happen to be passing and in need of sustenance, I'd highly recommend it. But I digress. Back to our story, where the Jenny Dangs have just wowed them once more at the Star and Garter (I deprecate the use of the vulgar colloquial name, the Scar and Batter; it's so uncouth) and they and Margaret have repaired to the Raj for some late night eats and revelries. Let the action commence...



"And the Balls-up Award for tonight goes to..." shouted Don with a flourish, as the Jenny Dangs and Margaret settled themselves into the tight seating around their table. The Balls-up Award had recently been instituted by the band for the person who made the worst mistake at that night's gig. The prize, or more accurately, the penalty, for winning the award was to wear for the duration of the evening a garish, bright yellow tee-shirt with "Balls Up Artist" and a picture of Pee Wee Hermann emblazoned on it, and to pay for the starter course and first round of drinks: the former was embarrassing, the latter generally crippling, as the other band members took advantage by ordering the most extravagant dishes and drinks on the menu. It was, therefore, a matter, not only of pride, but of financial prudence to avoid the award.

"Simone," the Jenny Dangs yelled in unison, each of them pointing at her head and gesturing animatedly.

Simone laughed. "Okay, it's a fair cop." During one of their regular sets of jigs, at the conclusion of the first tune, 'The Geese in the Bog', when her fiddle was supposed to segue them into 'The Tenpenny Bit', she had launched instead into a completely different tune. Fortunately, Marie and Pdraig knew the unwonted tune well enough to accompany her on the melody, while Jim and Don fell back on a very basic 3/4 rhythm, and the band played it out as a session piece. Some of their regulars, who had anticipated 'The Tenpenny Bit', had shown a deal of surprise, but other than that the band had managed to play their way out of it successfully; not that this was going to rescue Simone from her fate as Balls Up Artist for the evening.

“The most spectacular balls-up in ages, that was. How can you play the wrong tune, for God’s sake? We must’ve played that set hundreds of times,” chided Don good-humouredly.

“I know, I know. It’s because I was listening to the Boys of The Lough earlier. They do ‘The Geese in the Bog’; in fact it’s where I learned it; but they follow it with ‘The Connaughtman’s Rambles’ and I just went into it without thinking.”

“Anyway, tonight’s winner of the yellow jersey,” said Marie, pulling the tee-shirt from her bag. “Yours, I believe.”

Simone took the tee-shirt with a sheepish grin. “Okay, I’ll wear it. But it’s too bloody hot in here to wear it on top of what I’ve got, so if you don’t want to know the score, look away now.” Deftly, she pulled her own tee-shirt over her head and sat, momentarily, in the middle of the Indian restaurant in only her bra. Pdraig and Jim let out a loud cheer, alerting the rest of the diners to what was happening, and as they looked round Simone quickly slipped the “yellow jersey” over her head and slid it down her body. “There,” she said, shaking her shoulders and brandishing her chest seductively, “what do you think?”

“Stunning,” they cried in unison. They always did.

“And now the starters,” said Don. “What have we got? A boti kebab with lamb for £6. That’ll do me.” The others followed suit, selecting their, mostly expensive, starters and choosing extravagant cocktails; they then ordered their main courses, opting for the usual range of strengths from phal, for Pdraig, to korma for Jim, whose mouth exploded when confronted with hot food. Only Margaret foreswore the expensive starter and drink, ordering a plain mushroom bhaji and a half of lager from the elderly waiter. He repeated the group’s order laboriously and loped away.

“The Goan Goer’s on form tonight,” said Marie, nodding at his retreating body.

Simone smiled at Margaret. “My saviour,” she said to her. “I’ll be able to afford to eat again by Wednesday now, instead of Thursday, thanks to you.”

“My pleasure, my dear,” Margaret replied. “Wouldn’t want you wasting away, now, would we?”

“She’d be alright,” said Jim, “plenty of fat in those thighs. Keep her going for a month, they would.” Simone slapped him playfully across the head.

“Behave, big boy, or I’ll use these thunderthighs to suffocate you with.”

“Cor, would you really?” Jim replied enthusiastically.

“D’oh!” sighed Simone, with a theatrical slap of her head. Jim had long since accustomed himself to being the butt of the group’s jokes and, in fact, revelled in it. Like many shy people, he used humour to counter his nerves, and his gaucheness only served to further endear him to people: he was someone it was impossible to dislike.

A different, younger waiter approached the table with their drinks and settled them down. "Evening, guys and gals," he said.

"Hi Rashid, how's it going?" asked Simone.

"Oh, pretty good. Quiet night, really. Always happens when you lot play; everyone heads out of town for the night to escape. Is that you ballsed-up again, Simone?" he said, indicating the tee-shirt. "That F# gets you every time, huh?"

"You wouldn't believe what she did tonight, mate." said Don, shaking his head.

"And you missed her putting on the yellow jersey," interjected Jim. "Flash of the day."

"Damn, I missed that?" smiled Rashid. "No chance of an action replay, I suppose?"

"Not unless you want to waive the bill, sunshine."

"Hmm, tempting. Might just do that. I'll see if the manager's in." He returned to the kitchen with a laugh and a wave. Jim hooted.

"Let's hope the manager's out, eh?" he bellowed.

"You're *that* close to a good slapping, young man."

"There's no point threatening him like that, Simone. He'd love it," said Padraig.

"Sadly, I think that's probably true," murmured Simone, "isn't it, sweetie?" She ruffled Jim's hair affectionately. Jim smiled broadly, but said nothing.

"My God, we've silenced him. Someone make a note of the date. Jim Beam speechless..." Don laughed. Jim Beam, the nickname for Jim coined by Margaret, had been quickly adopted by the rest of the band, most enthusiastically by Jim himself, who refused to refer to himself as anything else. This had caused a sticky moment when he was stopped by the police for speeding outside the County Hospital the week before, giving his name as Jim Beam while handing over a driving licence bearing the name Jim Thompson: only his good-natured guilelessness had saved him from arrest.

"I only ever saw Jim speechless once," said Simone. "A few years ago, in third year of High School. D'you remember it, Jim?" From the agonised look on Jim's face it was clear he did, and the rest of the band, too, were evidently familiar with the story, broad smiles breaking out on their faces. For Margaret's benefit, Simone outlined the high farce which led to Jim's suspension from school for a week. Mr Finchley, the Biology teacher, had been late arriving for class one morning and Jim took advantage of the unexpected freedom to wreak havoc in the biology lab. While trying to swat a fly on the window, he leaped onto the radiator pipe which ran along the skirting board. Even then, Jim was a big boy, and the pipes were old; and unfortunately he landed square on top of one of the joints, which instantly gave way. Immediately, a thin but powerful jet of water leaped from the pipe and rose eight feet

in the air. Panic stricken, Jim let out a yell for help, but his laughing classmates simply sat in their chairs and clapped. "Help me, for God's sake," he shouted, but to no avail. To whoops of delight and the strains of *The Stripper*, he whipped off his shirt and wrapped it around the pipe; it succeeded in slowing down the flow, but not in stopping it entirely and, howling with fear, the terrified boy stripped off his trousers and began to wrap them around the pipe too. This did the trick, and the plume of water abated to a tiny, pulsing trickle, but Jim was now standing in the classroom in his underwear, sopping wet and in floods of tears. Simone finally took pity on him and handed him Mr Finchley's white lab coat.

"And that's where it all went wrong, isn't it Jim?" she teased. Sadly, Jim was never able to let a crisis worry him for any length of time; he was delighted with this new prop and, thrusting his hands in the pockets, began flashing at the class as if he were a dirty old man in a raincoat. And it was at this point that Mr Finchley returned, just as Jim had opened the lab coat to its fullest extent, revealing his podgy body and dripping wet knickers. "What are you doing, boy?" Mr Finchley had roared at him, but Jim was too terrified to speak. "Where are your clothes? Why are you wet? Have you gone stark-staring mad?" Mr Finchley fired off enraged question after enraged question at the quivering boy, and the more he shouted, the less able to speak Jim became.

"I'm going to see the Headmaster," said Simone, mimicking Mr Finchley, "and when I get back I expect to see you sitting in your seat, fully clothed." Jim lowered his head into his hands and the Jenny Dangs roared with laughter in anticipation of what happened next.

"And?" asked Margaret.

"So, poor Jim was terrified out of his wits," continued Simone. "But he did it."

"No."

"Yeah, he unwrapped his trousers and put them on. They were soaked through, of course, they must have been freezing. And then he unwound his shirt and put that on too. Which meant, of course, a bloody great jet of water spurted out of the fractured pipe again, landing half way across the room, just behind Jim's desk. And Jim squelched over to his seat, looking like a creature emerging from the black lagoon, and sat down at his desk, this picture of absolute misery, soaked from head to foot, with a torrent of water breaking over his head. Then Mr Finchley and the Headmaster came back...."

By now the group were uncontrollable.

"Flooded the needlework class on the floor below..."

"We all got the rest of the day off..."

"Suspended for a week..."

"I still swear a rainbow broke over his left shoulder at one stage..."

“And throughout it all, he never said a word...”

“Not a word. For two days...”

“He ended up with a temperature of 101 as well...”

“Nobody ever knew if it was the cold that caused that, or the shock...”

“But at least he got his own back on Mr Finchley in the end,” said Simone.

“Oh no, don’t bring that up,” pleaded Jim.

“How?” asked Margaret.

“Well,” said Simone, smiling at Jim and stroking his shoulder gently, “it was a very hot summer afternoon, quite a bit later, maybe even the next year?” Don nodded his agreement. “And there were a lot of flies around. Mr Finchley was late again: he often was, he was a terrible teacher. Now, we all knew that Mr Finchley kept his sandwiches in the fridge in the back office. And somebody...”

“It was you, Simone,” shouted Jim.

“Somebody,” she continued, “suggested it might be a good idea to swat some of those flies, and add a bit of protein to Mr Finchley’s sandwiches.”

“You didn’t.”

“HE did,” Simone replied, jerking her thumb at Jim. “Twelve flies he put in those sandwiches...”

“Oh, Jim, that’s gross,” Margaret laughed.

“And on that note, here come the starters....”

Rashid appeared at their table and began handing out the starters. “Manager’s out,” he said, looking at Simone. “How about a ten percent discount? Would that get me a repeat showing?”

“Ten per cent? Forget it, sunshine.”

“What will it get, then?”

“Ten per cent? Let’s think. For ten per cent I think you could get a kiss.”

“On the lips?” Simone paused, and rolled her eyes. Ten per cent would probably save her about £5; it was worth it.

“On the lips,” she agreed.

“Lingering?”

“Don’t push it, Rashid!”

“Okay, okay. It’s a deal. When can I get it?” Jim cheered and applauded, relieved that attention had been diverted from his youthful misdemeanours and Pdraig and Marie followed suit.

“When I get the bill; when I see that the ten per cent has been taken off. Not before. Haven’t you got other customers to be serving, Rashid?”

“That’s a promise, Simone,” he tossed over his shoulder as he scuttled back to the kitchens.

The group settled down to their meal. The Raj was a favourite haunt of theirs, the best Indian restaurant in town and staffed, apart from the Goan Goer, by younger and sassier waiters who liked a bit of banter with their customers. They were intolerant of the rowdier elements, however, and there was scarcely ever any trouble. The band were well known and liked by the staff, occasionally performing impromptu sessions at their table in return for the price of their meal. “Makes a change from that bloody Ravi Shankar music you usually get,” as Jim rather indelicately put it.

Don observed Simone as she ate, suspicious that something was wrong with her. As the meal progressed she fell into silence, picking distractedly at her food, nibbling at it unenthusiastically, and losing eye contact with her friends. For a few days she had seemed slightly distant, vaguely troubled, and although she had appeared quite boisterous earlier this evening, nonetheless something gnawed at the back of Don’s mind, insinuating in his mind that all was not well. Nobody could fathom Simone: nobody was allowed close enough; but when Don had had his difficult period some years back he had become more intimate with her than anyone else, and he was more alert to her moods than the others, better able to pick up the nuances in her behaviour which betrayed her emotions. And he was sure she was bothered now. There were times, he thought, when her laid back and casual demeanour seemed slightly forced, somewhat stilted and false. She also used storytelling to manoeuvre the focus from herself to someone else. The story about Jim was a perfect example: it was one the whole group, apart from Margaret, knew inside out; indeed, only Pdraig hadn’t actually witnessed it. Why, Don, wondered, had Simone chosen to tell that story just then? It almost fitted into the conversation, and nobody else had noticed anything unusual in her raising it, but Don felt sure she had done it to deflect attention from herself. So what was it that was troubling her?

“When are you going back to Derby, Simone?” he asked.

“Tomorrow. My friend, Suzanne, has to do a couple of re-sits and I said I’d go up and help her revise for them. She’s really worried about them.”

“If she fails?”

“Out. Off the course. Two years work wasted.”

“Christ, no wonder she’s worried.”

“How long will you be gone?” asked Margaret.

“A week, I reckon. She’s got the re-sits on Wednesday and Thursday, so I’ll probably come back next Friday. Why, will you miss me?”

“Course I will. Who’s going to take me cycling?”

Simone laughed, spearing a piece of meat with her fork and waving it carelessly in the air. “You should have seen her. Absolutely bloody crazy. A maniac on wheels.”

“You went cycling?” asked Pdraig, surprise registering in his voice.

“Yeah, round Rutland Water. Why d’you think I’ve been walking like a sailor with piles all day? Twenty six mile round trip. With Evil Kneivel here doing stunts and falling off left, right and centre.”

“I only fell off once.”

“Bloody miracle, too. Have you ever seen anyone stick their feet in mid-air and then do a handbrake turn at thirty miles an hour? On a bicycle?”

“Did you?” guffawed Pdraig with amusement and admiration.

“Oh, you know, just a trick I learned.”

He laughed again. “Do a lot of trick cycling then, do you?”

“Oh this and that. Learned it from a trick cyclist from the circus I picked up one night. Sergei, his name. Russian, very hot...”

“Sergei the cyclist! Bet he could ride...”

“Well, he had me in the saddle for hours. Showed me all his tricks. Boy, he had a few...” The others laughed and continued to probe Margaret for details of her cycling prowess, and of Sergei’s.

“Excuse me,” said Simone abruptly, rising to her feet.

“Hey up. Pit stop for the yellow jersey,” shouted Jim as Marie got up to let her out. Don watched with some concern as Simone hurried to the toilets, but the conversation around him continued unabated. He caught Marie’s eye and gestured towards the toilets, raising an eyebrow and cocking his head slightly. Marie understood his meaning and slid silently towards the toilets.

“Why do they do that?” said Jim. “Women? They always go to the toilets in pairs. Always. Why do they do that?”

“So they’ve got enough fingers to add up the IQs of the guys they’re with,” replied Margaret tartly.

Simone was staring blankly at the mirror when Marie entered the toilets. “You alright, Simone?”

“Yeah,” she said, turning and smiling in a rather forced manner. “Yeah, fine.”

“Been a bit quiet through the meal. What’s wrong, worried about Rashid’s kiss?” Marie replied lightly.

“Yeah, too right. He’ll use tongues, guaranteed.” They laughed, but a nervous silence descended. Simone continued to look in the mirror, twirling a lock of hair in her finger. She and Marie had grown up together; they were the same age and lived only a few streets apart, and had known one another longer than their memories could stretch, their parents having walked them together when the girls were still in prams. They had been inseparable as children, in the same class throughout school, taking the same subjects, going to violin lessons together and practising at each other’s house every night. Never apart, most people believed them to be sisters, and that was when the name “Fiddle Twins” had been established; ten years on, the name remained, and if they had grown slightly more distant as they matured, they were still as close as natural sisters.

