

PREVIEW

FURTHER EDUCATION

a novel by

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Introduction to Life in Hell

Miranda was reading Daisy a letter from Regina. The next to last paragraph went like this: "I don't know who they were expecting – certainly not a Big Black Woman from Brixton! I think they were hoping for a reincarnation of D H Lawrence! (someone actually asked me if I had ever met 'the guy who wrote Lady Chatterley's Somethingorother') Anyway, they pictured a man – 'cause they think lots of men writers from England have women's names (like Evelyn Waugh – 'Is he a she?') - someone in tweeds who talks with a lisp, sexually a bit odd, if not a total poof, and funny in a dark sort of way – like the guy in the Nobakov novel who fancied little girls. Definitely not me!!! Not someone who looks like their cleaning lady! I thought I was going to New York. Nobody told me that 'upstate' meant a three hour drive from Manhattan! Nobody said the college would be full of Lilly-white kids who talk like characters out of the Simpsons!"

Miranda put down the letter and sighed – "She'll be all right, don't you think?"

Daisy lit up a fag. "Wouldn't worry about Regina. She can take care of herself. But Americans aren't noted for their sense of irony. Guns, yes – irony, not."

A drop of water from a rusty pipe above fell onto Miranda's desk splattering over some of her papers piled recklessly in disorganised stacks. She sighed again – her fifth of the day (but sighs were better than screams, she thought) - and then dutifully pushed the tarnished stack to the opposite side of the desk. The look on her face was one of stoic forbearance of the sort a prisoner in Cell Block H might adopt when told this would be home for the next thirty years and she could do fuck all about it.

Daisy looked up, focusing on another brownish drop oozing from the corroded pipe above. She watched the seepage grow fatter, clinging precariously to its death-defying perch. It appeared to be suspended in time. She blinked. It was as if the blinking of her eyes was a toggle switch releasing the tensile force that kept the drop up there while gravity had dictated otherwise. The drop fell onto Miranda's desk with a rusty splat. In her mind it was like another drop of blood haemorrhaging from the ancient varicose veins that ran across the ceiling of Mi-

randa's subterranean office.

"Can't you get that fixed?" Daisy asked.

The expression on Miranda's face changed. It was now the look of the all-suffering manageress who knew, like the Roman emperors of old, that her task was to oversee the collapse of civilisation. To pretend otherwise was futile. "God knows I've tried," she said. It was one of those grand statements replete with metaphorical resonance that Daisy suspected went far beyond the rusty pipe business.

Miranda picked up Regina's letter again and read the last part aloud: "I didn't get a chance to meet my replacement. Seems he'd already left by the time I arrived. But I gather he's been somewhat misled. Thinks he'll be ensconced in some ivy covered halls. What have you written him?"

Miranda looked at Daisy. "Did you write to him?"

"No, why should I have written him?"

"Because I had asked you to."

Daisy fumbled defensively with her cigarette. She looked both annoyed and slightly guilt-ridden. But annoyance far outweighed the guilt. "Maybe you had. But frankly it was a mile down on my list..."

"So you never got around to it." Miranda was wearing her all-suffering look. Even this slightest of chastisements brought out Daisy's artillery to fire a warning shot across Miranda's bow. "I had more important things to do..." She stubbed out her half finished cigarette onto a nearby saucer with more force than was required, twisting it ruthlessly until the strands of tobacco burst from the crushed paper cylinder.

Miranda ignored this minor tantrum and turned the tables once again by asking her chief advisor her help, "What are we going to do with him?"

"Who bloody asked him to come, Miranda?"

"I didn't."

"Bloody Regina!" Daisy allowed herself a wry little smile, one that recognised the

extreme folly that life sometimes presents. "She always gets what she wants, doesn't she?"

Miranda looked down at the letter. "Well, she wanted to go to New York City..." Catching herself in the throws of begrudging admiration for someone who at least tried to better her existence, Daisy lit another cigarette with the automatic movements of a true addict. She took a deep, narcotic puff, felt the pain of an invisible force pressing down on her chest and then the fresh flow of nicotine cleared her head again. "So that means we have to baby sit some displaced American?" She waved her hand leaving a trail of faint white smoke like vapour in the wake of a soaring plane. "Miranda, look around you for heaven's sake!"

Miranda did look around and saw what she has seen for the last several years – a dark, damp hole that would have been condemned by Victorians as too vile for a workhouse. But it was all she had to do her job and in a strange and curious way she loved it. Not the dankness nor the hole but the job. And she loved that enough to suffer through the indignities of rusty pipes leaking on her papers, the mildew and the smells and all the other crap that went with it.

Just then the door to Miranda's office burst open. A man appeared all in a twitter. His face – the face of a wounded child aged fifty plus – was both expressive and expressionless. The muscles of his mouth had been trained over the half century to give nothing away; his eyes, however, had never been properly disciplined, which is why, perhaps, he had ended up in this hell-hole rather than some more salubrious house of learning. He was trapped and he knew it. Everything about him said, "Help, get me out of here! I don't belong in a place like this!" But no one listened to his pleas anymore, not even himself.

"Miranda! She's done it again!" he shouted. His weasel-like eyes cried out for recognition. His pallid face, the colour of pre-cooked white bread, reminded her of the bank clerk who refused to cash her cheque that morning as she had left her identification at home being in a rush to cover a class for a colleague who was faking illness because she couldn't bear to come in.

"What are we talking about, David? If you're going to interrupt an important meeting you must be clear..."

Daisy took a puff on her cigarette, looked up at the leaky ceiling as she let out the smoke and smiled at Miranda's ability to declaw the raging beasts who tried to waylay her either in the dankness of her office or lurched out from the shadows

to accost her as she ventured to leave her dismal sanctuary.

"What am I talking about?" The exasperation dripped from his voice like mouldy treacle. "I am talking about the same thing I was talking about last week and the week before. I am talking about that woman – the battle axe who has commandeered my room!"

Miranda recalled she has heard this tirade sometime before. But many and numerous tirades had gushed forth over the past week so it was hard to tell which tirade was which and what was from whom.

"Ah, yes," she said. "Remind me again."

The pre-cooked doughy face slapped itself with its own hand. "My Gawd!" The dough had started to bake, its colour changing from white to red.

Sensing an impending heart attack or at the very least a minor stroke, Miranda tried to calm him down. "David, you know we've had problems with room allocations because of the repairs..."

"What repairs?"

"The repairs that have been promised..."

"When?"

"Sometime soon."

The bread had started to burn. It threw its crusty arms into the air in supplication.

"Tell me, just in case I've missed something since the last World War. What does that have to do with the menopausal harlot who stole my classroom?"

"David!" she said, wagging a stern finger at him. "I won't have you speaking about my staff in such a derogatory manner. I've warned you before!"

"Derogatory? Menopausal? Harlot? I thought you liked Shakespeare?"

Miranda closed her eyes, seeking the calm that her Buddhist mediation classes

had promised would come to her salvation at times such as this. "We're speaking of Joe, I take it."

