

A novel based on a true and moving story...

*Taking Care
of Harry*

FRANK RYAN

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By the same author*Goodbye Baby Blue**Sweet Summer**Tiger Tiger**The Sundered World*

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

Had ya seen your first son?

Why'dya leave us all here?

Has the battle been won?

Allen Ginsberg: *Elegy for Neal Cassidy*

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For Amy

1

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

'What happened, Mylie?'

I say nothing.

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

Tony is smoking a Marlboro cigarette. I can make out the fierce red arc of its passage, stabbing the air in my direction

before sweeping back so he can inhale it deep, the smoke of his exhalations metamorphosing in the starlight to become a halo around his bald head.

'Will you look at the state of him!' Tony says. 'Didn't I tell you, Brenda, that there would be nothing but trouble after that business, following the girl all the way to London!'

It is only half a dream. I am floating between two worlds. My feet stand in the English Channel. Out there, beyond the horizon – invisible, although my eyes turn slowly towards it – is France. Above my dizzy, inebriated head is the starry sky of deepest night.

With another turn of my head, I gaze back towards my friends, gathered in sleep around the ashes of the distant fire on the beach. I think about what we did. How we took care of Harry.

I say nothing.

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

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

I watched this with a growing fascination.

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

2

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

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

I want to get it right.

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

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

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

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

I like Doctor Henessy, whose first name is Margaret. To be honest with you, she's my favourite amongst the doctors.

Everybody, with the exception of old Grumpy, calls her Maggie.

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

The way it usually happens is that a qualified psychiatric nurse, known as a Court Diversion Officer, does a round of the

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

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

"ugger off!" he muttered back at me.

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

Then I saw the bowler hat. It really took me by surprise. It was lying on its side about six feet away across the floor and I realised that it must have fallen off his head. I crawled over, on my hands and knees, to pick it up. I had never held a real bowler hat in my hands before and I was curious, that's all. Anyway, I could see that this hat meant a lot to the old man, so I brushed it down with my sleeve and put it down on the floor next to the mug of tea – my mug of tea. I took some trouble arranging the mug and hat so they were easy for him to see. All the time he was watching me through that bright blue eye of his. I had to pick up my voice a little, to make sure I was getting through to him. 'Do you see that tea there next to your hat?'

"iss off!"

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

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

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

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

'`ou `astard!' he gargled through his spit.

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

'Hey – come on, now! Nobody is going to hurt you. You're among friends here.' I took the clean tissue from Ann and wiped his eye for him. Then I wiped him down over the visible half of his face.

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

toothbrush. I left him the toothbrush and added the razor to the pile I was taking.

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

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

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

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

3

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

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

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

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

I'm not a whinger. A lot of the work on a psychiatric ward is tedious. It's a funny thing, but I don't mind even the most boring

routines. I can't say I like shovelling shit, but there isn't much of that, not like on a long-stay geriatric ward. On the whole I like working on the Unit more than I would have thought when I began here five months ago.

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

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

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

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

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

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

'Not if it means I don't get my two weekends this month.' I made no secret of the fact that I was well and truly pissed with him.

'I've made plans for every single free weekend for the next two or three months.'

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

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

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

'There's no need for this kind of confrontation.'

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

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

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

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

He's about sixty years old. You can be sure that he didn't thank me for the way I had helped the nursing staff handle his patient. He doesn't call us health care assistants, or HCAs. He calls us orderlies. Whatever you call us, HCAs or orderlies, we are at the bottom of the heap in the National Health Service. We are the bums of the system.

You require no training at all to become a health care assistant, so people like Grumpy can crap on you whenever they feel like it.

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

4

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

There was an almighty row going on between Janus and Rich when I got back home this afternoon. I wasn't in any mood for this.

Of course the row was over something trivial. Rich had eaten the last of the bread.

'There was a whole quarter loaf in the cupboard,' Janus growled to me, 'and he's scoffed it down to the last crumb.'

Janus thinks that people should try to live together in a reasonable kind of harmony. It's one of those things that give rise to his sense of order in the world.

He likes to keep us in order by leaving notes around the place: CLOSE THE FRIDGE DOOR or WASH THE POTS or OPEN THE WINDOW, RICH, YA BASTARD, AFTER YOU HAVE HAD A DUMP. He writes these messages in spidery block capitals on little squares of yellow paper that have a convenient sticky edge running along one side. His surname is Orpington. He never talks at all about his family, who live down there in county Kent and who send him a cheque once a month. I have a feeling that that is also how his family wants it. They must have breathed one great sigh of relief when they sent Janus up to London and they have been more than willing to provide for him ever since. Janus went to a public school that he also doesn't like to talk about. But if you listened to him going on about everybody else's level of education, you'd think it must have been Eton.