“What d’you think of Margaret?” Simone asked suddenly.

“Margaret? I kinda like her. She’s good for a laugh. Why, do you not?”

“No, no, I do. I do like her. It’s just, sometimes, she’s like really irritating, when she goes on about her fabulous sex life. Sergei the bloody cyclist, or the IT bloke from work, or somebody else, or somebody else. It’s like, yawn.”

“Yeah, she does lay it on a bit thick. Trouble is, it gets the guys going, so they egg her on. They get turned on hearing a woman talk sexy.” Simone nodded, although she knew this wasn’t strictly true: even when Margaret and she were alone she was still full of braggadocio.

“Suppose you’re right. I’m maybe just a bit touchy tonight, looking for something to criticise.”

“That’s what comes of wearing that yellow jersey. Makes you cranky.”

“Too bloody right.” She laughed, but went silent again for a moment. “It’s just... like, I don’t know; when you started going out with Justin, how long did it take for you to get to know him? I mean, properly?”

Marie exhaled a surprised sigh, raising her eyebrows. “God, I don’t know. We met about two years ago, but we’ve only been going out for eighteen months. I didn’t fancy him straight away though. He did. He started chatting me up the first day we met. Typical bloke.”

Simone smiled. "So how did you get off with him then?"

"At the Christmas bash at 'Albert's'"

"Yeah, I know that. I was there, remember. But how did you decide to go along with it? How did you decide he was the one?"

"Well, the ten voddies probably had something to do with it." They laughed. "But, I don't know. I don't think you *do* know, it's not a conscious thing. You just get used to people and then things kind of, like, develop, you know?"

Simone nodded unconvincingly. "Fair enough, I suppose they do just develop. But how d'you make the leap from lover to partner? How d'you know they're the right one?"

"You don't. You can't ever, can you? You have to go with your instinct."

"And how often d'you get it wrong?"

"Loads of times."

"Count one to ten and he's gone with the rest."

"What?"

"Line from a song. Relationships wither and die. Such fickle things."

"Don't I know it. Remember Tommy? And Carl? And Stephen?"

"Stephen was only ten, though."

"Yeah, dumped me for the under elevens football team."

"They *were* a very good football team. Unbeaten all season, as I recall. But it's about trust."

"What is?"

"Friendship."

"Yeah, I suppose it is. And kindred spirits. Same outlook, similar beliefs. Compatible, I suppose I mean." It wasn't a big deal to Marie, not something she had ever given much thought to. Simone was too reflective for her own good at times, she considered, too intent on understanding and looking for meaning. It seemed a curious contradiction with her relaxed nature.

"Well, yeah," continued Simone, "they're like, the building blocks of a friendship. But it takes more than that. Hundreds of people have the same interests and outlook as me, but they're not my friends. There has to be something else."

"I don't know. You're making it too complicated. You meet someone, and if you like them and have something in common it just clicks. Like that. You've got loads of friends like that."

"Not really. Only the four of you."

"Rubbish. We're your oldest friends, yeah, but you've got dozens of others. Margaret, for example, or Suzanne. You're going back to Derby for a week to help her. What's she, if she's not a friend?"

"An acquaintance. All acquaintances. That's all." Marie looked at her curiously. Simone had a wistful expression on her face, far away, distracted. She was leaning against the sinks, her arms stretched back and hands gripping the surface, and her eyes were fixed unseeingly on the cubicle doors.

"And how do they become friends?"

"Trust."

"Trust?"

"Trust. Margaret, for example? Could you trust someone like her?"

"What's to trust? She's only a friend. You're not talking about shagging her or anything are you? You're not moving in with the woman. She's just a friend."

Simone laughed. "Yeah, yeah, you're probably right. You know me: analyse a problem into submission." She pushed herself from the sinks and stepped forward. "This bloody tee-shirt is revolting. I'm going to burn it when I get home."

"I wouldn't bother. Pdraig bought twenty of them. Job lot, got twenty per cent discount for bulk."

"That doesn't make sense."

"I know, he paid £240 so he could get the 20 per cent discount. If he'd just bought the one it would have been £10."

"That's Pdraig. So rational he's stupid."

"Just don't say it's his Irish genes." Marie laughed as she opened the toilet door.

"What Irish genes?"

"Exactly." They weaved their way through the tables back to the Jenny Dangs, who were now arguing about football. Margaret looked wearily at them.

"Thank God you're back. They're on to flat back fours and 4-2-2 and the like."

"4-4-2," corrected Jim.

“My mistake,” said Margaret. She turned to Simone. “You okay?”

“Yeah, great. We’ve just put the world to rights.”

“Ended world poverty,” continued Marie.

“Cured global warming.”

“Put an end to war.”

“Did you find a way of making men put the toilet seat down when they’ve finished?”

“Don’t be silly. We didn’t have time for that.”

“Ho ho,” said Don haughtily.

Rashid arrived with coffees, and placed them in front of each of the diners. Leaving Simone’s to last, he turned to her and puckered his lips into an exaggerated kiss.

“Would madame like the bill now?”

“Not yet, Rashid,” she smiled. “Come back in a little while. It’s a big moment: I’ve got to prepare myself.” He laughed and departed in the direction of one of the other tables. “You’re not into football then, Margaret?”

“Loathe it. I don’t mind watching the players though. All those hairy thighs and tight butts.”

“You do surprise me,” she said laconically.

“I used to have a thing about Kevin Keegan. I remember when he got sent off in a cup final and whipped his shirt off. I had that picture on my wall for years.”

“Kevin Keegan. Isn’t he the bloke who used to have a perm?”

“Yeah, well they were very fashionable when I was a girl. My first boyfriend had one. Craig, what a wimp he was. Tiny dick. I remember being really disappointed when I saw it. My first one, and I expected something much more impressive.”

“I expect he was only about eight, though,” said Jim. The others laughed.

“Fourteen,” corrected Margaret, smiling.

“Fourteen? Wowweee. Wish I’d known girls like you when I was fourteen. All the girls I knew were still playing with Barbie.”

“That’s because you were still playing with your Action Man when all the real girls were about.”

“Miaoow,” said Pádraig.

“So what happened to Craig?” asked Jim, ignoring him.

“Craig? Poor guy. We got very close one evening, *very* close. And he started fumbling with me, and I started fumbling with him. As you do. And then I felt the size of it, and like I say, it wasn't what you'd call a marrow. More a broad bean. And I thought: no, no this won't do. I couldn't bring myself to do it. I wanted something more memorable than this to take my cherry, so I pushed him away and said 'no!' really theatrically. 'No,' I said. 'I can't do this, Craig. I can't do it. Don't force me into this, I don't want it,' like the hammiest soap opera you'll ever see, and he fell for it, and started apologising to me, and his little dick shrivelled up, and, well, that was that.”

“Okay,” said Simone, getting to her feet again. “I'm going home.”

“What?” said Marie.

“Sorry, I'm just a bit bored with this conversation. And anyway, I've got to be up early in the morning to get to Derby. I'll see you all next week.” Marie rose to let her through, and the group watched in confusion as she fetched her coat from the rack. She looked back momentarily, her eyes fixed on Margaret's, and swept through the door into the night.

“What was that about?” asked Margaret, a look of shock on her face.

“Search me,” replied Jim.

“What did I say?” she continued. “What have I done? Have I upset her?” Margaret seemed genuinely perplexed.

“Margaret,” said Don, “Simone is a woman of hidden depths. Nobody understands her; it's why we all love her. All I can say is that you may have hit a raw nerve.” And, he thought bitterly, you have no idea how raw, or how painful, you stupid woman.

“But what did I say? I'm really sorry.”

“Like I say, you hit a raw nerve. There's things you don't understand. I'm telling you, Margaret, don't ever hurt her.”

“Hurt her? Why on earth would I do that?”

At that moment Rashid returned to their table, giving an unwitting, yet comic, double take when he saw the empty seat where Simone had been. “Where's she gone?”

“Sorry Rashid,” said Marie. “It must have been too much for her. She just upped and went. Obviously the thought of your kiss reduced her to a quivering mass...”

“Bollocks,” he cried. “I've already done this bill with a ten per cent discount. Where's my kiss?”

“Jim, can you oblige?” asked Don. Jim grinned and pursed his lips like Les Dawson.

“Oh, hang on,” said Margaret exasperatedly. It seemed that her evening had gone sour, and she wanted it to end. “I’ll get the bill.”

“And the kiss?” asked Rashid.

“And the kiss. Come here, lover boy.” Rashid bent over towards her, and Margaret grabbed his neck, gripping him tightly and pulling him towards her; she fixed her lips on his and commenced a long, deeply lingering kiss. Finally releasing, she pulled her head back from him. “Debt paid?” she asked.

“I would say so. Have a nice evening ma’am.”

THE RAJ: MARGARET'S VERSION

When your world comes tumbling down, and all your hopes cascade with it into a pit of heartache, it's hard not to wallow in self-pity; so you'll forgive, I hope, my lachrymose introduction.

I'm afraid. I'm afraid. I'm afraid. What have I done? Oh God, what have I done? Have I lost my love, lost her just when I found her, just when I knew her? My visions of the future, the starry-eyed entente, the hand-clasping, life-enhancing, sweet embrace, the shared journey through a sea of emotion, have buckled and fractured, have torn into bitter shreds those plans, such plans for earthly bliss, have left me breathless, lifeless, soulless and bereft. And now I am alone. Alone, afraid and adrift. What a fool am I. Once and forever, a fool.

And what have I done, you ask? I don't know, and therein lies the seed of my downfall. Know thy love, and if you know not, say naught. Stay, observe, study and learn; discern her needs, divine her likes and dance a merry dance; but don't assume, and don't presume and don't engage mischance.

Oh, I can't keep up this dramatic language any longer; apart from anything it requires too much concentration and interferes with my sorry self-indulgence, but you get the picture. I'm knee deep in tears, a pale and sorry mess. Oh God, I'm off again. Right, bare facts...

Simone is not speaking to me. I've upset her, though I'm not entirely sure how or why.

It all seemed to be going wonderfully well. We were having a cracking meal at the Raj, and everyone was in tremendous form. Poor Jim Beam came in for some rough treatment, as usual, but he took it in his usual, serene manner. God help that boy if he ever takes up smoking dope: he'd be too laid back to remember to breathe. Simone seemed bright and cheerful, and as ever I just felt elated being in her presence. Right at the start she gave a brief flash when she whipped her tee shirt off in the middle of the restaurant. It's these little, uninhibited, spontaneous gestures I so love her for. It was all I could do to keep my tongue from drooling out of my mouth and my eyes fixed in their sockets. If I wasn't so upset I'd describe the vision of perfection to you, but at the moment I simply don't have the heart. She told some fantastic stories, especially about Jim Beam, and I had absolutely no conception that anything was amiss.

But then it all went wrong.

I was talking about Craig, about how we nearly got it on one night, before I chickened out. Ironically, this is one story I've told them which is largely true; I'm having difficulty keeping track of the lovers I've invented over the last few weeks, but little Craig was real, and so was his little dick. I may have talked up my role in the fiasco into which our date descended, but it was more or less true.

As I was telling it, though, Simone got up and said "I'm bored with this conversation, I'm off." Just like that. No discussion, no goodbyes, she just left. Clearly, I've upset her, but I have no idea what I've done, and I am absolutely miserable. I don't know what to do.

I asked the others what had happened and Don said "she's a woman of hidden depths. That's why we love her. But you've hit a raw nerve." What raw nerve, I asked. I tried to get him to tell me what he meant, but the sanctimonious little prick refused to say any more. He did say the most extraordinary thing though:

"There are things you don't know. Don't ever hurt her."

Why in God's name would I do that? I worship her, I adore her, I'd do anything for her. But what don't I know? I'm certain he knows, and I'm equally certain he has no intention of telling me. What his game is, I don't know: I'm not sure whether he sees me as a rival for Simone's affections, or whether he is just revelling in the role of her protector. Whatever, if I have hit a raw nerve, and he knows what it is, he has to tell me.

I tried to call him tonight, but his flatmate answered and said he wasn't in. I don't believe that for a second, but what can I do?

I need to speak to Simone. I need to clear things with her, apologise and find out what I did to upset her. Maddeningly, she's gone to Derby for a week: what unbelievable timing. I can't last for a week like this, though; it will drive me crazy, not knowing whether she is still angry with me, whether she wants nothing more to do with me, whether I've lost her entirely. I need to know. I need to know what my love is thinking.

Oh God, what have I done?

THE RAJ: SIMONE'S VERSION

SIMONE'S DIARY, JULY 20TH

Fuck.

Fuck.

Fuck, fuck, fuck, fuck, fuck.

What a fucking mess I've made. Simone, you stupid bitch, you stupid, stupid bitch.

I lost my temper with Margaret last night and walked out. Walked out on all of them while we were at the Raj. She had been winding me up all evening with her endless talk about Sergei the damned Russian cyclist, and all her usual, stupid sexual innuendo. It was really getting to me.

But then she started on about her first love, and began telling this story about when they first nearly did it. They were fumbling with each other's clothing, and this and that, and then she felt the size of his dick. It was really small, and she said how disappointed she was; she wanted something better for her first time and decided to get rid of the boy. And this is when I lost it, because it took me straight back to Steve, all those years ago. The parallels are uncanny, and it isn't a laughing matter. The sheer arrogance of the woman. She started pretending that she didn't want to do it, and that he was forcing her, and he shouldn't do that. Bitch, I thought to myself. How can you fucking joke about this? How can you tell an amusing story about someone else's misery? I couldn't take any more of it, so I just said "I'm bored, and I've got to get ready to go to Derby," and walked out. How stupid can you get?

Did I discuss it with her? Did I speak to her about it? Tell her I thought her conversation inappropriate, or boorish? No, I didn't. I took the immature approach and stormed out, like a petulant little schoolgirl. What will she think of me? I expect they were laughing about it for hours afterwards. Silly Simone's taken pet...

And why didn't I? Why didn't I have it out with her? After all, I, of all people, had pretty good cause to. Well, and I'm ashamed to admit this, it's because despite how much Margaret was winding me up, it was really myself I was annoyed with, and I was taking it out on Margaret. Transference of guilt, a classic case, and Margaret was the ideal vehicle for my ire.

I was really disappointed with my own behaviour throughout the evening, and feeling pretty low about it. First off, I stripped off my tee-shirt in the middle of the restaurant. Damn me, I thought, even bloody Margaret wouldn't do that: what are you trying to do, girl, keep up with her? And then, because I was uncomfortable about that, I took it out on poor Jim, humiliating him by telling the story - for the millionth time - of when he got

suspended. Poor kid just took it, as he always does, with a smile on his face, but I felt so bloody awful about doing it to him. So Margaret was an excuse. When she started on the story about her boyfriend I leapt onto the moral high ground and started casting judgements on her, but in the cold light of day, I can see that it was purely a way to exorcise my own guilt. What a stupid, stupid bitch.

And there's something else. But I don't dare write that down yet. I don't even dare think about it, because it's too crazy to contemplate. I'm off to Derby in a few minutes, and I think the break will do me good.

I'm off. I'll write again soon.

TRIP TO DERBY

I suffered and sweated over the weekend, unable to concentrate on any activity without returning to Simone and my current crisis. I replayed the conversation in the Raj over and over again, Simone's "I'm bored" speech wounding me deeper and deeper each time. I played out new conversations, trying to imagine what she might say: depending on my mood, these ranged from tearful apologies to ringing accusations of – well, I was never sure of what exactly, since I still couldn't understand the reason for her peremptory departure.