"She took it, you didn't. Unless, that is, you gave her permission. Did you give her permission to usurp my classroom, Miranda? Because, if you did, I will kill you with my bare hands. I have just completed an Open University Course in the Japanese art of Kafamunga. My hands are classed as lethal weapons now."

Looking at the dumpy figure of this sad little man, Miranda had to laugh. Self-deprecation was the saviour of every abused public-school boy, she suspected. "Joe has a class of 25 ESOL students," she replied. "She can't fit them all in B205. Your Access class has twelve. Why can't you move them to A106 and let her have the larger room?"

"Because, as I said before, there are no windows in A106 and it stinks like a sewer."

Miranda turns to Daisy who is watching the conversation with detached disinterest and says, "Does A106 smell that bad?"

Daisy shrugs and then disappears behind a cloud of cigarette smoke.

"I'll tell you what," Miranda says, turning back to David, who was still simmering on a slow but steady fire, "just go along with it this time and I'll work something out for next week."

"You told me that last week," he reminded her.

She put a hand on his shoulder and watched him cringe. Laying hands on David wasn't wise, but it was a quick way to get rid of him. "Trust me," she said. Miranda made an honest distinction between sinful lies and lies of expedience. The first, she felt, took her to places she didn't want to go; the second smoothed the passage to places she did.

He didn't believe her, of course and went away in a huff. It's only then Daisy re-emerged from her protective wall of gasified tobacco. "I don't like that man," she said, staring at the empty space that, to her, seemed to still contain his aura. "I wouldn't be heartbroken if he decided to take that early retirement offer."

"Shouldn't be too hasty," Miranda responded, looking down at her desk as she

shuffled through a stack of dampish papers. "We're lucky to have him."

What Daisy liked about Miranda, could she admit it, was Miranda's ability to shock even her – the least dewy-eyed of all the animals who ever trod the face of the earth (or so she sometimes felt in her hours of bleakness). "Why for bloody sake?" she managed to say after getting over the initial trauma of being hit by such a flatulent statement coming from the mouth of someone who so effectively eviscerated the very person she now defended.

"Because, despite everything, David knows his stuff," Miranda said, opening a folder she had located beneath what appeared to be a mass of diverse items stacked helter-skelter atop one another. "You do know he's a Cambridge graduate, don't you?" she said looking up at the younger woman across from her who stared back, mouth agape.

"Miranda, what the bloody fuck does that mean – except that his language is totally inappropriate for the kind of students we get! Someone like David can't get within twenty miles of their frames of reference!"

"That may be so, but he can teach to the syllabus and get them through their exams."

"And half of them drop out because they see absolutely no point of entry, no way of personally connecting to the subject matter." Daisy retorted, crushing the remains of her cigarette in the dish that contained the remnants of her last one and immediately lighting up another. "That's not what we're about, Miranda! And you bloody well know it! We're about empowerment, not divide and conquer!"

Miranda either didn't hear or didn't want to get into it. More to the point, she was mentally redirected. "Found it!" she said pulling out from the folder a paper that appeared to be a letter which she quickly perused with a practiced eye that over the course of many, many years had been trained to search through miles and miles of extremely boring and tedious text for that snippet of useful information possibly hidden somewhere within.

"Oh, shit!" she said, dropping her hand and staring over at Daisy still fuming silently at the other side of the room.

"What?" Daisy responded, picking up on the urgency of Miranda's manner and

quickly forgetting she was on the point of being livid.

“That American – Regina’s replacement. He’s due here on the 10th!” Miranda lifted the letter as if to display the documentary evidence.

“The 10th? That’s tomorrow!” said Daisy.

“Yes, I know” Miranda rubbed her tired eyes with a weary hand. And she silently mouthed a word which Daisy didn’t have to hear to comprehend.

1

Jim Thomas tried dialling the number of Kilburn College again with no success. The payphone instructions were useless – dial first, wait for a response, then put the coins into the slots. Certainly that couldn’t be right, could it? What was the person on the other end supposed to do while he searched for the right currency denominations? By the time he injected those strange pieces of metal into their proper receptacles whoever answered on the other end would have hung up he suspected. But, fortunately – or unfortunately – he never got that far. The strange beeps and buzzes that came through the receiver when he dialled suggested to him that he hadn’t actually connected with the number written on the piece of college stationary that he clutched in one hand while clinging on to the ancient bakelite phone with the other.

The letter he was clinging to, like a lifeline stretching invisibly from his safe and secure sinecure in upstate New York to this curiously unfamiliar world where he knew not a living soul, was from Regina Jamerson, the woman who had exchanged teaching positions with him. He had received it only the other day. It was dated three weeks before and was in response to the third panicked express mail, registered, receipt requested, pre-paid postage reply enclosed, envelope plastered with phosphorescent ‘Special Delivery’ and ‘Par Avion’ stickers, missive he had sent her. Her reply read:

“Let me assure you that everything is in order. I’ve checked with the college and they know you’re coming on the 10th as arranged. They’ve sent you formal notification of your appointment for one year as Lecturer in Language and Humanities. I’m not sure why you haven’t received it yet but not to worry, I’ve contacted personnel and they definitely have you on the books – or will do by the time you arrive. I’ve also spoken again with our head of department, Miranda Kelly, and she says she has asked one of our colleagues, Daisy Stephens, to look after you for

a bit till you get the lay of the land. Miranda told me she asked Daisy to write you directly and I'm sure you'll receive a letter from her before you leave New York. If not, don't worry – the post is awful these days, isn't it? But she knows you're coming and that's the main thing. Everyone, of course, is looking forward to meeting you. (They're all dreadfully busy preparing for inspection – but what else is new?) Hope you find my flat to your liking! It's not luxurious but it's walking distance to the college, so that's a great big plus! I've told my neighbour downstairs, Jeff, to expect you. He's a little deaf (either from his collection of heavy metal or all the drugs he takes or both – what's the world coming to? I don't know!) so you need to pound on the door hard sometimes before he hears you. (Don't worry about his pit bull dog - he's very nice despite his bark - which can scare the shit out of you if you don't see him, but he doesn't mean any harm usually. Just don't stick your fingers through the mail slot!) Anyway, Jeff has a set of keys and will let you in if you show him your passport. (You can't be too careful, can you? Better safe than sorry, I always say!) You'll find an extra set of keys on the dining room table. Hope you enjoy London as much as I expect to enjoy New York!!!”

Jim folded the letter and placed it neatly back inside the pocket of his jacket – a brown, Harris tweed he had purchased just last week at a clothiers called Harman and Jones Ltd, Purveyors of Quality Shirts and Trousers. It had a very English feel to it even though it was located in the Blue Moon Shopping Center, stuck between Wendy's Hamburgers and Toys 'R Us. Then, brushing back his hair, he put on his new wool cap, which perfectly matched his jacket and was also purchased at Messrs Harman and Jones from a salesman named Nigel who had convinced him that caps were very much in fashion this year 'across the pond' and if he was planning on hunting he might also need some gear which he would find in their well stocked sporting section.