While I was changing my clothes in my room, Rich was running around the living-room table with Janus chasing after him.

Rich was shrieking things like, 'Hey, hey – *hey!* Cut it out! Hey – help me, will ya, Mylie!'

Rich's name is Richard Wilkins. He comes from a family of Covent Garden greengrocers. He's a Crusty, with a gold ring though the septum of his nose. Rich was very damaged by a father who used to beat him, which is part of the reason why Janus and I feel he needs looking after. He left home to join the army. He saw action in

Northern Ireland before they kicked him out because he was starting to have peaceful thoughts. If he has any philosophy of life I think it might be based on apathy. Rich would like to think that he is independent of the social structures of society. He's a very pure person in his way and believes incredibly in what he is doing, which is participating in the wholesale alternative to anything that is popularly accepted as normal. Today, at half past five in the afternoon, he was already half stoned on pot and cider.

Rich is about five nine. He eats like a pig and still looks like a famine victim. He has a dozy face even when he is sober under a tawny mop of dreadlocks. I don't know how he gets his hair that colour, because it looks like it was naturally bleached by the sun.

I had to come down the stairs.

'Hey, go ahead, ya bastard – eat me!' Rich was toggling his head up and down and cackling in a high pitched kind of whine. It's unusual for Rich even to raise his voice. It can be hard sometimes to understand what he's saying because of the irritating gaps when his brain switches off. He was lifting up his nose with the ring in it, to wind Janus up.

'Ah – eh! Go on, Superman – eh – eat me!'

One of these days, Janus says, he probably will eat Rich. 'It's a fahking promise!'

Janus says fahk for fuck. His voice is like Shere Khan the tiger's, only deeper. He can be very amusing when he gets uptight. But there was no real danger that he would do anything seriously violent to Rich – it's too convenient for him to be able to study an example

of the Counter Culture. And besides, where else was he going to get his supply of gear?

I should explain that Janus is an extreme supporter of law and order, except when he disagrees with it, for example in the case of cannabis. He believes that if everybody smoked a joint the crime figures would come tumbling down because pot makes you mellow while booze and crack are wind-ups. You can see the sense in it if you just lie back and pull on a spliff and think about it. There's a lot of sense in Janus but the trouble is he doesn't know where to draw the line. All that would result from this latest spat was another message, concerning the last of the bread, on yellow paper stuck to the cupboard door.

They're like kids at times, in spite of the fact that Janus is twenty-two and Rich twenty-one.

I felt so mad at their antics I threw myself between them. 'Get a bloody grip, the pair of you!' I shouted. 'You want to see some real problems? If you want to see some problems worth fighting over, I'll take you into the hospital. I'll show you a few real problems.'

They stopped arguing and looked at me with expressions of absolute amazement.

'Okay!' I relented, feeling embarrassed because I had let the tensions of the job show. 'Look – for the sake of peace, let's say I'll pay for the bread. But you've got to do your thing too, Rich. I think you should atone for eating Janus's bread by going out to get us a new loaf.'

Rich whined on about being bullied by me and Janus but out he went anyway to get the bread. Afterwards he stamped up to his room to sulk and play Industrial Techno loud enough to make the house walls tremble.

One thing that Rich and I share is a feeling for music. I could talk to you on another occasion about different types of music, but what I am saying is that I understood the way that Rich was feeling. I empathised with his need for the dual experience of his *Reload* album, with its extended hand, like the naked arm of Orion the hunter on the cover, showing us the escape direction into the cosmos.

'What's up, Doc?' I asked Janus, getting out a couple of iced beers as we sat facing each other over the dining table. 'Another rejection?'

'Fahking bastards! Who do they think they are! Fahking arselicking gits of fahking bastards!' he growled, unscrewing the cap with the palm of his hand.

Janus is the only one amongst us with a degree, which is in Business Studies from the London School of Economics. He's also the only one amongst us who is looking for a job and this does his head in. But he's okay really and I'm the first to admit that Rich can be a pest. 'I mean,' said he, forgetting the job rejection and returning to his argument with Rich, 'I don't even object to the arsehole helping himself to some of my bread. It's the wasteful way he goes about it, eating all of it and not bothering to go out and get another loaf.' It's a sad fact that Rich has a great many careless notions.