By Monday evening, made miserable by a solitary bottle of wine, I reached the limit of my endurance and resolved that I had to go to Derby to find her. I had no idea where she lived, of course, which made things difficult. I had her mobile number, but I couldn't call her for fear of her refusing to speak to me and forbidding me to come; so I tried Don, who refused to tell me. He went into pompous mode again, assuming his role of unofficial guardian and ordering me to leave well alone until Simone was ready to talk. Again, he told me I didn't know what I'd done, to which I snorted that that was precisely the reason why I wanted to go and see her; but he wouldn't listen. Marie was completely unavailable when I tried; whether this was a genuine or a diplomatic absence I wasn't sure but, I told myself, don't start becoming paranoid. Next stop was Jim Beam, and it was evident from his stuttering performance that he had been given orders not to tell me anything. Jim's sweet nature, though, dictated that he couldn't deny anybody for long, and after a few minutes I was scribbling down Simone's Derby address. Promising him a big kiss the next time we met, I said goodnight and began to make preparations.

Derby wasn't far, only about ninety minutes away, and I set off about eleven the next morning. It was a bright day, warm and effervescent, a velvety wind floating in the atmosphere, stroking itself up and down my arms and over my face. My mind was whirling as I drove distractedly up the dual carriageway. What was it about this woman which so entranced me? From the first moment I saw her I knew I wanted her. Why? It made no sense. I had never previously had any lesbian notions, and yet Simone, from the instant I saw her, had filled me with a lust the intensity of which I would not have believed possible. As I came to know her, this lust deepened and ripened, blossoming into such a deep-seated devotion that I felt close to tears each time I was in her presence: I had become so emotionally charged that the mention of her name, the touch of her hand, the sight of her glorious profile would cause my heart to stop and my hands to tremble. In comparison to my almost schoolgirlish infatuation, she had an almost preternatural poise, an elegance and grace that came from within and

manifested itself in her warm, compassionate treatment of everyone around her. She was one of those people who instantly brought excitement and happiness to a room, whose entrance brightened any gathering, whom everyone considered their friend.

None of this, though, really answered my question: why was I so obsessed with her? She treated me no differently from anyone else, granted no special favours, displayed no more affection, and yet my response to her had inflated far beyond the simple affection displayed by everyone else. Why had I, a thirty-seven year old woman, become so hopelessly infatuated with this young girl of twenty?

I suspected I knew the answer, but not yet: it was there inside me, but not in a form I could yet comprehend. There was a special connection between us: I felt it powerfully, and I had a notion that Simone did too. There was a particular resonance to our relationship, something which attracted us to one another, like magnetic opposites, without us being able to influence it in any way. The key was there somewhere, I felt, and it would unlock the door of understanding when it was ready.

But first, I had to find Simone. And I had to reconcile her.

Any of you who know Derby will sympathise with the next hour and twenty minutes, as I drove round the outer ring road several times, through the city centre in various directions and explored sundry business parks and residential areas. Derby is easy to get lost in and, once lost, impossible to extricate yourself from. I drove round and round, getting more frazzled and bad tempered with every set of traffic lights, less calm and composed with each roundabout. All the while I could think only of Simone, of what she might say when she saw me, of whether she would shun me or welcome me.

Finally, I found her street and parked about fifty yards or so from her flat. The car was hot and smelly and so, I feared, was I: hardly the sort of entrance I had hoped for. A sudden burst of nerves almost ruined my resolve at that moment, little barbs of doubt insinuating themselves in my psyche, pricking at my confidence. If I could have turned round, if it wouldn't have ruined my self-esteem, if it had been easier to accomplish without such evident loss of face, I think I would have done. But here in Derby, after having driven for nearly three hours in search of my love, there was no way I could back out.

Still, as I stood before her door I felt physically sick. My knees were trembling, my palms were clammy and puffy, and it felt as though a spear were probing at my chest. With a sickly, metallic taste in my mouth and fear ringing in my ears I rang the doorbell. After about twenty seconds – and it is amazing how long twenty seconds can take – I heard from within the sound of feet clumping down stairs, and the door swung open. The rest of my life, I thought, rested on the next few seconds.

“Margaret.”

Simone looked amazing. I remember, even in my terror, even in my moment of fear and doubt, that the mere sight of her set amorous spirits pirouetting in my stomach. She was completely unmade-up, and her hair was tied in a bunch at the back; her face, luminous and unearthly in its beauty, glowed and shone, leaving me mesmerised.

I had been practising this moment for three days, and I had no idea what to say.

“Hi.”

She stood in the doorway, arm raised, holding the edge of the door above her head. That image of her is branded in my memory, unerasable, as vivid now as it was at that very moment. If I close my eyes I can see every detail: the delicate hairs on her arm, white in the pale sun, even and regular in pattern; the texture of her skin, so densely smooth; her fingers crooked around the door, long and impossibly elegant, with the largest fingernails I had ever seen; the arm of her tee-shirt falling back to her shoulder and revealing her underarm to my prurient gaze; a picture of beauty, a picture to remember, a picture to cherish.

“I wanted to talk,” I stammered, “about the other night...”

“Look, Margaret, it’s a really bad time. Honestly. I’m not giving you the brush-off, really I’m not, but I can’t right now. I’m helping Suzanne with her re-sits: she has her exam tomorrow. I promised to help her, I can’t let her down.”

Slowly, I could see doors shutting before me, futures dimming, dreams and plans breaking down in recrimination and sad certainty. Whatever she said, however she chose to dress it up, I *was* being given the brush-off; I was being despatched; I was unwanted. My lip trembled, my eye dimmed. I think Simone saw the effect her words had had on me. She studied my face for a moment, that curious, inscrutable look she generally wore masking her true feelings. She seemed to be weighing things up, determining her course of action. I stood, a helpless bystander in my own drama, awaiting the next move, like an actor who has dried up on stage waiting for the prompter.

“Tomorrow,” she said at length. “Meet me tomorrow. Suzanne has her exam at nine. Meet me in the University – you know where it is?”

I nodded. I had no idea, but as this lifeline dangled precariously before my nose I was scared to do anything which might upset it.

“Meet me in the refectory. You can’t miss it. When you enter the main hall you can see it in front of you. I’ll be there just after nine.”

Again I nodded mutely. I was afraid if I opened my mouth I would cry.

“But hey, we’re alright aren’t we?” she said.

I smiled. *She* asked *me* if we were alright.

“Yeah,” I managed to drag from my mouth, “we’re cool. Tomorrow, then.” Quickly, before the tears which I knew were about to flood from me showed themselves, I turned and fled back to the car. We were alright. Were we?

I found a cheap bed and breakfast for the night and bought some fresh clothes and a map of the town, ready for the morning. That night, cooped up in my tiny room, seemed to last forever, an aching eternity of hope and doubt, elation and despair. I swooped and soared through emotional peaks and troughs, convincing myself that things were fine, and then, before I had drawn breath, breaking down once more into pessimistic vacillation.

The next morning I set out early for Kedlestone and quickly found the University. It was the summer holiday, of course, and the place was mostly empty, with just a few nervous looking students, presumably those doing re-sits, ambling about in the early morning sunshine. The campus was large and crisp and attractive, a million miles away from the cramped, archaic place where I had studied fifteen years before. I marvelled at the space, the attractive banks of grass and flower beds, the copious car parks and the array of interlinked buildings. Reaching the main entrance, I swung open the large, glass doors and stepped inside. After a basic reception area, the space broadened out into a huge concourse, with shops all down one side and a shallow bank of steps leading to an elevated hallway. On one side was the entrance to the library, a huge, multi-floor building with as many PC stations as books, and on the other the refectory, with a number of tables and chairs scattered all around it. I scanned them, but there was no sign of Simone. Fetching myself a cup of tea and a blueberry muffin, I sat near the hallway, where I could observe everyone as they came and went.

Simone was about ten minutes late. I saw her the instant she swept through the glass doors and into the concourse. She wore blue, three-quarter length trousers, her bare, slender ankles emphasising her trim and attractive body; and on top a simple, cotton tee shirt, cropped to reveal her midriff. Her hair was loose, swinging gently as she walked, silky and glinting in the light, and she wore a smile of calm assurance. My heart was somersaulting in my chest as she approached. Seeing me, she waved and headed over.

“Hiya,” she said. “I’ll get myself a tea and be right with you.” She chatted briefly with the assistant behind the counter while she prepared the tea, and I tried to compose myself.

“Sorry about yesterday,” she said, as she placed her tea on the table and drew up a chair next to me, “but Suzanne was in a real state. She’s almost beside herself this morning, convinced she’s going to fail.”

“No problem,” I replied. “My fault. Shouldn’t have sprung myself on you like that, with no notice. It’s just...”

“Oh, that’s okay. I’m kinda glad you did.”

“You are?”

“Yeah, I think we need to talk. About the other night.”

“Yes, I think we do.” There was silence for a moment. We both laughed.

“Well, one of us needs to say something...” she said eventually.

“I’m sorry,” we said in unison. Again, we laughed. Again, there was a pause.

“I am really sorry,” I continued. “I’m really, really sorry that I upset you.”

“Yes, no, well,” she said. “It’s complicated. Yes, you did upset me, but it wasn’t only you. I think I, like, took it out on you, because I was upset and annoyed anyway. It wasn’t all your fault, and it didn’t deserve what I did.”

I had no idea what she was talking about. I doubt whether she did either.

“Can you tell me what it was I did? Or said?”

“Well, no, I don’t want to go into details. It’s not worth it; it doesn’t matter. There’s nothing to be gained by it.” She paused, as though seeking the courage to continue. “But I will tell you one thing that annoys me. It’s been bothering me for a while, now. I hope you’re not upset about this, but I’m going to say it anyway.”

I waited, my heart pounding in my chest, the residual noise thumping in my ears. I was on automatic pilot by now, barely conscious of what I was saying: it was as though I were on the outside, observing what was happening. Sometimes the emotional pitch of a moment becomes so great that you become almost disestablished from it: it’s as though the intensity of it is too much to bear, and your mind takes evasive action. What was she going to tell me? What was it that annoyed her? Would it upset me? I thought, at that moment, that I was going to be sick, and a momentary dizziness overcame me; reality slid and melted away from me, then drifted back into focus again. Simone was toying with her tea, not looking at me.

“You have a really bad habit,” she began, “of going on and on about your love life. In fairly extensive detail, I have to say. Unnecessary detail, in fact. All the gory details. And it, like, it doesn’t offend me, but ... it’s stuff I don’t need to know, d’you know what I mean?”

I stared at her in amazement. This was what upset her? This was what annoyed her about me? Dear God, I only did it because I thought that was what her generation did; I only talked about my experiences (invented, every damned one of them) because I didn't want to appear like some aged spinster. The irony of it struck me, and I laughed.

"What's so funny?" she asked, immediately sounding prickly.

"I'm so sorry," I replied. "I had absolutely no idea. None at all." It was going to be difficult to explain, without revealing that my stories were fabrications, and that I did it out of basic insecurity, neither of which I wished to admit to. "I guess I was trying to fit in."

"But we don't do that. We don't talk about sex all the time like that."

Not all the time, they didn't, but they did talk about it rather more often than they perhaps realised, in a more open and upfront way than they realised. Certainly, compared to my generation they were far more relaxed about discussing sexuality, but perhaps I had misjudged the extent of it.

"I'm sorry," I repeated. "It really is my fault. I thought I was just joining in. I've gone over the top without realising it. I won't do it again." Simone looked embarrassed, as people generally do when their argument is accepted without demur: the whole argumentative flow is disrupted – the attack and parry, counter-attack and defence, the whole ritual is overturned, and it can be difficult to know how to pick up the threads of the conversation again. She smiled and reached out her hand; taking mine in hers, she nodded happily.

"No worries. It's over and done with, in the past." I would have been happy to leave it at that, happy to accept her reassurances: nothing, in fact, would have pleased me more. Yet, something didn't quite add up. I could detect a slight anxiety in her expression, and something gnawed at me. However irritating it might be to hear excessive details about my sex life, her reaction the other night was disproportionate. Having put up with it for the weeks we had known one another, it didn't seem probable that she would explode in the manner she did: not Simone, it wasn't in keeping with her nature. And what had she said at the start of the conversation: "I don't want to go into details." That meant there was more; that meant there was something else, something deeper, something more substantial than a dislike of hearing the prurient details. Besides, there was Don's cryptic comment: "there are things you don't know." Simone was not telling me the full story; she was concealing something from me. I stared at her face and saw, again, a flash of vulnerability that wasn't generally visible. I had seen it once before, at Rutland Water, when she had seemed close to becoming upset about something. About what? She was an enigma, with her emotions so deeply buried beneath her calm exterior, but the more I got to know Simone Clements, the more I sensed she was less at ease with herself than she liked to project.

“Over and done with,” I repeated. I wanted to probe further, but I could tell from her eyes that her guard had gone up again. The shadow of vulnerability had disappeared from her face as quickly as it showed, as though it had never been there, and she once more presented her affable, genial self. I changed the subject to her friend Suzanne, enquiring politely about her re-sits, what subjects they were, how close she had been to passing and so on. Immediately, the defensive edge to Simone’s demeanour disappeared.

“She’ll be alright, though,” she continued. “She worries too much, gets herself worked up too easily. She just needs someone to sit down, to hold her hand and talk her through things.”

“And what about you,” I said nervously, aware that I was treading on dangerous ground again. “Who do you turn to when you’ve got problems?”

“Oh, I don’t have problems,” she said airily.

“Yes you do,” I replied. She looked up at me sharply, surprised that her parry of my question had been fired back at her. “We all do, sometimes.”

“Well, I must just be very lucky,” she replied, “because I don’t.”

“Or you don’t talk about them.”

“We all deal with things in our own ways.” The pitch of her voice was rising, and I could see she was getting flustered. I had no desire to upset her again, but I knew she was concealing something. I had begun this conversation curious about what it was that Simone was concealing, anxious to know how it affected me, and how I affected it: I was approaching it out of my own self-interest. As the conversation turned and developed, though, I began to sense a whole new side to Simone. I began to glimpse a weakness, a vulnerability which was all the greater for the lengths she took to conceal it. I felt I had come close to uncovering a huge well of uncertainty in this most certain of individuals. And through it all, my love for her swelled. I was no longer curious, I was concerned; I didn’t want to know, I wanted to help. I wanted her to let me into her life, because I suspected she had never let anyone in before; I wanted her to know the joy of sharing, and I wanted her to share with me.

“Yes we do deal with things in our own way, but we all need to talk about things sometimes.”

“What are you getting at, Margaret?”

“Nothing,” I replied. “Just making a point that we all need help sometimes.”

“Are you suggesting that I need help now?”

“No. Why do you think that?”

Simone paused, conscious that I had called her bluff: by stating that I had made no such implication, I suggested that the inference was entirely hers, leaving open the question of why she might make such an inference. She made no effort to answer. I was getting nowhere, I could see that. Simone’s defences were formidable, her resolve considerable. If she didn’t want to open up, she wouldn’t. Not here, anyway, not in her own setting. Here, she was in control, she could assert her authority. And here, I felt, lay the roots of her problems, the relics, the remnants of some past disputes which she had tried to bury within her. While she was in these surroundings, at once unsettling and familiar, I would never break through.

“You are always such a pillar of support for people. You’re always there for everyone else,” I continued. “I’m just curious about who or what supports Simone.”