Hunting wasn't Jim's thing, not at all. But he had seen a cap such as this worn by one of his literary idols – W. H. Auden - in a photo somewhere and so he bought it. He was also tempted to purchase a pipe except for the problem of having given up smoking some years ago. He thought, perhaps, of getting the pipe and not filling it with tobacco - just to chew on the stem occasionally. But that did seem a bit pretentious (though he considered it long enough to actually try several out for size, weight and balance – something that brought him perilously close to the edge of losing his 'Smoke Free!' button given to him by the dean of college after his hands had been swabbed with a special chemical which showed in blue dye any trace of tobacco used up to three months before).

Grabbing his twin leather bags – another recent acquisition made especially for this trip – he headed for the taxi ranks just outside the door. He had rarely found himself in a situation such as this. For Jim was an organised man – a facet of his personality which had served him well especially as he wasn't particularly quick of thought – not like the glowing stars he had seen rise in the academic firmament. He owed his success (if a renewable contract at a minor upstate college could be considered 'success') to his determined approach toward life and its complex manifestations. 'Simplicity' was his catchword. Everything, he believed, had its box. His skill was the ability to sort things into them. But he was also dependable. If something needed to be done, he would do it – though it sometimes got him into trouble as dependable people tend to be used rather like galoshes, which he was starting to find out to his detriment.

Yet there was another side to Jim. This was a very private side that he hadn't shown to many people, certainly not his students – except on exceptional occasions. It was the side of him that came out in those quiet hours when he finally was able to open a book and dwell in his real homeland which existed between its covers. Then Jim finally came alive. For it was there he could secretly experience all the saccharine emotions he sometimes mocked in his lectures. But it was also where he became universal – an important clue to why many people saw Jim almost as a non-being so removed from life as they knew it. And it was why he came to find himself in England – his literary homeland. For, like any serious explorer, he needed to feel the earth from whose soil those precious works had taken root and to sense the environment where they had been nurtured.

And stepping outside the terminal door he set down his bags, looked up into the clouds of relentless grey, and took a deep breath of British air. For here he was – finally – in England! Forget the fumes, the grime, the coughed-up phlegm underneath his polished brogues. Forget the deadened looks and the muffled snarls from the ghostly netherworld that passed before him. He was here at last. It was for him that moment of near epiphany perfectly signified by a errant beam of light that had miraculously found a pin-hole through the dankness of the sky and fell on him like a ray refracted from a heavenly prism, creating in him a feeling so strong and moving that it wasn't even slightly modified by the splat from a diarrheic pigeon squirting its load onto the right lens of his glasses before diving into the choking path of a double-decker bus in some strange cosmic kamikaze event that made life even more difficult for the hapless Pakistani driver who had only recently come to England himself.

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3

The journey from Heathrow to Kilburn was like a trip through parallel but unconnected universes for Jim and the taxi driver. The endless rows of dull rubber stamp houses, the interminable traffic jams, the death-defying roundabouts, the overheated engines pouring toxic fumes into the air, was filtered through Jim's literary third eye as a magic carpet ride through the recreated world of Hardy whereas the cabbie saw it more as an updated version of Dickens.

They were driving up Maida Vale when Jim, who was sitting rather democratically in the front seat next to the driver, having noticed the name of the road they

were on pointed to one of the dilapidated mansions overlooking the dreary avenue and said, in rather awe-struck tones, "Orwell once lived there, you know."

"A mate of yours?" the driver asked in a voice that suggested Jim might want to keep his comments to himself.

"No, I mean George Orwell. You know – the author. Animal Farm, 1984..."

The driver muttered to himself as a No. 16 double-decker swerved out of the bus lane into his path. It was a long ride and the cabbie wasn't in the best of moods but the fare was going to be substantial and Yanks were noted for their exorbitant tipping habits so he was willing to play along especially as they now only had a mile and some pence to go. "You'll find that a good many writers live around here, Guv," the cabbie replied.

"Really?" Jim raised his eyebrows, quite impressed. "Are we near Kilburn?"

"Up the road," said the cabbie motioning with his head. "Just yesterday I dropped this bloke off back there where you pointed out ... where your mate – what's his name again?"

"Orwell..."

"Yeah, that's the one. Anyway, this bloke I dropped off, he was a writer too. Worked for the Sun. You have that back in New York?"

"The Sun?"

"The paper. One of Murdoch's. You know about him?"

"He owns the New York Post, I think. And several others..."

"Bloody Aussies! Think they own the world!"

"Oh, well that's a relief," said Jim, with a slightly nervous chuckle. "Most people think it's us Americans."

"Aussies think they own it. Yanks know they own it." Then, remembering his dreams of a world-class tip (in his mind, the cabbie had already used it to order three bitters and a double Scotch at his local pub), he added, "No offence though,

mate. I like Yanks myself. Would have gone there if it weren't for my gammy leg." And here he hit his thigh with a sharp slap. "Get's bloody numb sometimes, especially after a long drive like this." (London Taxi Driver's Manual - Points to Remember for Maximising Remunerations: The 'Gammy Leg' ploy often works to lubricate wallets after long and tiring trips especially if the fare is a dumb American who thinks the rest of the world hands out extra dosh for doing nothing like they do back where they come from.)

The cabbie reached the High Road and soon made a sharp left. A few minutes later he stopped in front of a sprawling structure set back on grounds that might have been a rubbish tip. Then turning to his fare and said, "Well, here you are, Gov. Kilburn College."

Jim looked out at the building and then back at the cabbie. The expression on his face was the kind of bewilderment one might experience upon waking up from a rather nice dream and finding someone trying to light fire to one's mattress. "It can't be!" he said. "Can it?"

The cabbie checked the address on Jim's letter and then consulted his book of maps. "Looks like there's only one Kilburn College, Gov," he said.

Jim inspected the sign planted in the ground before the building which proclaimed in big, bold letters of faded red, "KILBURN COLLEGE". "Maybe it's the annex," said Jim, hopefully. "Maybe it's the part they're planning to tear down."

"Couldn't say," replied the cabbie as he got out of the hearse-like car. He went to open the boot while Jim remained inside, almost comatose, still staring, unbelievably at the dilapidated building which looked to him for all the world like an enormous brick warehouse that in its better days might have been an abattoir but now seemed more likely to serve as a urinal for the ugly tower blocks behind it.

"This is it, Guv," said the Cabbie, who was standing in front of the passenger door holding Jim's extremely soft leather luggage which now could have been made of porcupine bottoms for all Jim cared. "Unless you want to be driven somewhere else," the Cabbie hopefully suggested.

Shaking his head, Jim reached for his wallet and said, half-heartedly, "What's the damage?"