You wouldn't believe that he has another of those rings through his dick. And it isn't through the foreskin, neither. It goes through what he calls his meaty meatus and it comes out in the ticklish bit underneath.

The trouble is when I try to think about it I can't think for laughing.

According to him it bled for days after he persuaded the tattooist to do it a couple of months ago. His girlfriend, the Eco-Amazonian warrior, Angie, has a ring 'down below'. According to Rich, those rings make their orgasms last until Christmas.

I know what you're thinking but you'd probably think twice about it if you saw her in her combat fatigues and knee-length lace-up boots.

Angie shares the same philosophy as Rich, in that she has no objection to State income because getting something back off the system is socially acceptable. Of course this isn't to say that she has ever put anything into it. On the surface of it, the three of us live in the same house and we have nothing in common, but in fact we hit it off surprisingly well. Janus is actually a good friend to Rich, who lives off the food bought by Janus and me.

Let me tell you a little more about Janus and you'll see why I love the guy.

Janus is very interested in famous leaders, like Napoleon, Hitler and Mahatma Ghandi. He studies certain aspects of their lives and from this he conjectures what he calls his 'hypotheticals'. I'll give you one example.

There was a soldier called Private Tandy, who was only five feet five in his stockinged feet. He was one of the most decorated soldiers in the British army of the First World War. One day Private Tandy had Adolf Hitler down the sights of his rifle, but because he was such a decent kind and because Hitler was wounded, he refused to put a bullet in him. When Hitler came to power in Germany he asked the British army to send him a print of this incident, which he put up on his own wall, because it showed that fate, in the form of Private Tandy, had spared him for a greater purpose.

That's how a thing becomes a hypothetical.

Janus spends a lot of his time working out answers to questions like, What if Private Tandy had blown out Hitler's brains?

To his thinking this is more than just an interesting puzzle with regard to human history. He's an expert in extrapolating the chaos theory to everyday life. He does this lying on his bed, listening to the funky music of James Brown and smoking joints. But he can really get up your nose at times because he thinks he's always right.

Because it was on my mind, I made the mistake of mentioning Harry and how sad it was to see a respectable businessman come into the Unit in that state. I talked about what little he had brought into the Unit with him – just the old shaving gear and that paperback book by Arthur Koestler.

Janus hooted, 'You are such a naive fahk, Mylie!'

'What would you know about it, donkey brain?'

'I'll bet you don't know what George Sanders and Arthur Koestler have in common.

So there I was, having to bite my stupid tongue.

I mean, I already knew that George Sanders did the voice of Shere Khan in *The Jungle Book*, which is a film that must have hit Janus at a formative age. But I didn't know that they had both committed suicide. Janus is one of those people who knows everything. It seems that Koestler didn't just kill himself, he took his wife with him because he was both a selfish asshole and a believer in euthanasia. I could see how euthanasia was going to be the link to the chaos theory and I had no desire to spend half the afternoon listening to Janus discussing it, so I headed back towards the stairs.

Then, just on the off-chance, I shouted back over my shoulder as my foot hesitated on the second step:

'I bet you don't know what the chaos theory has in common with the Mona Lisa!'

Of course he fell for it, like a plonker.

'I presume this has something to do with the female psyche,' says he, testing me, with a wolfish sneer.

'Not even lukewarm!' I was getting an ache in my jaw from trying to stop myself grinning, because Janus was really hung up on the female psyche. I didn't even mind stepping back down off the stairs.

'I bet you twenty quid you'll never even get close to what they have in common.'

'Mylie, old boy, you prove to me there is a link between the chaos theory and Leonardo da Vinci and I'll shout you enough beer to fahking drown you!'

'There is a link', I said, struggling to hold a straight face,
'between the waves of the sea and the eddies of the wind da Vinci
drew in his sketchbooks and the same random movement of the hair
in his painting of the Mona Lisa.'

You should have seen his face! His eyes had really lit up and he
was laughing like a hyena. No joking – he sounded more like a wolf
howling. Janus might know everything about everything but I know
more than he does about Leonardo da Vinci.

Normally it would be a very bad idea to get one over on Janus:
he can be a bit difficult when he has a mind to. But he was really
good about losing that one. It was the chaos theory – he just loves to
hear anything new about the chaos theory. I'm telling you this so
you won't just think bad things about Janus. If he weren't a trifle
paranoid, Janus would be exceptionally clever.

He has a hypothesis that the chaos theory could be applied to a
kind of metaphysical concept of marketing. It really does make you
wonder if Janus could turn out to be the greatest marketing expert in
London, given half a chance. But nobody will give him the chance.