There was complete silence for a good thirty seconds. And then, to my utter astonishment, Simone burst into tears. Her face, alabaster-smooth, pale and perfect, crumpled into a heaving, sobbing grimace of misery, the suddenness of the transformation taking my breath away. Great, lung-filling gulps and animal sighs rent the air, as Simone’s composure evaporated into plangent tearfulness. I pulled my chair beside her and reached out to her, drawing her sobbing head to my chest. I could feel the convulsions racking her body as she flung her arms around me.

“If only,” she said through her sobs. If only? If only what? Now wasn’t the time to ask though. I stroked her hair, kissing the crown of her head gently and stroking my left hand up and down her back soothingly. My God, I thought, what have I done? What sores have I exposed? What pain have I provoked? Gradually, Simone’s tears subsided, and for a moment she sat quietly in my grip, her head lodged against my breast. In spite of the pain I knew she must be feeling, I thought it a beautiful moment of calm.

“I’m sorry,” she said, raising her head from my chest and wiping her hand against her tear-dewed eyes. “I don’t know what came over me. Guess I’m a bit overwrought, like Suzanne,” she smiled, trying to make light of events. I grabbed her hand and held it tight.

“Who supports Simone?” I repeated. “I hope that one day you’ll be able to tell me.” She smiled and nodded, head bowed.

In that instant, our relationship turned on its axis. I had seen through the pretence. I had seen the real Simone, the living, crying, hurting Simone who was bottling up her emotions and hiding herself from the world behind the façade of “Simone, everyone’s friend.” And in that moment, at that revelation, my love for her multiplied a thousand-fold.

“Don’t suppose now is a good time to tell you about the bloke I picked up in the B&B last night?” I joked.

She laughed. “Not at all a good time.”

“Thought not.”

“Did you?”

“What, pick someone up last night?”

“Yeah.”

“Course not. What do you think?” I wanted to tell her that I spent the night in self-pitying misery, convincing myself that I had lost her. I wanted to tell her that I was too scared to sleep, too upset to think, too worried to dream. But I didn’t. How could I?

“Have you ever been to the Peak District?” I asked.

“No, never. Stupid, isn’t it. Half an hour or so from here, but I’ve never gone.”

“Can I take you?”

“Why?”

“I think you’d like it. I think you’d appreciate it.” I think you need it, I thought, I think you need the space, I think you need the perspective.

“Yeah, I suppose so,” she replied noncommittally.

Seizing on her agreement, however tentative, I proceeded. “Great. Can we go tomorrow? Suzanne’s last exam is tomorrow. You’re free after you escort her to the exam room door. We can go then.”

“Tomorrow?” she retorted in surprise. “What’s the rush? I need to get things ready...”

“Rubbish. Just pack some clothes and a toothbrush and you’re ready. Do you have a tent?”

“A tent? What for?”

“For sleeping in, of course. And sleeping bags?”

“No, none,” she replied, confused.

I could see she was regaining her composure and was about to start querying things, so I bulldozed my way through her objections. I had made

my mind up, and I wasn't going to accept any refusals. What Simone needed, I decided, was to get away from herself, to remove herself to somewhere where she wasn't everyone's rock, everyone's support, where she could just be Simone Clements.

"We can go tomorrow morning, and do a nice, gentle walk, then stay the night and do a longer walk on Saturday. I'll go into town this afternoon and buy a tent and sleeping bags."

"What about food?"

"Oh, there's a pub in the village. We can eat there."

"I've never been walking before."

"It's easy. You put one foot in front of the other." Before today, Simone would have won through with her objections, would have used rational argument to get her own way, but I was in no mood for compromise and batted away every protest. I would not be gainsaid.

Simone realised this, too, and finally relented. She smiled. "Okay, okay," she said, "have it your way. We'll go camping in the Peak District. I must be mad."

"Fantastic. D'you want to come into town with me to buy the stuff?"

"No, I said I'd wait for Suzanne and buy her lunch. Then we've got to finish the revision for tomorrow's exam."

"I know, I know. I'll keep out of your way tonight. See you here tomorrow, though, nine o'clock sharp. For the start of a big adventure."

"Hmm," she replied, the last vestiges of her disquiet etching a faint, pained beauty on her face. "A big adventure..."

EDALE

Anyone who knows the Peak District will appreciate that the worst thing about it is getting there. The roads are narrow and impossibly winding, and populated by gangs of motorcyclists whose lack of regard for their own safety and that of everyone else is astonishing: only vanity of the most unattractive and soulless type can be so disregarding. We arrived shortly after twelve at the small campsite behind the Post Office in Edale and booked our pitch for two nights. Simone had never been camping before, and her gaucheness as she tried to assist me in erecting the tent was amusing to the point of being excruciating. Resolving that I would be faster by myself, I sent her in search of bread and quickly pitched the tent beneath the shade of a massive oak on the right hand side of the sloping field. Being a Friday morning, the campsite was not especially full, but I knew that by evening it would be busy: Edale is at the foot of the Pennine Way, the last point of civilisation before walkers begin the rugged, 250 mile walk up England's north-west spine, and as such is one of the most popular stopping places in the whole Peak District.

I settled the bedding inside the tent, then broke open a can of lager, stretched out on a rug on the grass on while I waited for Simone to return, and breathed in exaggerated lungfuls of the fresh Derbyshire air, looking around the campsite, and beyond, across the Dale, in the direction of Castleton. There is a simple beauty to the Peaks which is indefinable but tangible, which lifts one's heart, invokes a sense of wellbeing. Simone appeared after about ten minutes, swinging a plastic bag full of groceries.

"Ha!" she snorted, indicating my lager, "didn't take you long to get started, did it? I thought this walking lark was supposed to be healthy?"

"You'll not be wanting yours, then?"

"Give it here! I had the rudest woman in the post office; all but told me off for taking a loaf of bread from the shelf."

"A '*local shop, for local people*', darling," I quoted from the popular TV series. "Lucky to get out alive, I'd say. She didn't see you coming back here, did she? Didn't see which is our tent? '*I know where you live...*' She'll come in and get us in the night." I handed Simone her can of Stella Artois and leaned back on the rug.

"Cheers m'dear," she said, popping the ringpull and taking a hefty swig, her hand cocked jauntily on her hip. "So what's the plan of action then?"

“Well,” I replied. “I thought we’d do something nice and easy today. Break you in gently. Get you into the feel of things...”

“Cut it out. You make me sound like some kind of a wuss.”

“If I knew what a wuss was I’d agree.”

“Let’s just say if you ever call me one our friendship is over.”

“Hmm, you don’t know what it means either, then?”

“Not a clue. Good word though. Onomatopoeic.” She paused. “Probably.”

“Well then, my little wuss, what I thought we’d do,” I ducked to avoid her playful slap, “is take a quick hike up Grindsbrook Clough.”

“Didn’t he used to manage Nottingham Forest or somebody?”

“That was his brother. Grindsbrook Clough is the start of the Pennine Way, so when you get back you can tell everyone you’ve walked it. Well, two miles of it anyway.”

“That’s probably about as much as I want to.”

“You’ll love it. Trust me.”

And love it she did. It was a short walk, only about three miles or so, but took in some breathtaking scenery. We started on the course of the Pennine Way, strolling along the side of the valley, with the wild and craggy Golden Clough rising erratically to our right and, beyond that, the beginnings of the bleak moorland and the rocky outcrop of Ringing Roger. Gradually our path became more open, satisfyingly rough and empty, and the relative lack of walkers helped increase our impression that we were alone in the wilderness. At first the walking was easy, and Simone began to form a false impression; she was disabused of this, though, as we followed the western turn of Grindsbrook Clough and the path began to ascend quite sharply, becoming rockier and more difficult. The valley narrowed, and all around us were gritstone boulders, weird and fantastically shaped by the winds of centuries, centurions on guard in the vast, bleak landscape. As we reached the outcrop at Foxholes we paused and looked over the great expanse of moorland to the west, heathered and violet.

“God, it’s huge,” Simone said.

“Wonderful, isn’t it? Kinder Scout is over there, to the north; these are the slopes of the lower edge. Enormous, empty moorland, beyond the control of man. Heather and grass and rocks and grouse, and nothing to find but your soul.”

We turned south towards Grindslow Knoll and paused at the peak, taking in the views around us: Grindsbrook Clough to the north, up which we had just climbed, nestled at the base of Kinder Scout and leading back down towards Edale; westwards towards Crowden Clough, with its scarred, rocky outcrops, at once lovely and menacing; and south over the whole valley of Edale, a beautiful slice of England, glinting green and warm in the pale summer sunshine, restful, unruffled, unconcerned by time or tide.

“Tired?” I asked.

“No, but my feet are a bit sore. I wasn’t expecting it to be so rocky.”

“We’ll head back now. A couple of lagers at the Nag’s Head and a Shepherd’s Pie and you’ll be fighting fit for tomorrow.”

“Tomorrow?”

“Yes, tomorrow. Tomorrow we do the big walk. Peveril Castle to Mam Tor.”

“I can hardly wait.”

“You’ll love it. Trust me.”

“I’ve heard that before, somewhere.”

“And I wasn’t wrong, was I?”

“No, you weren’t.” She threaded her arm through mine and kissed me lightly on the cheek. We took a final look over the valley and began our descent. “Thank you for this,” she said. “Thank you for bringing me. It’s what I needed.”

I nodded and we headed down the path towards the village again and into the Nag’s Head. The Nag’s Head is a bustling, thriving pub, full of walkers in the summer months, its various rooms alive with the spirit of adventure, bristling with tales of rambling, past and present, of blisters and sprains, triumphs and disasters. Here mingle the casual ramblers, happy and relaxed, the walkers about to set off on the Pennine Way, full of determination and adrenalin, and those who have just completed the walk, tired, contented, ready for some easy home comforts. Simone and I settled into a huge wooden bench in a little alcove and thirstily set about our lagers.

“That was cool,” Simone said.

“Was it what you expected?”

“Don’t know. I’m not really sure what I expected. Wasn’t sure if it was going to be, like, climbing and scrabbling up mountainsides, or more like just a long

walk. It was sort of a mixture of the two. I really enjoyed it. I'd like to do it again."

"Just as well, really, since we *are* doing it again tomorrow." I raised my glass in mock salute.

The pub was surprisingly busy, considering it was only about seven in the evening, and a large contingent appeared to be Welsh. While I was queuing at the bar I asked one of them, an older man with an impressive beer-belly and a thatch of tousled, greying hair, who they were.

"We are the Prestatyn Rugby Club," he replied in a booming voice, his precise Welsh vowels ringing through the bar, "on our annual walking holiday. Do it every year: three days walking, two nights drinking and last man standing drives us home." I laughed and he introduced himself as Gareth and offered to buy our drinks, and so it was that we found ourselves in the middle of Prestatyn Rugby Club's festivities for the rest of the evening.

I returned to Simone with our drinks, and Gareth in tow.

"Don't tell me," she said witheringly. "We've only been here ten minutes, you've pulled already?"

"Simone, this is Gareth, he plays rugby."

Simone looked disdainfully at Gareth's ample belly. "Not very fast, he doesn't, I imagine."

"I'm more what you'd call the coach," he bellowed good-naturedly. "Delighted to meet you, Simone. And may I say what a beautiful young lady you are?"

"You may."

"Oh, I'll not bother. You don't need *me* to tell you that, do you?"

"When did you get here?" I asked.

"Eleven o'clock this morning. Had a quick sprint up to Hollins Cross and Lose Hill, and we've been in here since five."

"You'd never know," said Simone. The rugby team were, it was true, becoming more and more raucous, their good-natured banter conducted at a volume which, if replicated in the workplace, would require earplugs under Health and Safety legislation.

"You ain't heard nothing yet," replied Gareth. "Wait till we start singing."

We were hungry by this stage and while Gareth and the Prestatyn rugby team settled down for a hard night's entertainment we quickly perused the menu. I had already decided on shepherd's pie: after a day on the moors one needs something substantial, and only traditional food will do. Simone followed suit and we placed our order.

"So am I going to have to sleep in the car tonight then, while you and Gareth make mad, passionate love?" she teased.

"Behave," I replied. "I honestly don't do that sort of thing."

"Oh no? The stories you've told me over the last few weeks..."

"Well, they might have been a bit embellished, shall we say."

"No way. All the details you've gone into. You couldn't have made all that up."

"Vivid imagination, my dear, vivid imagination."

Simone snorted, not sure whether to believe me or not.

"Anyway, he's not my type."

She laughed and hit me playfully. "And what is your type, then?"

"Ah, there's a question. If you'd asked me six months ago I could have told you: tall, dark, intelligent, rich, that sort of thing. Now, I'm not sure. I don't know."

"What caused the change?"

"Oh, I don't know. Things."

Simone laughed again. "Christ, we're a right pair aren't we? Only yesterday it was you lecturing me about keeping things to myself, not sharing, bottling things up. Now you're doing it to me!"

"Touché. Okay, we'll make a pact then. Anything we ask each other, we answer honestly. Yes?"

Simone nodded uncertainly. "No secrets," she said.

"No secrets. But if, for any reason, we don't feel able to talk about it just yet, we can say so, and promise to explain later."

Simone nodded again, rather more vigorously this time.

"And the other won't probe." I continued. "*No paseran.*"

“What?”

“*No pasaran*,” I repeated. “You shall not pass’. Republican soldiers said it in the Spanish Civil War. When they were fighting Franco.”

“Cool. *No pasaran*, then. Unless and until invited.”

“Indeed.”

“I tell you what, though, it’ll be a culture shock for me, opening myself up to someone else,” Simone laughed.

“And me, I guess.”

“Okay, I want to start this.” She settled herself excitedly in her seat, her left leg swung under her right, facing me earnestly. “How many guys have you really slept with?”

I was somewhat taken aback: I hadn’t expected such immediacy, nor such a forward question. I had proposed the honesty policy, however, so I couldn’t renege on it.

“Three,” I replied.

“Three!” Simone snorted. “Three! Come off it, you must have told me about at least a dozen.”

“Like I said, a vivid imagination.”

“No kidding?” Simone went silent for a moment, taking in this revelation. “So why? Why tell me all those stories?”

I shrugged my shoulders uncomfortably. Why had I done it? To be interesting, to fit in with the young things, to convince myself I wasn’t some old frump who’d run past her time. Fear. That was the reason. Fear of a body showing its age, fear of a life half over but barely lived, fear of contempt, fear of blank looks where once I had turned heads, fear of it all being over before I’d allowed it to begin. Fear of fate, fear of growing old. Invent a past to create a future.

“I didn’t want to seem like some droopy old maid,” I replied.

“I’d never have thought of you like that.”

“No?”

“No. God, no. You’re beautiful, you’re young, you’ve got more life in you than most of the girls in my year at uni. It’d never cross my mind to think of you as an old maid.”

I wasn't sure whether I believed her or not, but they were the words I wanted to hear. "Well, when you get to my age..."

"Oh don't give me that 'when you get to my age' schtick, please. Give me a break."

"Sorry," I smiled. "Sounded like an old maid there, didn't I?"

"Just for an instant, yes," she chided with a grin. "Granny."

"Wuss."

Food arrived in time to stop us scratching at each other's eyes, and we laid into it hungrily. Now that Simone and I had been detached from our personal tête-à-tête, I was suddenly conscious that our rugby chums had grown considerably louder, and there was a deal of discordant singing at one of the tables in the opposite corner to us. And I was also aware that looming over us, once more, was the rotund and jocund form of Gareth.