“Forty-nine quid on the metre, Gov, plus whatever...” The cabbie gave him a gratuitous smile which Jim didn’t see or, at least, didn’t take in as he pulled two twenties and a ten from his billfold and handed it to the driver who kept his expectant palm extended even after Jim picked up the soft leather suitcases and walked, like a condemned prisoner, toward the structure which was looking to him more and more like something he had once seen in a film about Devil’s Island.

4

Bridget was standing by the sliding glass window that separated the front office from the entry hall when she saw the strange man come in who set off all kinds of alarm bells in her head. (Bridget, in fact, had several types of alarm bells stuck somewhere in her cranium which alerted her to various dangers, depending on the circumstance. This one defied categorisation, so, as no specific alarm was triggered, all of them went off.)

She was about to pick up the ‘hot line’ to warn someone – probably Miranda, but really it was whoever picked the bloody thing up – when she remembered that the phones were down. So all she could do was hold her ground and stand there motionless as the creature descended (like a stick insect she had once seen in a nature documentary who used non-movement as a defence against some hungry predator – though, thinking about it – the stick insect was indeed eaten in the end.)

Jim, for his part, walked boldly up to the varnish-haired woman stranding rigidly behind the communicating window like a not-unattractive gargoyle, put down his matching suitcases and asked, “Is this Kilburn College?” while hoping beyond hope that her answer would be, “No. This is Kilburt College, spelt with a ‘t’ at the end. People often mistake this dump for Kilburn College, spelt with an ‘n’ at the end, whose delightful campus is just down the road.”

However she didn’t. What she said instead was, ‘Yes.’ Though she said the word with something of a throaty tremor.

Jim winced. ‘Oh’, he said. And then, giving it one last shot, he said, ‘Are you sure?’

Bridget didn’t really know how to answer that one since, in her life, she was sure of very little. But she suspected that this was, indeed, Kilburn College, though she was prepared to be convinced otherwise – especially if someone who looked like

he was in authority told her. So clearing her throat and summoning up all her courage she asked, 'Are we changing our name then?'

'Excuse me?' Jim replied, suddenly finding himself mentally somewhere still over the Atlantic with the stewardess shaking him and pleading, 'Please wake up, Mr Thomas! You're frightening the children!'

It was then that Bridget realised that there was a strong possibility she had it wrong and that this was not the Chief Inspector standing before her but a dreadfully lost tourist looking for the Kilburn Hotel – a mistake that had once been made before. Thinking this, she relaxed her rigid facial muscles and allowed herself the slight semblance of a grin.

'This is Kilburn College, you know, not Kilburn Hotel,' Bridget explained.

'I do realise that,' said Jim, glancing around at the crumbling interior. Then, reaching into the pocket of his Tweed jacket he pulled out his letter on official college stationary and scanned it quickly for the name he couldn't quite remember. 'Miranda McNamara ... I believe she's expecting me. I'm Jim Thomas,' he said with a resigned sigh.

Bridget's alarms went off again. The suitcases weren't full of clothes, she realised, they were filled with papers! They were crammed with documents to torture and torment them! And she and the rest of the secretarial staff would have to spend their evenings and holidays compiling the scribbled replies that the beleaguered lecturers would furiously pass them ten seconds before the due date. It was all too terrible for words and she felt like weeping there and then. She would have liked to have told this evil man to go back to the creepy-crawly place from whence he came but she understood intuitively, because she was actually quite a good secretary, that doing so would not have been particularly useful to her career, and as she had three small children to support, she decided instead to get him comfortably seated and offer him a drink before running desperately for assistance.

5

Jim was seated on an uncomfortable wooden bench in the college foyer drinking a cup of watery coffee that tasted, strangely, of chips cooked in rancid oil, gazing at the peeling walls and wondering how on earth they could have been painted such a stomach-wrenching shade of green, when he suddenly realised that someone was watching him.

On the other side of the room sat a young black woman staring in his direction. Her dark brown eyes were enormously large and, though it took him a while to notice, they seemed to be fixed in space. In fact, though she was staring in his direction, she wasn't actually staring at him. She was staring through him or beyond him. But her eyes were fixed on him like a search light might be fixed on something simply because it stood in the way.

Even though Jim realised that he was not the object of her gaze, he did find it somewhat disconcerting to be looked at so intently by someone who didn't even have the courtesy to blink. Yet there was a certain quality about her face he found intriguing. The more he looked at her, the more he thought of an image he had once seen in a book of strange and unusual rituals – in particular, a Gypsy ceremony in the South of France celebrating the Black Madonna. There was something that struck him then about the poetry embedded in that dark icon which he also sensed in the woman across from him though he couldn't actually put his finger on it.

As he studied her, however, he slowly became aware that there was something else he hadn't seen at first. Her ebony face had streaks of white leading from the corners of her eyes down the length of her cheeks like traces from an ancient sea that had long since drained away leaving only a residue of brine. He didn't know what it was but it left him with an even more hollow numbness in the pit of his stomach – a sensation that when combined with the rancid grease flavoured coffee was not very pleasant.

He was about to attribute his strange and conflicting feelings to the consequences of jet lag, when he heard a commotion that, like a small but forceful whirlwind, was sweeping everything up into its cyclonic orbit – sucking him from his confused reverie back into the reality of this North London version of the world and popping him out of his mental bubble.

Miranda walked boldly up to the man sitting stiffly on the bench as Bridget twittered annoyingly at her ear, pointing to the figure who was clearly the only one who matched the description of the beast with treble sixes marked up and down his forehead. Sniffing the air before her, like a trained bloodhound, she approached him as a commander of an opposing force might meet an emissary of an alien and demonic world whose denizens were reputed to eat teachers for breakfast.

“Welcome to Kilburn College,” she said with the same poker face that had seen her through many difficult negotiating situation where it was important to give absolutely nothing away until it was forced from you at the point of a gun. “We actually weren’t expecting you for several months yet...”

Jim stood up wondering whether it was customary to offer his hand – as hers continued to dangle by her sides. In films he had seen new colleagues who had never met each other before kiss on the cheeks, but he wasn’t sure of the protocol - was it once, twice or three times? Besides, he was pretty sure that the films were French or Italian. The British shook hands he thought. But hers was not very accessible being that her fists were clenched and it meant running the risk of major embarrassment if he extended his and she actually had wanted a kiss (though looking at her expression, which was rather stern and forbidding, kissability was not a quality he would have picked if forced to choose, which, thank heaven, he wasn’t). So he stood there looking dumb and said, “Didn’t you get my letter? I tried to call...”

Letter? Miranda thought quickly before actually denying it since it could likely be lying in a mushy pile of unopened mail mouldering on her desk. So she took the advice her sainted football crazed father had given her that the best defence is a good offence and said, ‘We couldn’t receive your phone call because the antiquated system of telecommunications we’ve been saddled with here has broken down again – something I hope you will put in your report.’”

Was he in fact expected to write a report on their aging infrastructure he wondered? Because, if so, they might as well be told that he knew nothing about electronics. In fact, he didn’t even know how a toaster worked – something he proved beyond doubt by nearly electrocuting himself once when he stuck a knife into the elements while trying to pry loose a bagel wedge which had refused to pop up and forgetting to unplug it first.