Janus is six three and has shoulders like a gladiator. He would
be a knockout with the women if he would work on his charm a little.
His appearance would also be improved if a dentist did some work
on his teeth. Honest to God, when he opens his mouth and bares
those fangs you'd swear he was going to eat you! Still, I have to
admit that he has this job application business off to a fine art. He
really does write the most lovely references for himself. A good
percentage get him invited to interview, but he never gets the job.

I hate those timid bastards who won't give a job to my friend. I really do – I hate their guts. I'd like to put one of them in his place and see what it's like when nobody will even give you a chance.

'The whole fahking arselicking world must be copying my ideas by now,' he moaned, as we unscrewed two more bottles of beer.

5

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

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

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

its own badminton court. So you get the picture. It has to be different, otherwise the patients would feel lost when they went back into the world outside.

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

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

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

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

Even old Grumpy must be lusting after Anna.

Anna is carrying out a staff integration exercise of her own. But we all have to take our place in the queue because she's working her

way through the male nurses, giving them what she calls her 'counselling'. I dream about being counselled by Anna so today, as usual, I gave her a bit of a smile when I arrived and passed by her desk.

'Hi, Anna!'

Anna reached out and ruffled my hair.

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

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

Grumpy is a bit touchy these days because of Dr Boyson's new book. Dr Boyson is Grumpy's main rival on the Unit. He has written a best-selling book called *Choices*, in which he argues the case for his liberal philosophy of life. Grumpy thinks liberal thinking like this has given rise to a society that would consider such a thing as euthanasia.

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

No shit!

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

I like working on the Treatment Suite, which is the psychiatric equivalent of an operating theatre. This is where we give some of the really sick patients electric shock therapy. I know that there are people who don't agree with this kind of treatment. They think it's barbaric, making sick people have fits in order to treat them. Before I came to work here I probably felt the same because I had never seen people who were really sick in their minds. I had some vague idea they were just a bit nervous or depressed, a little worse than I feel myself with a hangover. It was a shock for me to come face to face with what it is really like to blow your mind.

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

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

'Struggling!' I returned the smile.

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

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

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

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

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

That idea really startled me.

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

After ECT one of the experienced nurses comes into the recovery room and does a cognitive function assessment, to make sure there is no brain damage. Today it was Karim Patel who arrived to do the

assessment. It always amazes me how the patient wakes up within a minute or so of the fit and how soon they are able to start the assessment after that.

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

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

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

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

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

6

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

Michael is the Ward Manager on William Blake. He's positively ancient amongst the male nurses, at fifty years old. He is also gay, with a dozen gold studs in his ears, tattoos on his hands, and overdeveloped buttock muscles, which must be the result of obsessive exercise. He's balding at the front and his hair hangs down in a wide tail on the back of his neck in the style known as a mullet.

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

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

Harry has been moved out of the Safe Room and into a side ward, to allow him time on his own to acclimatise to the ward routine. I knocked very lightly on the door before I entered, but he

didn't appear to notice me at all. He was dozing in his chair beside the window. That's the trouble when you put somebody on antidepressant drugs. The drugs can make people sleepy. Sometimes they can make patients so confused they are rambling out of their skulls.

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

I picked up the book and I went to put it on top of his locker. But I didn't want him to lose track of his progress and so I glanced at it while I was considering how to mark the page. There was a name written down in faded ink on the blank pages just inside the cover: *R. Giles*. It surprised me that it wasn't Harry's name. I began to feel guilty because it all seemed very personal to him. At the same time I couldn't help thinking about this person called Giles, who had written his name inside the cover of Harry's book. It would never have occurred to me to do something like that. So I was starting to wonder if a book would have to have some really special kind of meaning for somebody to write his name in it. I almost put it down right then but instead I still held it in my hands. The yellowed pages looked as if they had been read and re-read. I didn't know if it was Harry or this person called Giles who had found the book so interesting. I had never had the opportunity to read *Darkness at Noon*. But now I saw that Harry had reached page 109, a chapter

called, THE SECOND HEARING. My eye caught a snatch of conversation:

*

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

'Who the hell are you?'

'Don't you remember me?'

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

'The tea wallah!' he barked.

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

'What kind of a name is that?'

'Mylie O'Farrell,' I added.

'Sounds like an Irish name to me.'

'I come from Sheffield.'

'Sheffield?'

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

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

'Yeah!'