"Can I get you lovely ladies another drink?" he asked. He was a pleasant enough man, very hospitable and not in the least pushy, but to be honest I could have done without him. The whole intention of this trip was to get Simone alone, and becoming embroiled in the activities of Prestatyn Rugby Club on tour was not part of the plan. Before I could decline, however, Simone interjected.

"Half of lager please. Kronenbourg."

"And for me, please," I added. Oh well, I thought, if I'm not going to get her to myself I may as well join in the fun. Gareth disappeared to the bar and quickly returned with our drinks, settling himself down at our table. The group opposite were in full voice by now, singing a combination of sentimental ballads and grossly, but hilariously, offensive rugby songs. A particular favourite with the team was The Granny Song, the singer of which got an earsplitting yell of approval when he announced it. To the tune of Delilah, it chronicled the depths of depravity to which a young man is driven:

*"My how I defiled her,
Roped and groped and riled her
Eighty-four, an octogenarian whore,
Forgive me, wee granny, I just couldn't take any more."*

That pretty much set the tone for the next couple of hours, as drink took its toll and the rugby club got coarser and louder, drunker and wilder. They had taken over a complete room of the pub, and apart from us the rest of the customers had vacated it for the relative calm of the other rooms. The Prestatyn rugby team were free, then, to do much as they pleased, and the

players took it in turn to lead the ensemble in song. Gareth, when it came to his turn, announced, to great cheers, that he was going to sing "The Musicman".

"Oh, I know this," said Simone. "This is fun."

"It's a children's song," I replied, confused.

"Probably not this version, Margaret."

Gareth began singing, in a very fine tenor, "*I am the music man, I come from down your way, and I can play*"; and the congregation answered "*what can you play?*" Gareth sang in reply "*I can play the viola,*" and was answered "*how does it go?*" Suddenly, he launched into an impersonation of Julian Lloyd Webber, who was a cellist, I thought, but never mind, and sang "*vio-vio-vio-la, vio-la, vio-la, vio-vio-vio-la, vio-vio-la.*"

That set the scene for the song, as each person in turn became the musicman, playing a variety of instruments: piccolo, German Horn, piano and so on; and then, naturally, given that this was a rugby club, it started to depart from reality, beginning with "The Dambusters," accompanied by the entire group running around the room with their hands clasped to their eyes like goggles, pretending they were flying a plane and humming the tune to The Dambusters. "*I can sing like Grace Kelly*" was followed by "*holy shit, the brakes don't work, the brakes don't work, the brakes don't work,*" and the tone became progressively baser from there, encompassing the Pope, Michael Jackson and sundry other luminaries. Finally, as Gareth sang "*I can play the big blue whale,*" Simone grabbed me.

"Toilet break," she said, heading for the door.

"What was that all about?" I asked when we were ensconced in the miniscule toilets.

"You'll see when we get back," she laughed. When we returned, the floor was awash with beer and the walls were dripping.

"What the hell?"

"The big blue whale," explained Simone. "The action for it is to take a mouthful of drink, tip your head back and spout it out like a whale."

"Simone," yelled Gareth as we gingerly wiped our seats and sat down again. He came over to us, grinning. "Time to calm things down a bit, the boys are getting too excited," he said. "Will either of you ladies do a turn for us?" Not a bloody chance, I thought, not a chance. Simone was showing the effects of the alcohol more than me, though, and readily agreed. She disappeared to our car and collected her fiddle, returning breathlessly a couple of minutes later. A loud

cheer went up when the rugby team saw her appear with the fiddle under her arm, and Gareth rapped on the table to attract everybody's attention.

"Lady and gentlemen, I give you.... Simone!"

Instantly, she broke into some spirited reels, and within minutes the pub was alive, with people clapping and dancing wildly around Simone. She stood, stock still beside me, seemingly oblivious of the tumult around her, careless of the frenzy she had whipped up. That wonderful, dreamy, faraway look crossed her face, as it always did when she played, and she disappeared into her own private world of music. She scorched through *The Geese in the Bog* and *The Connaughtman's Rambles*, and then, glancing down at me and winking, started on my favourite, *The Otter's Holt*. I'd never heard her play it on the fiddle before, only the flute, and I was entranced as she stormed through it, her bow fiery and alive as it snapped out the three ringing D chords which started the third phase. By now, virtually the whole pub had congregated around the entrance to our room, people craning to get a view, fighting to get past. I was so proud of her, so proud of my Simone, knowing that she could command a gathering so easily, could stamp her personality on any group, no matter how drunk or how loud. This was the Simone I knew and loved, the Simone with the sparky, bubbly confidence, free, alert and alive. It may have just been a fancy of mine, but as I watched her perform her impromptu set the worries and strains which had bedevilled her for the past week seemed to slip from her, her stance regaining its wonted poise and control, her face breaking into a dazzling smile, a sense of sheer enjoyment emanating from every feature, dominating every gesture. Whatever demons were wrestling with her were summarily dispatched, and it was a dynamic Simone who finally wound to a halt, a few minutes later, with an expansive, final flourish of her bow, to be greeted by tumultuous cheering. She smiled and affected a mini bow, and then resumed her seat beside me, breathless and laughing.

"More," they shouted. "More, more, more." There was no let-up, and they began clapping and stamping their feet, louder and louder, faster and faster, until virtually the whole pub was clapping in time, cheering her on, willing her to play again. Resignedly, smiling, she stood up.

"Okay, okay," she shouted, waving her hands in the air. "Okay, one more." There was a loud cheer. "I'm going to sing you a song this time, though, and my friend Margaret is going to help me." I stared at her, ashen-faced, shaking my head. "It's a bit of a sad song, but never mind. It's called *"I wonder what is keeping my true love this night."* Not a catchy title, I'll grant you, but it's a lovely melody." She looked down at me. "You can do the third verse, okay?" And without giving me the chance to refuse, she began singing.

"I wonder what is keeping my true love this night, I wonder what is keeping him out of my sight." It was the song I had sung to the Jenny Dangs that night at the lock-in at the Arts Centre, only Simone sang it much, much better than I ever could, imbuing it with a resonance, a plaintive longing that I could never

match with my feeble voice. Where moments earlier there had been a cacophony of noise there was now silence, an almost eery stillness enveloping the room. I was aware of rising panic within me, as Simone completed the first verse and began the second. She had told me to sing the third, the verse sung by the man, in which he belittles the love he had affected to feel for the woman. Simone was singing so wonderfully and I knew I would ruin it the instant I opened my mouth and unleashed my crow's rasp of a voice. Simone sang on inexorably, though, and with a sick feeling in the pit of my stomach I rose to my feet.

"For I can love lightly, and I can love strong, I can love the old love till the new love comes on," I sang, barely conscious of what I was doing. The room had disappeared into a molten mass, nothing discernible, nothing distinct, nothing real, as my terror guided me through the ordeal: I was alone with my fears. I couldn't hear a note I was singing, and had no idea whether I was in tune, or in tempo, or even if I was singing the correct words. *"I only said I loved you for to give your heart's ease, and when I'm not with you I'll love whom I please,"* I continued, reaching the end of my verse, and with a huge sigh of relief I sat back in my chair. It was only then that I realised that, throughout, Simone had been accompanying me with her fiddle.

She carried on, her voice soaring to perfection when she hit my favourite line, *"I'm sorry and tormented for the love of my dear,"* and falling breathily towards the sad, fatalistic conclusion: *"your love it lies so lightly as the dew on the thorn, that's there in the evening and away with the dawn."* And once more she gripped her fiddle to her shoulder and eased into a gentle, meandering, melancholy melody, sadly sweet and floating across the room in a final, rueful sweep.

She sat down and again we were engulfed by a wave of cheering and foot-stamping. Simone rose to her feet and did another brief bow, dragging me up and forcing me to do likewise, but she refused to play again.

"I need a drink," she cried, "my glass is empty. I need a drink, no more, no more." As she sat down again, to the good-natured boos of the disappointed throng, Gareth re-appeared, the answer to our prayers, with two halves of lager.

"Now, being Welsh, I thought I knew a bit about singing, but that was just lovely. Just lovely," he said admiringly. "Both of you, I mean. Voices like *angels*."

"Okay, don't overdo it," I laughed, and thanked him for the drink. It was getting late by now, and at the conclusion of Simone's brief spot many people began to drift off. Suddenly, a wash of fatigue blew over me, and we agreed it was time for bed. We finished our drinks and began saying goodbye to the Prestatyn rugby team, thanking them for their entertainment and enduring their beery, leery kisses.

Gareth came to say farewell. "We move to Bakewell tomorrow, so I shan't see you again. We come here every year, though, same week. Third week in July. Come back next year and give us another tune and a song."

Laughing, we promised we would and headed out into the chill of the evening, striking out towards the nearby campsite.

"That was marvellous," Simone said, gripping my arm and threading hers between it and my body. "I really enjoyed that. Best fun I've had in ages. Thank you."

"And thank *you*," I replied. "It's been a wonderful day."

We were too tired to sit out, so quickly and quietly we got ready for bed. It had grown quite cold, and we each wore baggy tee shirts as we settled ourselves into our sleeping bags. We lay side by side almost, but not quite, touching, and as I turned to face her I could feel her breath, soft and dewy, on my cheek. It was dark, but I could see the profile of her face, and I felt a calm joy that, finally, I was lying beside the woman of my dreams.

"That was the first time I've ever sung in public," said Simone. "Played instruments hundreds of times, but I've never had the courage to sing before."

I was amazed. I had assumed she sung regularly, and couldn't believe that anyone with her poise and self-belief would lack the courage to stand up and sing. She gave no indication of being beset by nerves when she sang; quite the reverse, she had seemed in total command of everything around her.

"I didn't realise. You'd never have known," I replied.

"I was really nervous. But I've been trying to pluck up the courage to do it for ages, so this seemed an ideal chance. They were all so drunk I figured if I made an arse of it no-one would remember, anyway. And having you helping me on the third verse was really important too. You sing so well, you make it look so easy."

"Well, I'll tell you something else, then. It was my first time in public, too. Apart from that time in the Arts Centre."

"No! Really? But you're so calm when you sing, so confident. I just thought you'd done it loads of times, in, like, folk clubs or something." I was staggered that Simone had thought I had appeared confident, when in fact I had been a terrified wreck: I must be better, I thought ruefully, at hiding my emotions than I realised.

"Absolutely not. Never done anything like it in my life."

“You’re full of surprises, Margaret. I thought you were fantastic in there. I thought you sang beautifully. I wish I could sing like that. Such passion, such depth. It sounded from the heart.”

I had no idea what to say, so I said nothing. It was beyond belief that Simone could compare her angel’s voice with mine, or aspire to sing like me.

“D’you mind if I ask you one more thing?” she asked.

“No.”

“Tell me about your unrequited love. Your once and forever.”

I longed to tell her, but this wasn’t the time. I knew it wasn’t. Sadly, I turned onto my back.

“No paseran.”

MAM TOR

I woke early, the morning air a cold blanket around me, and quickly got dressed. Simone was still sleeping by my side, her head burrowed into her blanket, hair tousled on her blue pillow, a picture of serenity. For a moment, as I observed her, contentedly oblivious of everything around her, I was overwhelmed with love, a firecracker exploding in my heart and pheromones fizzing through my brain. The memories of last night, of Simone in full flow, of Simone entertaining the pub, flooded back, filling me with a sweet sense of warmth; and then, with a jolt, with a cold shudder, I remembered her probing me about my unrequited love. *No paseran*. You can't go there, Simone, not yet, not yet.

Simone didn't surface for another half hour, and in the meantime I went down to the shop to cadge two cups of tea and buy some fresh rolls.

"Morning, sleepy," I said.

"Ugh, I'm stiff all over. How long have you been up?"

"Couple of hours. I had a quick march up to Hollins Cross to watch the dawn."

"You didn't?"

"No, I didn't. What do you think? Got you a cup of tea, though."

"Fantastic. Do I need that?"

"Buttered roll?"

"Yes, please. I'm starving."

"It's the country air."

"No, actually, it's the alcohol. I always wake up starving when I've been drinking."

"Honestly, where's the romance in that? You're supposed to say the country air is good for you, gives you an appetite, stimulates the body, activates the senses."

"Stimulates the body? Makes it stiff as a bloody board, more like. My back is *aching*."

“You’ll be alright once you’ve had a shower. Ease it off.”

“Oh, I don’t know if I fancy those showers.”

“Stop being such a wuss.”

Simone slapped me hard on the shoulder.

“Oh, I’m really sorry,” she said, laughing, “I didn’t mean that to be so hard. Let me make it better.” She leaned over and kissed my shoulder through my tee shirt, then rubbed it gently with her hand.

“Damn, if only you’d slapped my backside.”

“Oh really? You’d like me kissing your arse, would you?”

“Darling, the whole world can kiss my arse. But you would be especially welcome. As long as you didn’t bite.” I paused. “Well, not too hard, anyway.”

Simone finally agreed to use the showers, and we prepared for the day’s walk, packing our rucksacks and slipping into our extra-thick socks and chunky boots. Simone was wearing shorts and a light blue tee-shirt with ‘nobody’s poppet’ emblazoned across it, and in the morning sun she looked adorable, willowy and slight, a prepossessing, winsome Grace.

“All set, then?” she said.

“Thunderbirds are go.”

There are two ways of getting to Hollins Cross from Edale: the easy way, following the alarmingly eroded path which meanders gently upwards, or the hard way, up the steep side of the hill. In tribute to the Scottish genes we both harboured, we chose the hard way, and scrabbled upwards through the gorse and heather and grass, finding the occasional sheep track to follow, slowly, achingly, making our way to the top. Hollins Cross is a crossroads, with the startling ridge path from Mam Tor to Lose Hill running east to west, intersected by a path joining the villages of Castleton and Edale. We stopped for a couple of minutes to catch our breath, resting by the memorial stone set in the middle of the crossroads and looking at the world around us.

“What’s that ruin over there?” asked Simone, pointing towards Castleton.

“That’s Peveril Castle. That’s where we’re going next. Up the hill to the top, and then we’re going cross country and swinging round to here.” I turned to my right and pointed at the summit of the ridge path on which we were standing.

“That’s Mam Tor.”

“Christ, that’ll take hours.”

“About five, I reckon.”

“Best get going then,” she replied, and skipped down the sharply descending path, which was scarred deep in the landscape. We took about thirty minutes to reach the bottom of Peveril Castle, on the outskirts of Castleton. High above us, on a triangular spur, overlooking the village, sat the ruins of the castle, built on an almost sheer rock face.

“We’re going up there, are we?” asked Simone, pointing to the almost perpendicular gorge ahead of us. I nodded. “Fantastic, let’s go.”

The path was hard, rising up a narrow gorge, with enormous, limestone rocks towering over us; rocky underfoot and very steep, it was extremely wearing on the knees, and by the time we reached the top, both of us were struggling, out of breath and wheezing like a pair of old hags.

“What I’d give for a can of lager now,” I gasped.

“Bugger that, a feather mattress and someone to waft a giant fan over me.”

“Hmm, yeah, that’d do instead.”

We continued up the rocky path to the head of the dale and found ourselves in wild, open country, a huge expanse of gently undulating, grassy slopes, divided by a number of limestone walls soldiering across the landscape, stolid and lovely. Turning northwards, we followed a trail through several disused quarries and mines, all now gradually turning back to nature, the scars repairing themselves, reviving, renewing. All the while, as we walked, we talked freely, an endless dialogue about this and that, things of no consequence, plans, visions, ideas. The conversation was unforced, bearing that instinctive intimacy which marks true friendship; such familiarity cannot be replicated, cannot be manufactured; it is an entente to be treasured.