“What report?” he said.

Miranda let out a practiced sigh which was calculated to put people in their place by telling them what bloody fools they were without actually saying it in words. What she, in fact, would have liked to have said was, ‘It’s so much like you lot to write reports on our failings without mentioning the collateral problems – like non-functioning telephones – which prevent us from doing our job to your satisfaction.’ But she didn’t say that because she couldn’t even though she very much

wished that she could.

'What do you call it then, if not a report? A review, an audit, an appraisal?' She bit her tongue. She had sworn to herself that she wouldn't be sarcastic no matter what.

"You mean in America? We call it a report there too.' He scratched his head as he was getting extremely confused by now. 'At least I think we do...'

So that's it! They were starting to bring in American consultants! Well wasn't that just like them! Not surprising at all, she thought.

"Well," said Miranda, now standing her ground as a matter of principle and as a way of doing her bit to stem the tide of very un-British attitudes sweeping across the Atlantic and inundating England with ideas all of which seemed to have been dreamt up by half-wit American accountants who thought that schools were factories and students were products. "As we didn't receive your call and as your letter seems not to have arrived – you can't blame us for the postal service but perhaps you'd like to inspect them too. In fact, perhaps you'd like to inspect the entire network of government inefficiency including yourselves and while you're at it perhaps you can inspect the reason why the government is willing to let your department spend thousands on sending us American consultants when we have to fight tooth and nail to get a bucket of paint to cover the cracks in our walls!'

She was aware that somewhere down the syntactical line she had lost the thread of the sentence she had just spoken, but looking at the tallish American who stood before her with his jaw dropping further and further and his eyes getting bigger and bigger, she also knew that the gist had translated itself across the linguistic divide.

'Look', said Jim, finally allowing himself to express the pent up annoyance that had been building in him for several hours now, 'I accepted this exchange because I always wanted to live in England for a while and now I'm not so sure I did the right thing. I didn't expect a brass band to welcome me but...' He glanced around at the grim surroundings and then back at Miranda, whose own jaw was beginning to slacken. '...I certainly didn't expect this!'

And then, realising who this poor chap really was, Miranda began to laugh. In fact, she laughed so hard that Bridget thought she was losing it and was just one step from turning the bend into never-never land – something she had been fear-

ing for a while. Which was either prescient on Bridget's part or possibly projecting into Miranda what was actually happening to herself.

6

Jim had remained at Kilburn college only a while – long enough to hear Miranda's profuse apologies and to be given a rushed tour of the facilities which he found even worse than he could have possibly imagined. When they had finished their brief walkabout up and down the dark, narrow corridors, peeking into a curious variety of classrooms here and there, and finally ending up back where they had started, Miranda asked him if he had any questions and he said:

'Well, yes...'

And Miranda nodded her head and looked down at her watch, in a manner that encouraged him to get on with it because she was a very busy woman.

'Is this actually a college?'

She looked up at him wondering what he meant, since it was a question that could have been taken in a number of ways depending on how defensive you were or how many years you had left before you could apply for early retirement. 'I know this place can appear to be a half-way house for transients or, more to the point, a refugee centre, but we are a college, Mr Thomas, and we do our job quite well when we're allowed to do it that is...'

'Of course,' Jim said, hurriedly backtracking and recalling a word of advice from a friend who was once in England for a short visit (actually he was changing planes but the outward flight was delayed and he had ended up staying at a Heathrow hotel overnight) who told him that the British didn't take well to the American in-your-face approach to conversation and that if he really wanted to get to know the natives he would count to ten before he asked a question and then try to phrase it as a statement which really didn't even come close to saying what he wanted to say but just hinted at it. Something he now tried: 'It's just that in America, you see, colleges are sort of academic institutions or at least they try to be...'

'We're an academic institution too, Mr. Thomas,' she replied. And then she added, 'At least we try to be – sometimes.'

He realised that he wasn't explaining himself very well and, in fact, getting himself deeper and deeper into a hole he didn't want to be in. So, he cleared his throat and tried again, 'What I mean – what I think I mean – is that back home colleges give degrees like a BA – or in the case of two year colleges, half a BA. Here there seems to be a lot of different courses flying around attached to a lot of different qualifications run by a lot of different examination boards. At least that's the impression I got when you said one class was doing a Cambridge exam and another was doing a Pitman and another was doing a City something or other and another doing a GN something. Or does it all fit together at the end? I know it's early days, but am I missing something?'

'Well we're not a university,' she said, glancing at her watch again and making a show of wrinkling her forehead.

'That's the point, I guess,' he said, not really picking up on her very obvious clues of impatience, 'back home colleges are sort of junior universities.'

'You're not back home, are you?' she reminded him. Then, sticking out her hand (no attempted kisses) she gave him the sort of smile which said, 'Your time is up. Please see the secretary for any further information you might need although I'd be surprised if she'll actually give it to you.' That's what her smile said. What she said, in fact, was, 'We look forward to seeing you tomorrow, Mr Thomas. Bright and early. 9:00 o'clock. Your students await you!'

7

Plympton Road was not too far from Kilburn College as the crow flew. However, if the crow wasn't flying but taking a cab that day, then it was a distance. Not a great distance, but distance enough to run up a rather hefty tab - especially if the driver took circuitous route, the grand tour, so to speak, which passed parts of Camden, Swiss Cottage and West Hampstead.

The driver left Jim out half way down a street of three storey not quite dilapidated brick houses most of which had clearly seen better days but now were so pricey that they would cost a mint to renovate – keeping with the strange law of urban economics which allows poorer people's houses to be taken over by richer people who then must live in the same conditions the poorer people did but feel because the house was 'worth more' they had somehow moved up in the world rather than down.

Regina Jamerson's flat was in a building which had a small front garden that grew a large assortment of grassy weeds as appropriate cover for the collection of beer cans and styrofoam containers from a hamburger joint which, unfortunately, was lurking on the High Road just around the corner. There was also a squeaky metal gate with no latch that blew open and shut in the wind and a path of dangerously cracked paving stones that led from the squeaky gate to the great front door painted black.

Standing there on the pavement after paying out another exorbitant taxi fare – his second of the day - Jim looked over at the dirty red brick structure and wished he was back home again in his quiet sanitised flat which overlooked a very neat and trim patch of manicured green with a sign that read: 'Littering is a crime. Maximum penalty \$1000.' But there was no way back now, he thought – at least not at the moment. And Jim was a positive thinker. In fact, not too long ago when he was feeling depressed about having given up one of the few secret pleasures in his life – namely, smoking – he had taken a course entitled 'The Power Of Positive Thinking And What it Can Do to Help You Become Happy And Earn Big Bucks On The Stock Market.' And even though he lost a bundle on the few investments he managed to take out just before the market collapsed, he did think the course was worth every penny he had spent on it because it taught him that thinking in the 'short term' just gave you high blood pressure and ulcers while thinking in the 'long term' meant that even if you lost a bundle in a stock market collapse, you could look forward to the day when it went back up again.