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

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

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

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

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

Z

I was still feeling pretty wound up as I was headed back to The Palace on the 98 bus. Along the way, I called in at the Church Street market, where I bought a crinkly lettuce, tomatoes and a cucumber from an Edwardian stall on iron-shod wheels. When I got in, I made myself a bowl of pasta to go with the salad and sat down alone at the scarred wooden table in the living room. Then I made a mug of tea, carried it upstairs to my room and put on the NWA CD. I played it loud to suit my mood.

What I was thinking about was Tabi's father, Doctor Mather, who used to say that Sheffield was an ugly picture in a beautiful frame. I know what he meant by it: the beautiful frame is the Derbyshire Dales. But I wouldn't have talked about Sheffield like that. The trouble with people is they have to make boxes so they can put their ideas into them.

To tell you the truth, I was still cursing Harry's existence. It wasn't just the tone of his voice when he had said 'Sheffield' like that.

It was the way he had told me I had an Irish name, like it was some kind of a disadvantage or something.

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

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

Mum and I have things in common. She is inclined to be very stubborn. That's one way in which I take after my mother. I also

take after her in my looks. Mum is dark enough to be Italian. That's the reason I tan easily and why I have a thick head of blue-black hair.

People think it's a big deal having black wavy hair. I know they talk about the ideal man as being tall (I am six-one) and dark and handsome. I have the dark bit all right, but I don't think I'm quite there on the handsome. And being dark has its disadvantages. For example, if I really want to look clean-faced I have to shave twice a day.

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

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

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

Of course, most of the time I don't bother to shave twice a day. The only time I ever did was when I was going out with Tabi. She was my girlfriend back in Sheffield. She's about five nine tall, with

straight brown hair. I don't know how it is now but she used to have long hair about halfway down her back.

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

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

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

Once in my life I wrote an essay that got ten out of ten in English. It was when I had a probationary teacher you could have a bit of a laugh with. I got along with him really well. He told me I could just go ahead and write about whatever interested me for a change and so I talked about Sheffield and the stupid way my father had died and about how my Uncle Tony sold his house and brought

his family to live next door to us. He did that when he was really short of money. I thought it was a nice thing to do when my mum was going around the bend with grief.

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

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

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

She was a bit of a wild case, was Alison, and she soon had me laughing with her. We did it behind her house, up against the

backstreet wall in the rain. I had never had sex with anybody in my life before but she showed me what to do.

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

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

Tabi of course was different.

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

Everybody calls him mad Doctor Mather.

He had lost his wife years before, just as my mum had lost my dad, and he didn't bother to look after himself. My Uncle Tony said

he was a sarcastic Scotch bastard because he told him that his bones weren't filled with red marrow but with black ingratitude.

Tony can be a bit of a nuisance at times, when he's worrying about his heart. He's always thinking he's about to have a heart attack, when he has lost a bundle on the horses. Of course he doesn't ever come out and say that he's worrying about his heart. Instead he lies down on the couch saying he feels dizzy, or he has this pain that is killing him around his left nipple.

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

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

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

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

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

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

With my being tall and shaving from an early age, I was spending most evenings with my friends in pubs and discos while Tabi, who is actually two months older than me, was working for her A-levels. Now and then, on the occasions we'd meet, it was clear, from the friendly banter we had between us, that she found me easy to talk to. She must have fancied me more than I thought from what she told me later, but of course I didn't know that then. Naturally I thought that her opinion of me was the same as everybody else's.

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

my skin and the sycamores were like columns of marching soldiers, swaying in the wind because they were only marking time.

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

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

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

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

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

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

'What I am, Tabi, is stupid.'

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

This was the time when miniskirts had come back into fashion, with splits up to their hips, and she was wearing one. The smoke was making her eyes water so her eye makeup was starting to spread out over her face, like spiders' webs. She had taken to half leaning on the table very close to me, so her right breast was pressing against my arm.

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

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

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

I wondered why she was talking like this. You don't know her – I mean, you don't know the image she had, up to this point, projected into the world. I was thinking that I wouldn't have minded going to university if they had some course that I was really interested in. Psychology hadn't yet occurred to me, although it interests me now. I think now that I might be happy studying psychology. I could get a kick out of sitting around just thinking

about the mind and all that. Janus doesn't half mock me when I say things like that to him. He says, 'You should be hung up by the bollocks, old boy, to get the circulation back to your brains!'

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

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

I couldn't believe that she was as drunk as she was making out. I was taking careful swigs of my coffee to hide the fact I was getting horny from the way she was looking at me. Women know how to do that out of instinct. I just couldn't help myself. I reached out and brushed one of those tears that were running down her face.

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

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