Mam Tor is the Shivering Mountain, so called because of the alternate layers of soft shale and hard grit which run horizontally along it; unstable, the shale constantly shifts and slips, giving the impression that the mountain is shivering. The ascent is relatively easy, and made easier by a series of steps built into it, although one assumes they were designed by giants since the depth of each step caused both Simone and me great difficulty. It is worth it, though, because at the peak the view is unsurpassed anywhere in England. Southwards, and Castleton village, watched over by the looming sentinel, Peveril Castle; Cave Dale, running down to the castle, and down further still, into the village itself; and beyond, into the Hope valley, an endless vista of English beauty. To the north, the vale of Edale, with Edale village, where our campsite, and even our tent was visible; and beyond it the start of the Pennine Way, snaking round the side of Kinder Scout and up, onwards over 250 miles

to the Pennines; and all around a swathe of green, a patchwork of man and nature in harmony, fields on fields on fields, edged by hedges and limestone walls, with sheep grazing and cows herding, and birds banking and wheeling above them; clumps of trees lie dotted about, relief impressions standing proud of the land beneath them; with small farmhouses punctuating the scene, bringing it to life, demonstrating the symbiosis of people and country. And then beyond, following the rise of the Dark Peak, the moorland, bleak and alone, unambiguous, baleful in its casual, primitive certainty, civilisation giving way to raw nature.

As we stood on the summit and gazed in wonder at our world, I reached out and grabbed Simone's hand, pressing it tightly against mine, two minds, two bodies, joined as one in awed contemplation of the beauty around us.

"I know why you brought me here," she said.

"You do?"

"I do. And you're so clever. Sometimes we need to see the broader perspective, stop living in our own little box. Coming here, seeing all this beauty, all this wonderful country, makes you realise."

"Ah, yes. Robert Burns said what a gift it would be '*to see ourselves as others see us.*' But sometimes, though, we have to stop seeing ourselves at all. Step aside, look around, forget about ourselves. We get too caught up in ourselves, too fixed on 'me', blind to what's happening around us. We burrow into ourselves, shut ourselves away, become recluses in our own imaginations. So yes, a bit of perspective is a good thing. But that's not really the problem. Thousands of people get by perfectly happily with absolutely no sense of perspective whatsoever. Either they think only of themselves, or never of themselves, and they can be still be perfectly happy in their own little world. Rampant egotists or downtrodden mice, maybe, but perfectly happy. So that's not the problem."

"Uh-huh," she said edgily.

"The real trouble comes when you shut yourself into your own little cocoon and start to think that nobody can help you, that you have to do everything alone. You forget there's a world out there, and that the world can help you. You forget that you have friends out there who care for you, and will do anything for you."

"Interesting change of person there; we're in the second person singular now, I notice." From the very first time we met, Simone had demonstrated a great capacity to take any comment personally. I was used to the trait by now; and in any case, on this occasion, it *was* meant personally.

"Sorry, that was unintentional."

“Yes, I’m sure.” Simone sounded prickly, and I knew I was hitting a sore spot again. “You have to admit, though, sometimes it’s just easier to get on with things yourself, sort them out by yourself.”

“Easier, but not necessarily better.”

“Not necessarily worse, either.”

“Well, I think it possibly is. If you don’t realise what’s happening, I mean. If you don’t realise how serious things have become, how much you need to talk to others. You can end up trying to soldier on and getting more and more bogged down, deeper and deeper into trouble, without even realising that it was happening.”

“But sometimes it’s too painful to talk about things. Even to think about things. Sometimes it’s easier to bottle them up. Easier to tell yourself they never happened.”

“It would take a very raw experience to make you try to do that, surely?”

“Maybe.”

“And it won’t work. Whatever you bury will always come back to you. In the night, in the dark, in the time of doubt and worry; it’ll gnaw at you, it’ll always be there, lurking, waiting to pounce, waiting to drag you down again.” Simone tensed, and I knew that once again I had found the fault line which ran all the way through her. *‘There are things you don’t know about her’*, Don had said, and whatever these ‘things’ were, they had formed an angry, seething ball of pain within her. She stepped away from me, turning towards Kinder Scout, and I knew she had started crying.

“I take it you’re talking about me again?”

“Yes, I am.”

“You make it sound like I’m completely bloody miserable.”

“No, of course you’re not.”

“If I’m so pathetic why do you bother with me at all?” Simone’s voice was trembling, on the verge of breaking down.

“That’s not what I’m saying. Quite the opposite, in fact. You’re a very happy person, you’re a joy to be with, everyone says so, everyone feels it. I don’t think you have the vaguest notion how popular you are. You’re one of those people who bring happiness into a room; you’ve got a very special gift, Simone, a way

of touching people. Look at last night, in the pub. What you did was extraordinary...”

“I only played a few fiddle tunes.”

“No, you did more than that. You brought the pub together. You created a shared moment. Everyone who was there last night will be talking about that today. Every single one of them will be telling their friends about it: ‘You should have been there, it was fantastic, what a night’. You make people feel good. I felt it the first time I saw you. I don’t know what it is: you radiate kindness, and warmth, and understanding. You’re calm, you make everything right. You’re the soul of the Jenny Dangs, you know you are; it would fall apart without you.”

“No, I don’t think it would...”

I knew what she was doing; she was trying to deflect the conversation from herself again, only this time I wouldn’t let her. “What you do is watch out for people. Quite simply, you minister to them. And that’s why they respond to you, because you connect with them. You’re watching after them, helping them.” Simone still stood with her back to me, her jaw held grimly, trying to hold back the tears; her arms were folded across her chest and she looked more vulnerable than anything I’d ever seen, laid bare and unshepherded. It broke my heart to see her like this, and I hated myself for putting her through it, but I would not give up.

“But somehow, somewhere, I’m convinced you’re feeling some pain. And so I come back to the question I asked you in Derby,” I continued: “who supports Simone?”

“And I give you the same answer: **I don’t need it**. You’ve just said I’m happy, I’m the life and soul of the party, I bring warmth to a room, blah blah blah. I don’t need any fucking support.”

“Yes, you do, love,” I said softly. I stepped behind her and held her arms lightly. A tear coursed down her cheek into the corner of her mouth, and she sniffed loudly, biting her lip to prevent any more tears; she failed, and another, and another trickled down her pale, dew-soft skin.

“You’re okay,” I continued, “day to day, on a superficial level. Your life is ordered, compartmentalised, you cope with everyday things. That’s the easy bit. That’s the bit down there.” I pointed down into the vale of Edale, the soft, green expanse below us. “That’s the bit we control, the bit that humans manage. And it’s all beautiful. And it all works. The small farms, the little village, the holiday makers and ramblers. Everyone going about their business, working together, looking out for each other.”

“But what’s happening up there?” I pointed upwards, towards Kinder Scout, towards the start of the moorland. “What’s happening in the wilds, in the areas we don’t cultivate? What’s happening at the edges? D’you know it can be beautiful weather down in the valley, and a couple of miles up there you can’t see a yard in front of your face? Up there you’re not in control; you’re at nature’s mercy. Anything can happen, if you’re not careful.”

“What’s going on in that zone, Simone? What’s going on in the area you don’t control? What’s going on in your mind? That’s where you’re not happy, my love, that’s where you need support.”

Simone stood silently, her body tensed and shaking. “Heather and grass, and rocks and grouse, and nothing to find but your soul,” she said.

“What?”

“It’s what you said yesterday. I thought it was lovely. Out on the moors, nothing to find but your soul. Unexplored and unexplained and misunderstood. Confront your fears. Is this what you’re trying to tell me?”

“Yes.”

“I’ve got my own beast running rampant on the moors, terrorising my mind, is that what you’re saying?”

“Not a beast, no. Nothing so melodramatic. Just something that’s frightening you; something you’re not in control of.”

Simone sat down on the heather and hid her face in her hands. I sat beside her and stroked her thigh comfortingly.

“What happened to you, Simone? Something happened, didn’t it?” Her body was quaking. She sat with her knees in the air and leaned forward, resting her elbows on them, staring sightlessly into the vale below, her eyes awash, tears streaming down her face. Huge sobs rent the air, each one sending a tremor through her body. She seemed so utterly, ineffably alone, older than time and burdened by the weight of the world.

“*No paseran,*” she whispered.

I cradled her to me and felt in my pocket for a tissue. For five minutes we sat, rocking together, looking out over the valley, and gradually Simone’s tears subsided; she felt so small in my arms, fragile like a winter’s sun. I ran my hand through her hair, sweeping it back from her delicate face, now puffy with emotion.

“Can I ask a question?” I asked.

“As long as it changes the subject,” she said, laughing through her tears.

“Sort of. You said before, when we were at Rutland Water, that love was a myth. Do you believe that?”

“Yes. I don’t believe in love. I think the notion of romantic love is impossible. And d’you know why? Your ‘once and forever’ so-called unrequited love proves it: it can’t be love if it isn’t reciprocated. That’s just infatuation. Sure, one person can “*love*” another, but that’s not the same thing as romantic love, that’s not a union of bodies and minds. True love, real love is about sharing, and understanding, and knowing, it’s about being together. What it’s really about, it’s about trust, and in this world you can’t ever trust anybody, so therefore it must be impossible to love them. QED.”

There was a horrifying logic to everything she said, but it was so cold, so hollow, I could scarcely believe it was coming from Simone.

“It’s not love you don’t believe in then, it’s trust.”

“I don’t believe in either. You can’t have one without the other, and if the other is impossible, the one must be, too. It’s perfectly simple.”

“You don’t believe it is possible to trust anyone? What, never? Nobody?”

“No.”

“Not me?”

She laughed. “D’you know, I’ve been asking myself that question for weeks, now.”

“And the answer?”

She made no answer, and that, in itself, was the answer.

“You said you’d been in love once,” I said at length. “What happened?” Simone was picking distractedly at the heather between her thighs, her eyes red-rimmed but dry now, a couple of silver, salty tear-tracks still evident on her cheek. She didn’t look up as she spoke.

“His name was Steve,” she said. “My childhood sweetheart. Sent each other valentines from Primary Five onwards, got engaged when we were eleven.” I smiled. “Our families went on holiday together, and we would stroll along the beach in Hunstanton, hand in hand, kissing and running off into the sand dunes. We had no idea what we were doing, but we rolled about in the sand, cuddling, kissing, pretending we were lovers. We’d go to the cinema, sit hand in hand, not able to concentrate on the film at all, because we were just thinking about each other, and kissing, and fumbling. And you know. All very normal,

all very adolescent. He was really nice. I think I did love him, from an early age. My heart used to go ping! when I saw him, if that's what love is; even just watching him walk down the street would set my heart racing. He was very handsome. Tall, even at sixteen he was over six feet, and very strong. He was the games champion at school. Oh, we were the perfect couple, the sports champion and Little Miss Goody Two Shoes, star of the school orchestra. He had really thick, dark hair, curly, incredibly curly; I used to love running my fingers through it, I could do it for hours. Used to drive him mad, and he'd storm off in a huff. 'I'm not a bloody doll,' he'd shout. And he had blue eyes, lovely blue eyes, blue like you've never seen, blue like the ocean, and they seemed deep, too, like the ocean, and he held you in his gaze, and you couldn't look away, it was like he was hypnotising you, like you were under his spell. And he had the gentlest touch, that was the strange thing, because he was so strong, so muscular, but he was gentle as a dove, and he used to stroke my chin, and my cheek, like this, and tell me I was the most beautiful girl in the world, and he'd do anything for me, and he loved me, and he'd always love me, for ever and ever. And I loved that. A gawky, ugly girl with a huge nose loves to hear that. And he bought me things. Only little things, with his paper-round money, ear-rings which made my ears go septic, and a necklace, and a ring, and he'd say "you're mine now, Simone, you're mine." Yes, and then he started to get jealous. I never knew why. He didn't like me going out with Marie, my fiddle sister, wanted me to spend my time with him, wanted me with him all the time, except when he was out with the boys, of course, then he wanted me to be at home, alone. And he started accusing me of going out with other boys, started to say terrible things, accuse me of things I'd never do, and he'd get all angry, and shout, and break things. And. But he never hit me. He never hurt me. He never did that."

She looked away. Tears were forming in her eyes again, and her arms were goose-pimpled. She appeared to be on automatic pilot, barely conscious of what she was saying, a stream of thoughts and memories rising to the surface and jostling for prominence.

"And then, it was my seventeenth birthday." She stopped and dabbed her nose with her tissue again. Tears were flooding down her cheek and she stared, unblinking, at the ground. Her voice was husky and quiet. "It was my seventeenth birthday..."

A chill swept through me, an icy, excoriating blast which penetrated my soul. With dismal clarity, I realised what was happening.

Simone was telling me her story.

I sat, unable to move, and listened.

"It was my seventeenth birthday, and we'd been out at the cinema. We went back to my house, and went upstairs, and put on some records, some smoochy stuff, and he pulled me onto the bed. We hadn't done anything up to this point,

hadn't done *it*, I mean, but I knew Steve wanted to. Over the last few weeks he'd been dropping hints, and he would kiss me harder, and his hands would wander, and he would press himself against me, so that I could feel his erection. It was making me nervous, because I didn't know if I was going to be able to go through with it. I didn't know if I wanted to. And so it put up a kind of barrier between us, which Steve didn't like. It seemed to make him more jealous, and if I made an excuse not to be alone with him, which I did, because I was scared, he would say it was because I was going out with someone else. And I'd deny it, obviously, and that would just make him all the more convinced. And so things were a bit strained that night, my birthday. But anyway, we put on the smoochy music, and started kissing, and he pulled me on to the bed and we started kissing again, and cuddling. And it was lovely. Don't get me wrong. Like I said, he was gentle, he never hurt me. It was nice. I was getting turned on, and I knew Steve was too, because I could feel him hard. He started groping at my clothing, running his hand up and down under my sweater, and that was nice, too. And he grabbed my boobs through my bra. And that was nice. He pulled my sweater up over my head, and I let him, but I was frightened now. I didn't know if I could go through with it. But he was gentle, and kind, and whispered in my ear how much he loved me. And he took my bra off and kissed me. And sucked me. And it was nice. Nice." She paused. "But I was, like, detached from it, somehow. I was there but I wasn't. His hands were on my crotch, rubbing me through the zip of my jeans. And I was excited. Really. He pulled the zip down and started fumbling in my panties, and I felt his hand on me. The first time anyone had ever touched me. And it was nice. But it was horrible, as well. I was less and less happy. I was being carried along, and I wasn't sure I wanted to do it. He pulled my jeans off and my panties, and I was naked, naked in front of a boy for the very first time, and I felt small and frightened, and then he started yanking at his clothes and pulled them off. And he was naked. And I saw his cock. It was really hard, and really big and I knew I didn't want to do it. He was on top of me, his hands all over me, his cock pressing into me, and I panicked. I screamed and yelled for him to get off me, and jumped up off the bed, crying and trying to cover myself up. He got really angry with me, angrier than I'd ever seen him, shouting and swearing. 'Cock teaser' and 'slut' and 'bitch' and 'whore' and telling me I'd sleep with anyone so why wouldn't I sleep with him. He flung his clothes back on and yelled 'if I can't have your rancid cunt I'll go and find another one' and he stormed out."

Simone stopped again. Her voice was low and steady, unemotional to an extraordinary degree considering what she was relating. She swallowed, still staring into space before her.

"Next day," she continued, "we heard that a young girl, sixteen or seventeen, like me, was raped. It was huge news. It's a small town, things like that don't happen. Only they did. It was Steve, of course. They caught him almost immediately."