So, stealing himself for whatever came next, Jim lifted his twin leather bags (now a bit scuffed from twenty-four hours of intensive abuse) and began walking down the jagged pathway that led from the squeaky gate to the big black door with a sign posted on it that read, 'Beware of Cat!'

Jim was already on the front door stoop before he was able to read the sign. Finding it a bit confusing, he put down his bags and took out Regina's letter from his jacket pocket and glanced through it again:

'I've told my neighbour downstairs, Jeff, to expect you,' she had written. Then skipping down, he read, '...you need to pound on the door hard sometimes before he hears...' And then '...Don't worry about his pit bull dog - he's very nice despite his bark...' Then the warning, '..don't stick your fingers through the mail slot!' And finally, '... Jeff has a set of keys and will let you in if you show him your passport...'

Jim glanced up at the sign on the door – ‘Beware of cat’ – and then back down at the letter. He scratched his head. She clearly had written ‘pit bull dog’ not ‘pit bull cat’ and even for non-animal-lovers it’s pretty hard to mistake the two species, he thought.

Taking a deep breath, he knocked hard at the door and waited. There was no response. He knocked again – harder this time. Still no response. Then, putting his ear to the door, he listened for tell-tale sounds. But he heard nothing – not a semblance of heavy metal rock, nor growling dogs, nor hissing cats.

Taking his ear from the door, he pondered the situation. Perhaps the downstairs neighbour was out, he thought. But what about the dog – or cat? Did he take it or them out for a walk? And if so, how far would he have taken them or it? Perhaps there was a nearby park.

He took out the letter again and inspected it closely for clues. It was very unfortunate, he thought, that she had failed to provide him with the neighbour’s phone number or even his surname so he could look it up. But she had said when Jim was arriving so he was expected – unless, of course, there was some confusion. And, thinking over the events of the day, there was nothing but. In fact, he had a hard time recollecting what an unconfused state was, which is probably the definition of ‘jet lag’ and he wondered about people who hopped off international flights to negotiate great and important treaties where millions of lives were at stake and thought that if he was negotiating a great and important treaty at that instant millions of lives would probably be down the tubes in a very big way.

Rubbing his eyes, he looked down at his luggage and considered the soft leather. For a moment saw them as twin calves frolicking in a moist green pasture and then he rubbed his eyes more until he was able to see them again as suitcases whereupon he stacked them one atop the other and sat down on them even though the instructions he had read after purchase said, in no uncertain terms, not to do that.

He had his head tucked in his hands and was just drifting off to sleep, dreaming of his boyhood when he would nestle against his mother’s pendulous breasts and have her sing him a lullaby or read him a recipe from *The Joy of Cooking*, when he felt something very wet and slobbery licking his face. It was strange, he thought. His mother never did that. And then suddenly coming to his senses he looked up and stared into the eyes of – a beast! And the beast had its cold black nose pressed up against his head and its enormous tongue was licking him with

great gooey laps!

8

Regina's downstairs neighbour was not the drug-crazed psychopath that Jim had conjured in his mind – at least he didn't fit that particular profile at first glance. In fact, he seemed to be a rather solicitous young man – slightly unkempt, it's true – but on the whole rather more open and friendly than the other folk he'd met that day. And his dog – well, Wilberforce was a pussycat masquerading as a dog, Jeff explained. Also he (or she – Wilberforce was still sexual uncertain it seemed) wasn't a Pit Bull, as Regina who knew nothing about dogs (or other four legged pets) had said, but most likely a product of some golden retriever who had mated with Jessica Rabbit, according to Jeff.

Jeff didn't even ask to see his passport as he ushered him inside the front door which led to a narrow entrance hall and had been left unlocked so Jim could come in and make himself comfortable if he had arrived while Jeff had been out letting Wilberforce drag him once more through the neighbourhood searching for the perfect place to crap.

Inside the hall, on the right, was the door to the downstairs flat which had a sign that read, 'Back in a jiff, Jeff', and was meant for Jim had he been clever enough to have gone inside to read it. Regina's flat was above the stairs and, seeing that Jim was exhausted from his trip, Jeff helped him up with his luggage and let him into the rather agreeable chambers which Regina had made into her sanctuary.

After the initial bleakness of his London experience the flat was a pleasant surprise. It was bright and colourful without the kind of garish, over-the-top quality one might have expected from someone with Regina's florid style of writing. But it also had a homey feel to it.

Two rooms ran off the lower entry hall – a kitchen with a small dining area and a living room where a set of comfortable chairs were nestled round an open hearth. The cosy bedroom shared the space above with a study and a box room which Regina used for storage. The box room also had a bed which a guest could use provided he or she didn't mind sharing it with an assortment of oddments from Regina's travels like shrunken heads from Papua New Guinea and effigy dolls with pins stuck through their vital parts brought back from an island in the Caribbean. However, if one stayed out of that particular room everything was sweetness and light – at first glance, anyway.

And first glance was all that Jim had time for this evening. Tired and weary from a difficult day of shattered illusions, he decided to dispense with his usual pre-bedtime routine of folding his clothes, taking a shower, cleaning and flossing his teeth, getting into his nightclothes, brewing some soporific tea, neatly placing his slippers by the foot of the bed face out in case he had to get up in the middle of the night to piss, folding back the covers, fluffing up the pillow, getting into bed and sliding smoothly under the covers so as not to ruffle the sheets, turning on the night lamp, reaching for his book and reading a few pages of Byron or Browning before drifting gently off to sleep.

Tonight he fell like a lump into Regina's bed, fully clothed and was out like a light before he could smell his final fart of the day, courtesy of the greasy coffee Bridget had foisted on him.

9

He awoke with a start and sat bolt upright in Regina's bed. Squinting his eyes, he looked up at the unfiltered rays pouring in from the naked skylight directly over him. Where was he? For a moment it could have been anywhere in time and space, some fifth or even sixth dimension, perhaps, where carbon based life was recomposed as molecules made of woolly cotton – at least that's the way he felt. In an instant of realisation, a feeling of panic began to well up inside of him. It was as if he had entered a worm hole and had been swept down the slippery double-helix into another life. What worm hole? What life? And how the hell was he going to get out of here? 'I've got to think,' he said to himself, rubbing his hand over his rumpled hair. 'I've got to get hold of myself. I've got to have a plan...'

Then he suddenly realised he wasn't alone. Not in the ontological way – not in the 'no man is an island' sense – but in a very real and visceral manner, like when you realise someone (or something) is actually in bed with you and you don't know who (or what) it is. But that was, indeed, the case because whoever (or whatever) had caused a lump on the other side of the bed and the lump it had caused was snoring quite loudly. He hadn't noticed it at first because he himself snored and sometimes woke himself up by snoring and continued snoring for a while even after he was awake so he, in a sense was quite used to someone snoring in bed. But the lump on the other side of the bed, which had started to squirm a bit, was quite clearly not him – unless the other universe he had entered created some laggardly clone-like antonym of himself which was content to snore un-

derneath the covers while he was getting up.

He had half a mind to be truly terrified if it wasn't for the fact that half of him thought he was still asleep and this was just part of a very terrible dream. The other half of him knew he was awake and was still considering how to react (he was of course in a strange country, in a strange apartment and in a strange bed) when the question became moot by the lump emerging from its lump-like state, shaking off the covers, pouncing onto him and juicily licking his head.

At the very moment this liquid attack was taking place there was a knock at the downstairs door and a voice called out: 'Hello? Sorry to disturb you but is Wilberforce up there?'

Wilberforce, upon hearing his master's voice, did a very quick 180 degree turn which left his hind end where his tongue had been just a moment before and, now in a state of puppyish over-excitement, was whipping his tail back and forth, like a furry flannel, over Jim's mouth.

Still in a state of disbelieving shock – the kind that allows you to consider what you're going to make for dinner that evening while flying in the air after being hit by a speeding car – he heard footsteps clumping up the stairs and then the bedroom door open and then a voice shout, 'Wilberforce! Come down from there!'

Spinning around, Wilberforce gave Jim a final, oozingly yucky lick, before bounding out of bed and leaping at his master full force, impelling him backwards, out the door, whereupon he pounced onto the body now splayed on the floor like a rubberised toy that you could squeak if you jumped on hard enough.

'Wilberforce! God damn you! Get...!' The final words of frustrated agony were drowned in a flurry of Wilberforce's premium woofs.

Jim was still wiping the excess gunk from his face with the edge of the sheet when the downstairs neighbour finally was able to extricate himself from canine bondage and rising to his feet, poked his head into the bedroom and said, 'Sorry about that...'

Tasting dog in every swallow, Jim was sensing a great need to clean his mouth with some very powerful disinfectant and didn't really feel capable of responding even if he could have found the words to express the wave of emotions flooding

through his physiology. (The nearest he could come – in all the possible replies that flashed through his head in a millisecond of clarity before verbal lockjaw set in was – ‘How would you like to wake up to find your toes being eaten by a bunch of hungry piranhas while being slapped in the face with a wet tuna?’ But a throat full of dog saliva and nose full of fur prevented even that.

‘He’s a clever mut,’ said the downstairs neighbour with some pride. ‘Learned to unlatch the door by standing on his hind legs and pushing the knob with his nose. Regina had taken to chaining it shut at night. Her door that is. Ha! Ha!’

Jim stared at him and that monster of a dog still woofing and jumping like nobody’s business. Where was it all coming from, he wondered? Hormones? Or some diabolical force embedded within all that moulttable hairiness?

Meanwhile, Jeff, the downstairs neighbour was being pulled back out the door having attached the dog to a lead which meant to the dog that it was finally time to do what dogs love doing best – shit in the park. And before he disappeared, all Jeff was able to say in parting was something he had once heard another American he knew repeat like a mantra which to him summed up the essential philosophy of life on earth as he knew it: ‘Have a good day!’ And with his finger he drew in the air the outline of a smiling, happy face which lingered in the room after he left, not at all like the smile of pure raw optimism he was used to back home that was on all the buttons handed out by fast food chains, but more – in Jim’s eyes, at least - like a sarcastic grin with a touch of ironic malevolence.

10

The morning was glowing greyly in the dour English mist as Jim walked down the road which, according to the map he had purchased at the local news agency, would eventually spill out somewhere near the college and from there it was just a couple of twists and turns and presto! At least it seemed that way from the map except one thing he noticed was that straight lines were at a premium and the streets seemed to have names that changed so quickly you had to keep an eagle-eye out for defining signs tacked randomly on the sides of the buildings that hadn’t fallen down or were covered over by graffiti.

Walking down the high road Jim noticed the range of shops from curry parlours still redolent of last night’s mix of vindaloo and lager (attested to by small patches

of evil-looking substances still smouldering on the kerb) to gambling dens with pictures of snorting stallions in the windows and mangled strips of paper littering the doorway speaking of small fortunes going up in smoke along with tomorrow's rent, he suspected. Further on, a saloon which had clearly seen better days when someone had gobs of money to spend on ornate woodwork and great panes of painted glass now hiding the dingy goings-on inside which reeked of splattered brew permeating the wood underneath the shaky chairs as indelibly as the nicotine stained walls

Next door a small café with plain vinyl tables and linoleum floors was filled with bleary-eyed denizens gobbling up plates of runny beans on toast, rashers of fatty bacon and fried eggs cooked in lard washed down with chipped mugs of tea laced with sour milk (at least that's what his stomach told him as he glanced through the steamy window to gauge whether he should stop for a quick bite before leaving this little oasis of civilisation and travelling on – a notion which was quickly rejected when one of the customers coughed up a ball of yellow phlegm which looked very similar to the tea he was drinking.)

Later down the road he passed a mosque seemingly constructed from an old synagogue (judging from the Star of David still imbedded in the brickwork) and, further, an African grocery with boxes of exotic vegetables displayed out front like a bit of tropical seduction for the passers-by who stopped to admire the produce like one might gaze upon icons of incomprehensible beauty reminding them that somewhere, in a magical land of sweetness and light, things were ripened in the heat of the sun. (It was not by chance, he suspected, that next door was a travel agency with large, multicoloured posters proclaiming special rates for flights to Nairobi, Kingston and Nicosia.)

He noticed too, a library housed in an old Victorian structure with a sign over the bolted door saying it was now closed on Wednesdays due to funding problems and a building which housed the Irish Cultural Centre with a notice in the window announcing their plans to relocate somewhere bigger and better in an area called 'Neasden'.

Then everything became very confusing. The shops ended at an overpass which allowed the road to continue beyond a barrier caused by the imposition of railway tracks which ran in a gully some twenty feet below. On the other side was a network of thoroughfares which looked truly forbidding and where convergent streams of traffic were jammed, belching angry fumes into the air already tinged a corrosive shade of brown and quickly getting browner (as any biopsy of lung

tissue would well attest, he suspected, rubbing his chest which had already started to tighten).

Because of the confusing intermesh of loops and circles Jim couldn't decide where the roads were headed once they unwound themselves and straightened out. In short, it meant he didn't know which way to go. And for a moment, as he stood there looking out into the metallic forest watching the machines, thundering like herds of randy elephants on a rampage, going nowhere.

Standing there on the precipice of Armageddon, or so it appeared in his eyes still tired and confused from a journey which had taken him from the safety of a quiet, green upstate campus to this ... this foyer of Beelzebub, he wondered if that which lay before him wasn't a symbolic mote – some river Styx – which, once crossed over, could never be crossed back again.

11

It was already ten minutes past nine when Jim leapt out of the taxi which had travelled a circuitous mile taking him the two hundred yards to college from the impasse of physical and metaphorical loops which had thrown him into such a state of confusion.