I sat mute, shocked beyond words. Simone had been carrying this guilt for three years, guilt over a girl raped and a man driven to rape, driven to it, she thought, by her own act. It had been gnawing at her, scratching at her, insinuating itself in her mind, dragging at her self esteem, inveigling itself into her psyche, where it played tricks with her, lied to her, sneered in her ear that she could never trust anybody again, that she could never trust herself again, that it was a cold and hostile world. And Simone had borne that for three years. That single act of brutality had struck at everything she knew. The boy she loved, the person she trusted, had betrayed every civility known to humankind. How could she ever trust again? In that single act, that single moment of turning Steve away, her tortured mind told herself, she had ruined her own life, had ruined Steve's life, and had ruined the life of the innocent child he had raped. In her silence, in her voiceless acceptance of her complicity, Simone had assumed a mantle of guilt which was weighing down on her ever more heavily with every passing day. My poor, tormented darling, what must she have suffered? I put my arms around her and kissed her. We were both overcome, and neither could speak. We lay entwined on the heather, cheek to cheek, and wept into the clear and cloudless day.

THE CAMPSITE

We spent an hour on the hillside, talking and crying. Simone gradually became more calm and returned to her usual self, and finally seemed embarrassed by her outburst: there is nothing a reserved person hates more than losing their reserve, and I knew that to press things now would only serve to humiliate her. Accordingly, I tried to lighten the mood.

“Wonder how the Prestatyn Rugby Club are getting on in Bakewell?”

“Well, being Bakewell, I expect they’ve found a couple more tarts to play with.”

“But not one that can play the fiddle.”

“Or two with ‘voices like angels,’” Simone replied, impersonating Gareth’s elongated Welsh vowels. We descended the mountain and returned, wearily, to our camp. The conversation had dried up, and both of us were too emotionally drawn to put much effort into instigating anything new. It was a bittersweet conclusion to our weekend. We both felt, I sensed, that something essential had occurred, but each regretted its happening. Supper in the Nag’s Head was a more muted affair than the previous evening, and after only a couple of drinks we returned to the campsite.

“Okay,” said Simone, resting languidly on the rug beside me in the half-light of evening, “it’s been a weekend of questions. And a few answers, as well, I think. One final question, though, and if you say *no paseran* I’m going to stick this can of lager up your arse.”

“Okay,” I laughed.

“Sideways.”

“Alright, alright, ask away.”

“Okay, what about this unrequited love of yours?”

“Once and forever? Still just the once, and still forever,” I replied, guardedly.

“Have you done anything about it yet?”

I paused, looking down at the grass, reddish-brown in the dappled moonlight. “Not yet, no. But I’m hoping to. I’m hoping to, very soon.”

Simone said nothing, and I looked up. She had me fixed in a curious gaze, and I thought she was about to speak. My heart was lurching in my chest, nerves jangling. When can I say something, I asked myself, repeatedly and frantically. When can I broach it? When is the right time? Is there a right time? I felt we had come so far in the course of the last two days, had grown so much closer, come to understand one another more fully. I saw in Simone a much more rounded person than the one with whom I had fallen in love. I had seen - been privileged to be shown - what lay behind her façade of cool, calm assurance. I had glimpsed the soul of the woman, and that glimpse had convinced me: I had never understood why I had become so besotted with her, but now I knew, now I felt the connection so strongly, now I realised that living without her would be impossible.

She remained silent, and her steady gaze unnerved me slightly. The evening air was cool, slightly damp, with a gentle wind rustling insistently in the trees above and behind; down at the bottom of the campsite there was light and bustle and activity, but here, here in our corner, our private realm, all was still, all was quiet. In the gathering gloom, Simone's features were melting into indistinction, and yet her presence felt more powerful by the second, the aura around her suffusing its warmth, reaching out to me. Scrabbling behind her, she felt for her flute and sat cross legged in front of me. She placed the flute gently to her lips. And started to play.

And the tune she played was Paddy Fahy's Reel.

Paddy Fahy's was the tune I heard whenever I thought of Simone. It was my tune for her, that perfect, unfathomable, never-ending piece of musical perfection which seemed to me to distil the very essence of Simone. Its haunting melody drifted through the cool evening, settling over the Peak, comforting, peaceful, contented. I could hear Simone's breath whispering beneath the tune as she blew into her flute, bringing life and spirit to the moment, to the music, to the mountain, to us. Her eyes were a million miles away, floating and soaring in the wake of the song, while her fingers danced across the metal instrument, stopping and opening its holes, creating their magic, concocting perfection. Happy and sad, hopeful and desperate, the tune turned and revolved, unresolved and unanswerable, and I reflected on the last, tumultuous week: how I had come close to losing Simone, but how that seemingly traumatic event had brought us closer together; how Simone's emotions had burst through her once impregnable shell of reserve, and how, once more, that helped bond us; how we had talked and talked, and cried and cried, listened and advised, consoled and cajoled; how we had grown to know one another; come, perhaps, in some small, cautious, circumspect way, to trust one another; and how, dare I suppose it, we had come to love one another?

A tear sprung from my eye as Simone continued to cycle through Paddy Fahy's. It was no use. Everything that had happened over the last week, every event, happy or sad, had only reinforced my one belief: that I loved Simone Clements.

Loved in a way I scarcely understood, far beyond the lust and infatuation I had felt those months ago when I first saw her. Loved in a way which clawed at my heart, tore at my spirit, spat at my resolve. Loved in a violent, animalistic fashion. I became subsumed with tears, great wheezing snorts racking through my body. Once and forever, I loved my love, once and forever I needed her, once and forever, once and forever. Visions flitted before my eyes: Simone on stage, alive and fizzing with energy, playing *The Otter's Holt*; skimming through the countryside of Rutland Water on her bike, with the wind billowing in her tee-shirt, shrieking with laughter, happy in the joy of living; then crying and bereft in Derby, years of hidden despair unleashed, a cavalcade of emotion, a wellspring bubbling up and bursting out, catching both of us unawares; and resolutely striding up the crags of the Peak District, and sounding out her fiddle in the Nag's Head, the focus, the centre of attention, everybody's darling; and finally, head in hands on the top of Mam Tor, wailing for lost innocence. I saw those things, and I saw my love, sitting opposite me, playing her ethereal air, playing the tune that was made for her, the tune that described her perfection. And at that moment I knew: I had to tell Simone.

Convulsed with tears, I bowed my head and prayed for courage, prayed for Paddy Fahy to give me strength. I felt Simone's arms around me, cradling me, stroking her hand down my cheek, patting my hair and pulling me to her bosom. I hadn't noticed her stop playing and, indeed, the music was still ringing in my ears, hanging in the air, aching, permanently.

"What's wrong?" she said, tracing the line of my tears with her nail. "What's wrong?"

"Simone," I said, my voice cracking, "I have to say this now, or I don't think I ever will, and I couldn't bear that." I paused, and sniffed into a tissue. Looking up at her, I fixed her gaze in mine.

"Simone, I love you. I always have. I always will."

She said nothing, but continued to hold me. "I think I knew that. Once and forever?" she whispered.

I smiled and nodded. "Once and forever. You, my love, once and forever."

"Well, then, you'd better give me a kiss."

SIMONE'S DIARY, JULY 27TH

Jesus Christ, where do I begin? I've only been away for a week, and my world is changed totally. I went away a wreck and came back a dyke... *LOL* But seriously, this has been the most intense week of my life, and I don't know where to start. Well, I know where not to start, I suppose, because some of it is too difficult to talk about right now, I don't want to go over it again, not just yet. I didn't even want to do it at the time, so I couldn't bear to go through it all again now, not even for you, diary. Sorry and all that... *S* Another day, maybe.

The thing is, I think I've fallen in love. I don't really know: you know me, I don't believe in love, so how can I be in love? And so I'm totally, utterly confused. I know the exact point when it happened, sitting under a tree on a campsite in Derbyshire, but I don't know yet what it was that happened. See? Told you I was confused...

And you'll never believe who it is I may or may not have fallen in love with. Or maybe you will. Were the little signals there all along? Little hints? Well perhaps, but all in all I think you have to say it's a bit of a turn up. I have deliberately not re-read my last diary entries, mainly because they're too embarrassing, but also because everything that's happened since I wrote them has turned my life upside down, so I don't want to start muddying the waters by going back over old ground (mixed metaphors or what?! I'll never be a writer...) but from memory, last time I think I wrote about whether I could trust her or not.

Frankly, I still don't know the answer to that, and now I don't know whether I'm in love with her or not either.

Margaret, eh? Who can understand her? Woman of mystery, hidden depths, great kisser...

But I've let the cat out of the bag. Margaret then. Who'd have thought it? I'm sorry, I'm having difficulty thinking straight, so I know all of this sounds gibberish, but I need to get these thoughts down, as scrambled as they are, so that I can begin to understand what the bloody hell is happening to me.

Jesus, I think I'm in love. It's scary.

Okay, calm down, Simone, start at the beginning. Mind you, I'd prefer to start at the end, because I did some amazing things yesterday afternoon that I want to tell you about, right after I had a long, luxurious bath, with a handmaiden washing me... Oh God, I'm just so excited I can't think straight. Skittish Simone, now that's something you don't see every day... *L*

Right, start again. Derby. Terrible. Suzanne's exams, helping her out. Rotten bad temper, fallen out with Margaret the night before. Why? Look in the previous diary entry. Enough to say she was winding me up and I was winding myself up and we had a row and I stormed off

in a petulant huff. That's that, then, I thought, that'll be the last I'll see of her, she's not going to put up with a childish display like that.

And then she turned up in Derby. Drove all the way. What's all that about? She needed to speak to me, she said. Well, not today, I told her, I need to be with Suzanne today. Make it tomorrow. If she was that set on speaking to me she would wait an extra day, I thought, and if not, well, obviously it isn't just me who can play the drama queen and make dramatic gestures. Part of me wanted her to sod off, but part of me was terrified she would. As I say, little hints...

But she said yes, she would wait. Christ.

*Now we get to stuff I don't want to talk about, not yet. She upset me, started raking over things, probing where she wasn't welcome, you know what I mean, Steve and such, and I got really upset. I lost it, started crying in the middle of the refectory, blubbing my eyes out, making a complete spectacle of myself. But the damned woman wouldn't leave me alone. Kept banging on about it. "Who supports Simone?" she said, in that loud, very precise voice people use when they've thought of something clever they're pleased with, and want everyone to hear. "Who supports Simone?" I don't need anybody, there's nothing wrong with me, I shouted back, but even as I was saying it I was thinking of John, and Steve, and I knew that it was complete crap. Which made me worse: the damned woman was getting under my skin, and nobody is allowed to do that. And then she invited me camping in the Peaks. Camping!!! Never been camping in my life. Wouldn't know a tent peg from a camp stove. Though I suppose I'd find out pdq if I hit the wrong one with a hammer... *G* So of course I wouldn't go camping. My idea of hell, stuck on a bloody mountainside inside a piece of flimsy plastic, listening to the rain and avoiding the spiders. And so I said yes.*

Now why would I do that? Partly to shut her up, of course. I was so embarrassed, making a scene in public, but I don't know, there's more than that. I was curious. Curious about why she was so interested. Not that I wanted her to be interested: Christ no, the exact opposite. I've spent the last three years making sure people aren't interested in me. But I was interested in why she was interested in me. Oh goddammit, Simone, admit it, I was interested in her, full stop.

And so I went camping. And great fun it was too. Walking is cool, not nearly as boring as I thought it would be. Knackers your legs though. She took me to the top of some valley or other, up to the start of the Dark Peak, where it gets really wild and dangerous. We didn't go any further, but she pointed it out, and said this amazing thing, which I can't forget:

"Heather and grass, and rocks and grouse, and nothing to find but your soul."

She was trying to tell me something, I knew that, but I didn't know what it was at the time. Later, I thought I did know and told her, and later still I realised I was totally wrong. And that's when that thing happened. When I fell in love, or whatever I've done. But I'm getting ahead of myself.

The next afternoon, Saturday this would be, there we were on the top of a mountain, looking out. Mam Tor it's called, and it's really lovely. The world was green, and fresh, and happy and alive. And I was really happy, so calm and relaxed, no cares, no worries. But then I started thinking, damn it. I never learn. I was trying to understand why she had brought me

here and I realised then what it must be. "I know why you brought me," I said, little Miss Smarty Pants. She was telling me to look outwards, I told her, to see the bigger picture. I was so pleased with myself for working it out I didn't see the jaws of the trap close on me.

"Who supports Simone?"

She started on this again. And I got upset again. As you do, when people constantly pick at your scabs and make them bleed. Bloody bitch, why wouldn't she leave it alone? But she kept on and on and on about it. What happened Simone, what are you hiding? What's hurting you?

And then I thought about what she'd said about the wilderness, and finding your soul: was that why you brought me, I asked her. To confront what I was hiding, to confront my fears? Yes, she said. Yes it is.

I don't know what it is about her. I don't trust her (I think) and yet I get this urge to confide in her. I nearly told her once before, a few weeks ago, and caught myself in time. No such luck this time. The whole story came tumbling out, the first time I've ever told anyone, the first time I've ever spoken it out loud. The first time, if I'm being honest, I've even told it to myself. I think about it all the time, but what I think about is the aftermath, not the event, the outcome, not what happened. And I don't want to talk about it again. But I told her then, and I cried and cried and cried. God, I thought I was going to explode. It was like everything I've concealed for three years came spewing out of me in one long, shattering stream, and I totally lost control.

But she held me in her arms. For hours. Letting me cry, cradling me, letting the tears subside, letting the pain out. I felt so calm then, so calm. It was beautiful, actually, liking getting over the worst hangover in the world. At first everything is painful, your head hurts, your eyes burn when you blink, your ears ache, your senses are totally shut down: colours don't work, sounds don't penetrate, it's like you're entombed in your own misery. And then, slowly, the mists rise and life comes back. At first you don't notice it, and then you do, you feel life gradually draining back into you, every minute you feel a bit more normal. It was just like that. I was so upset, totally over the top, off-my-head, screaming upset, and she just held me, and she was crying too, but we lay on the mountain until I felt better.

And then we came down.

And when I came down the mountain, back to the camp, I felt lighter: lightheaded, yes, but really lighter – in what? Spirit, I think. I left some baggage behind on the top of Mam Tor, I'm sure of it. I'm not going to say I have totally got over what happened, because clearly I haven't, since I can't write about it tonight, but I think it is the start. I felt wonderful afterwards, really wonderful, like I was refreshed. Everything seemed clearer and brighter and more beautiful, and I just wanted to love the world.

And Margaret.

I remember thinking that, as we lay on the rug that evening, watching the stars. That I loved her. In a platonic sense, obviously. I thought about her a lot as we lay there: what she had done for me, how she had brought me here to help me, and I wondered why she would do

that. Why had she done such a thing? Such a thoughtful and selfless act. And I thought about her, about Margaret herself.

“Once and forever.”

I couldn't get that phrase out of my mind. I played it over and over and over. She told me it when we were at Rutland Water: she had been in love, she said, once and forever. Just the once, and it was eternal. I thought it was so beautiful, so romantic. And I was a bit jealous of her, I suppose, because I didn't think I could ever feel something as intense as that. But as we sat there I began to think how sad it was. It was an unrequited love, and poor Margaret was pining for someone, someone she loved but couldn't or wouldn't tell. And then I thought, well she's got a damned cheek lecturing me about not sharing my problems and keeping everything to myself when she can't even tell the person she loves how she feels.

And then I realised.

She had been. All weekend. That's when it hit me. The weekend was as much about her as it was about me: it was for both of us to unburden ourselves. That was why she brought me.

To tell me she loved me.

I asked her: tell me about your once and forever love, have you done anything about it yet? No, not yet, she said, but I want to. I almost panicked. It was me, I was convinced.

I had no idea what to say or do, so I picked up my flute and started to play. I don't know why, but a tune came into my head. It was one that Margaret once told me she liked, Paddy Fahy's Reel, and I started to play it over and over again, my mind racing, trying to work out what the hell I was thinking.

Margaret. Margaret. She really was kind and thoughtful and generous. She wasn't at all like the image she painted of herself. Nothing like the slapper she pretended she was, nothing like as shallow and thoughtless. I was kind of overwhelmed by the notion that she loved me, and that she could read my problems, and that she cared enough to help. She had got through my defences, made me open up, which no-one has ever done. I wanted to. In the end, I wanted to tell her. Why?

I knew the answer. And so do you.

And then I noticed she was crying. I stopped playing and asked her what was wrong. My heart was throbbing with fear. “Simone,” she said, “I have to tell you this now, or else I might never do it: Simone, I love you.”

“I think I knew that,” I said. “Once and forever. You'd better give me a kiss, then.”

*I was so scared. I've never given myself to anybody before, and I was terrified of what I was doing. Terrified of losing control of myself, terrified of losing my independence, having to rely on someone else. Having to trust someone else. I don't want to trust people. But she kissed me and it all melted away. We kissed all night, and hugged each other and stroked each other, and I think it is the most beautiful thing which has ever happened. Ever, in the whole world. To anyone. And so you see: I'm looking outward!! It's working already... *S**

*But God, I've got so much to tell you and look at the time. It's three in the bloody morning, got to get some sleep. More tomorrow, including the juicy bits... *G**

Night night

Margaret's Simone

BACK HOME

“Well, then, you’d better give me a kiss.” A perfect sentence which sent my life into a spiral. “You’d better give me a kiss”: so casual, so natural, such a beautifully simple coda to the convoluted, febrile movement I had concocted as I laid down my love for Simone. Only she could respond in that pure, open-hearted way; only she could draw me into her life with such understated eloquence.

“Well, then, you’d better give me a kiss.”

And so I kissed her.

And I kissed her.

And fell in love again.

I ought to be describing the stars, the moonlight, the rustling wind, the compliant perfection of nature as the lovers embraced, setting the tone, creating the mood: but I can’t, because I don’t remember. All I remember, and this moment will be burned on my memory as I draw my final breath, is leaning over towards Simone and resting my forehead on her cheek for an instant; and then raising my head, looking into her eyes, her eyes, her beautiful, solemn, elusive eyes; and then stretching forward and brushing my nose against hers, my lips gentle on her mouth. A kiss, a rite, a moment in time, a moment of love.

And she kissed me.

And she kissed me, melded her lips to mine, embraced me, took me for her own. We lay on the rug and held one another, stroking, caressing, kissing, sharing. We felt each other’s heartbeats and sensed our respective fears; we listened to our breaths, nervous and hopeful, and dreamed of the future; we tasted each other’s excitement and gave thanks for the present.

I don’t know how long we lay outside, but it may have been hours. Finally, shivering, we retreated to the tent and lay once more, entwined in a chaste lovers’ embrace. And in the dawn we awoke. Together.

I couldn’t have made love to Simone that night. It was too intense, I was overwhelmed by emotion. I had to allow my mind time to comprehend the enormity of what had happened before I unleashed my body on it: I had to deal with the mental kernel of our love before proceeding to its physical substance. In any case, when it happened, I wanted it to be perfect, not

scrabbling about in a tiny tent with stones sticking into our ribs and insects crawling over our bodies. I had waited all this time, I could wait a while longer. But not much.

We drove home the next morning, strangely silent, neither of us completely at ease with this new twist in our relationship. As we approached home I was aware that my stomach was churning and my mouth was dry and sickly. Where to? Hers or mine? Together or apart? What is the etiquette when a thirty-seven year old woman drives a twenty year old girl into the country and seduces her, then brings her home? As ever, Simone had the answer.

“Can I have a bath at yours? I don’t want to go home yet.”

I think I saw yet another Simone that day, or at least another facet of her character. The Simone I first knew, with whom I fell in love, was cool and easily affectionate, an uplifting personality who drew out the best in everyone. While undoubtedly genuine, I came to realise that she exaggerated this aspect of her nature in order to conceal her own frailties: in providing the warmth of support to others she selflessly concealed the flimsy infrastructure propping up her own happiness. And when, on Mam Tor, it came crashing to the ground I saw the raw core of Simone, the tiny, fragile confidence of a woman bearing a crushing sense of guilt for a crime not of her making; I saw the loneliness of self-doubt and the blight of isolation.

But that day, as we stopped to buy milk and papers, then drove to my house, I saw the two elements, the public and the private, until now so assiduously kept apart, being inexorably drawn together; and I saw a new Simone, more at ease with herself, more assertive, begin to emerge: the genesis, I think, of her adult persona.

It was gone mid-day, and we were both hungry; as we frittered around the house, unloading our gear from the car and watering the neglected plants, Simone volunteered to concoct some lunch. While I was dubious, knowing of Simone’s unproficiency in the kitchen, I readily agreed, showed her where the essentials were and headed for a brief, exhilaratingly hot shower. For some reason I welcomed that ten minutes alone, away from Simone; in the past three days we had never been out of each other’s company, and it was as though we were on some rumbling bullet-train careering towards a destination we were not entirely conscious of. As I stood beneath the energising gush of water I felt happier than I had ever done, but I was aware of a nervous apprehension, a distracted, almost torpid feeling of disconnection, as though I were not fully in control of my own actions.

I emerged from the shower genuinely reinvigorated, in mind as well as body, and slipped into my special silk dressing gown. It gave me a wonderfully louche feeling to be lounging around the house in my dressing gown in the middle of the day, with my new lover preparing lunch in the kitchen. As I stepped into the living room I was immediately aware of a distinctly acrid

aroma, and my worst fears about Simone's cooking seemed about to be realised. Lunch, though, was fabulous: toasted cheese using a chunky, crusty loaf of coarse bread with slivers of fried onion, garlic, mushrooms, tomato and paprika; simple but full of flavour. We ate quietly, and there was a feeling of suspension in the air, of marking time, rather like when waiting to see somebody off at a train station: you know the moment is coming and yet time seems to slow down, pauses become embarrassing, the train seems never to arrive.

"This is fantastic," I said, waving my bread and retrieving a slice of onion which had fallen from my mouth.

"Hmm," Simone laughed. "More a reflection of hunger than the real quality of the food, I think."

"You could be right. Still, it's beautifully made."

"Yeah well, you haven't seen the kitchen yet."

"Well, I *was* wondering actually..."

"Yeah?"

"The burning?"

"Oh, yes, the burning. Sorry about that. I'm afraid I've burned your oven glove."

"My oven glove?"

"Yeah, sorry, there's a big hole in it." Simone was shuffling uneasily in her seat and I looked at her concerned face with amusement. I couldn't fathom why she would use an oven glove to make toasted cheese.

"How could you burn the oven glove?"

"Well, when I was frying up the onions and stuff in the pan, the handle got too hot to hold, so I used the oven glove. I guess I wasn't really concentrating on what I was doing. After a minute, I noticed my fingers were getting hot again, and I looked down and the glove was on fire."

"Jesus, how high did you have the gas? Full on?"

"Yeah, I always do. Things cook quicker that way."

"Including your fingers." I laughed and peered closely at her. "I think you've singed your eyebrows as well."

“I have not!” she retorted, shielding her eyes from me in mock embarrassment and returning my laugh with a delightful, throaty hoot.

“Don’t they teach you cookery at school any more?”

“No chance. I did woodwork instead.”

“Oh yeah? Very useful. I need a new bookcase. Build me something and I’ll give you some cookery lessons in return.” I took her hand and held it across the table, opening it palm-up and stroking my thumb across the backs of her fingers. She smiled and agreed, but in that instant of contact a frisson of suspense pervaded the atmosphere and the levity of the moment dissipated: despite our pledge the previous evening, we were still not entirely comfortable with our new relationship. That transition from friendship to love is difficult: in the early stages, when you are still a friend who has become a lover, you instinctively respond to gestures or words as you always would, as a friend, not as a lover, and the realisation of the inappropriateness of the response reinforces a sense of ambiguity, increases one’s unease at the new order. Many relationships never reconcile these differences and founder before they have truly begun. I felt Simone flinch momentarily as I took her hand and knew that she had been talking to me as a friend, not a lover, and was therefore taken by surprise by the intimacy of my response.

“You’d better have that bath,” I said, smiling. “I’ll clear this stuff away.”

The kitchen looked like the centre of a chimps’ tea party. How could anyone use so many implements for so small a meal, I wondered as I threw two pots, four wooden spoons and three knives into the sink. Suddenly, I felt terrible, as though I were going to be sick. For God’s sake, woman, get a grip, I thought. You’re thirty-seven, stop acting like a sixteen year old virgin going on a first date; but I couldn’t help myself, because that was exactly how I felt. I had never been with another woman before, so in some respects I was a virgin, and I had built this romance into something so vital to me that the fear of failure was sickening. What if she doesn’t like me? What if I don’t turn her on? I’m old, how can she find me attractive? I assailed myself with doubts and fears, stoking the engines of defeat within my resolve. And I knew then that I had to act immediately, or the momentum would become too great and I would never overcome my doubts.

I stopped what I was doing and gathered a fresh towel from the airing cupboard. Standing before the bathroom door, I inhaled deeply and closed my eyes. I knocked on the door.

“Yeah?”

“I’ve got you a towel,” I said.

“Great, bring it in.”

Simone was seated in the bath, rolling the sponge up her arm. "This is a fabulous sponge," she said. "Really coarse, it scratches your skin."

"Opens the pores. Makes you feel fresher." She was beautiful. Her hair was wet and swept back, clinging to her scalp, focussing one's attention on her face. She was flushed from the heat of the water, her features vital and her skin soft and puffy, with a sheen of wetness. Down the bridge of her magnificent nose a silver streak glistened, the film of water reflecting the ceiling light and highlighting her most perfect feature. Her eyes, vulnerable and hopeful, expectant but afraid, filled me with love, an aching need to hold her. I felt slightly prurient looking at her breasts, but I was unable to stop myself; they were firm and upright, her tiny, perfectly round nipples, very dark brown, upturned deliciously and pointing proudly towards me.

"Let me do your back," I said and dropped to my knees beside the bath. I took the sponge and we locked gazes, each looking to the other for the confidence to continue, determining whether the mutual trust existed to permit us to submit to one another. We smiled our recognition that it did, and at that moment friendship ended and passion began.

She bent forward as I charged the sponge and I pulled it gently up her spine, tracing the line of vertebrae to her neck before squeezing and allowing the water to cascade down her back. I repeated the action three or four times, watching the water splay round her sides and back into the bath, gravity impelling it to look for the quickest route down. I turned the sponge round and used the coarse side on her skin, rubbing it hard against her back, making her moan with satisfaction. She bent further forward, her spine convex, her arms splayed out and hands resting between her knees on the bottom of the bath, revealing a side view of her small, plump breast; her skin, smooth and dense and finely textured like Canova's Three Graces, glistened and I stooped to kiss her shoulder, resting my lips on the slightly elevated scapula. She turned and briefly dazzled me with a coy smile before staring forward once more into the bath water, and I kissed her shoulder again, leaning forward and stroking the sponge over her other shoulder and down her flank. Turning it to the smooth side, I filled and re-filled and re-filled it, at first letting the flow rush down from her shoulder in a giddy waterfall, and then gradually stroking the sponge down her side while slowly releasing the water, letting it roam over her peachy skin. I could feel the swell of her breast, the flare of her hip and I traced my tongue across her neck, feeling the prominent cervical vertebra at the top of her back. Simone shivered and I blew gently on her nape, making her giggle and squirm in the water. She turned towards me but before she could speak I planted my mouth on hers and drew her into a kiss. She responded immediately, her tongue sliding delicately against my lip, and I drew my free hand to her cheek, holding it in my palm, stroking downwards, my little finger hooked back and the nail tracing the line of her jaw. I brushed upwards against her ear and ran my fingers through her sopping, matted hair, fixing them against her skull and drawing her forcibly towards me. She turned in the

bath to face me fully and I pulled her close, my arms enfolding her, cradling her to me; hers, in turn, draped around me, holding my waist, holding me tight. She sat up slightly in the bath, allowing our fronts to come together, her breasts mashing against the sodden fabric of my gown, and I could feel her nipples drilling into me. All of a sudden, a force was unleashed within us and we fell upon each other, gnawing, devouring, needing. My hands roamed over her body, smoothing, holding, gripping, squeezing; we alternately locked mouths in lingering, brutal embraces and drew free to plant wet, smothering kisses over each other's cheeks and eyes and nose; we stared, startle-eyed, at each other, raw desire gleaming in our frenzy-wide pupils. This was the most electrifying moment of my life, creating a visceral charge the like of which I had never experienced: kissing Simone's naked body was the single most erotic act I could ever envision.

"You're so beautiful," I whispered.

"I am?"

"Come to bed."

"Yes please," she said.

I wrapped her in the huge bathtowel and she seemed to shrink into it, my fragile, timid young lover. We floated through to the bedroom and I laid her on my bed, sliding next to her and lying side-by-side with the most beautiful girl in the world. She stared up at me, her arm folded over her breast, hand crooked backwards protectively, and she bit her lip apprehensively, blinking in trepidation. I kissed her lightly and laid my hand on her shoulder, running my fingernails down her arm to the elbow, where I gripped her loosely as my mouth slid from hers onto her chin, her jaw, her ear; she turned her head towards me and I drew my left hand across the back of her skull, holding her pale beauty, directing her mouth to mine once more and kissing afresh. My right hand slid from her elbow onto her stomach and rested against it, feeling the ebb and flow of her breath, the warmth of her skin, the softness of her touch. I longed to caress her breast, my fingers sidling towards it, lying in wait on the downy slopes, resting while my thumb struck out in exploration, rolling achingly slowly, gently over her reddened flesh. Looking down, her nipple, so small, so round, so brown, was hard and waiting to be touched, and so I touched. Sliding my thumb round, I ran it over her dainty areola, so beautifully formed, delicate and exquisitely textured; flicking across, I glanced against the nipple, then again, and again, and held it between my fingers, pressing slightly, rolling it, squeezing and teasing.

I undid the belt of my dressing gown and opened it wide, revealing myself to Simone for the first time. I was petrified, but proud. I rolled closer to her, my thigh resting on hers, our stomachs together, our breasts touching; manoeuvring slightly, I lowered my position until our nipples came together, tip to tip, and held my breast to hers, binding them together.

And I thought back then. I thought back to that first time I saw her, in the pub with her parents, when she bewitched me and entranced me, when she took my breath away and I vowed I would have her. It may have been a melodramatic gesture, but as time advanced it became self-fulfilling. The search for Simone, the seduction of Simone, had taken over my life, had become my lodestone. As I grew to know her, my love increased; as she slowly revealed herself to me – in a way she had never done to anyone before – my need expanded, until the idea of existing without her was unimaginable. My beautiful woman, strong and vulnerable, confident and defensive, had won my mind. And now she was mine and I hers. As I lowered my mouth to her breast I fought back a tear of happiness.

Today, I saw the most beautiful woman in the world.