While he was in the taxi which was struggling against the never ending counter-flow of morning traffic like flotsom fighting the unremitting seas he had come to an important decision. And what he decided was this: he would go to the woman who had met him yesterday (whose name he had already forgotten) and explain to her that this had all been a dreadful mistake and that he was sorry but he wanted to go home. She, of course, would understand and would immediately sort it out. And by the next afternoon he would be lolling in his comfortable bed gazing fondly out the window at the petunias in his garden.

However, by the time the taxi reached its destination, he realised that it might be a bit more complicated. Firstly there was the other woman – the one who had exchanged jobs with him and who was now in his apartment probably lolling in his bed and not even appreciating his petunias. Secondly there was the bureaucratic nightmare of trying to switch back after all the paper work that went into launching this grotesque misadventure. And thirdly (and this was perhaps the most significant of all) what was he to tell his colleagues after his dream of a lifetime was shot down in flames? Could he actually admit that he had packed it all in after a day and a half? Wouldn't they think that this was all part of an extended mid-

life crisis? And wouldn't they be right? And what would that do to his career which, dare he admit it, was already floundering like a fish in a very small pond that was growing relentlessly smaller?

No, he thought, gritting his teeth as he paid the cabby a ridiculous sum of five pounds for the trip because he didn't have any change and neither did the driver. No, he'd tough it out a little while longer. But he would be firm and resolute about certain things, he said to himself as he strode into the dilapidated building that looked even worse today than it did when he was still mentally mid-air. For instance, no to Jacobian dramas! He found them tedious and tiresome and he would just put his foot down if they tried to force him to teach a course on Sheridan!

And then, suddenly, he found himself once again in that dreary foyer and all his thoughts evaporated like a cartoon bubble deflated by the nib of the artist's pen.

Bridget who was on duty behind the glass partition had a moment of panic when she saw the figure in an expensive, though slightly ruffled suit standing there looking confused and uncertain before she realised it was déjà vu all over again and that she had indeed panicked over a similar sight yesterday only to be chastised by Miranda for not investigating the true nature of the beast before ringing the alarm bells.

Now, she thought to herself, what is the procedure? Do I call Miranda and will she be annoyed and give me one of her looks that always makes my belly feel as if I've just eaten too much raw fish? Or should I just have him sit while I have a cup of tea and think about it? Or should I blink and make time stand still while I visit with Rock Hudson in our special little hideaway even though somebody once told me he preferred men to women but I think they all have to say that nowadays, don't they?

These difficult choices were made moot by Jim who approached her and said, 'I expect you remember me from yesterday...'

Bridget nodded in a manner that made Jim question whether she actually did remember. But, in fact, Bridget having opened up the hideaway option, was already mentally half way there.

'I am expected, aren't I?' Jim said again, hoping beyond hope that maybe he actually wasn't and that they'd tell him – sorry, he'd just have to go home and try

again next year.

Bridget nodded and gazing at him she suddenly became aware that this was not some pestering stranger with an American accent but actually Rock Hudson who hadn't really died after all but had taken on the identity of this curious person who was standing before her right now. How did he manage to find her? Her mother had always said that if you believe hard enough you could make your dreams come true. She had said that while holding little Bridget's hand and giving it a squeeze as if to emphasize the point. And now it had all come to pass. And Bridget smiled a wonderful smile as she gazed up into the eyes of her special secret lover.

'Am I not expected?' Jim thought that perhaps by switching the syntactical order of the words his statement might be more recognizable to British ears.

'Oh, yes, yes, yes,' Bridget gushed. 'Oh, yes, you were! Oh, yes you are expected!'

'That's nice,' said Jim, unconvincingly. 'Could you tell me where I should go?'

'Go?' Bridget replied, suddenly feeling a shortness of breath that made her gasp for air. 'Go? But you've just come! You can't leave yet!'

Jim scratched his head. Clearly, communication was going to be more difficult than he had ever imagined. Perhaps the best thing to do, he thought, was to start over again using very simple language, emphasising the main points with a strong vocal inflection – a technique he had used to good effect with first year English students who had failed their placement exam.

'My name is Jim Thomas. I'm doing an exchange with Regina Jamerson (who, I suspect, has gotten the better end of the deal)...' The parenthetical statement was muttered in a muted voice and had just come out on its own surprising even him as it certainly wasn't the kind of ironic imposition he would have used with first year English students who had failed their placement.

He was about to start over as he noticed the secretary was staring at him with goo-goo eyes which could only mean that she hadn't understood a word he had said, when he saw out of the corner of his eye a figure with a commanding presence sweep past and then, recognising her he called out, 'Oh, hello there!'

Miranda, who was forever in a rush and hated to be accosted because it always,

always meant trouble, turned and squinted (because she had forgotten her spectacles again) which made her look not exactly ferocious, but certainly somewhat intimidating.

Being someone rather easily intimidated, Jim was a bit unsettled by her expression which he took to be a glare of disapproval because he had come fifteen minutes later than the time she had suggested he get there. Miranda, on the other hand, had totally forgotten about him in the avalanche of things that had fallen on her shoulders since this troublesome person had entered her life.

'Hello, it's me ... remember?' Jim said rather sheepishly.

Miranda, for her part, somehow found the strength to restrain a groan. 'Oh, yes, of course,' she said in a voice that didn't even try to hide her displeasure. 'Mr ...?'

'Thomas. Jim Thomas,' Jim said, a bit annoyed that she couldn't even remember his name (even though he couldn't remember hers.)

'Yes,' she agreed in the manner of someone affirming that the other had just correctly answered an examination question, 'you may come with me, Mr Thomas – if you wish.' And then, looking over at the beleaguered secretary, as though it was all her fault for having let this person in the door, she said, 'I'm still waiting for those files, Bridget

12

They were in Miranda's subterranean office with Miranda frantically shifting papers from one disorganised pile to another when she said to Jim, without even giving him as much as a glance, 'I wouldn't stand exactly there...'

He was about to say, 'Stand where?' or 'Why not?' (he couldn't decide which) at the very moment a big gob of water splatted on his head – which caused him to look up just in time for the next big gob to splat directly in his eyeball.

'I think you have a leak,' he said, taking out a clean hanky and stepping back a pace while he mopped off his face.

'A what?' Miranda stopped her frenetic search a moment and gave him a very well developed questioning look – arching her eyebrows with great effect and furrowing even deeper the wavy lines in her forehead which spoke of many years of questioning looks in the past.

'A leak,' he repeated pointing up at the dripping pipe.

'Oh, that,' she said going back to her dig through the mildewed documents. 'You wouldn't have any chewing gum, would you?'

'Chewing gum?'

'Yes. I thought most Americans carry it around with them.'

'No, I don't have any chewing gum,' said Jim. There was a moment of silence. Then he said, 'Would you like me to buy you a pack?'

She stopped her shuffling and looked up at him aghast. 'Buy me a pack? Why would you do that?'

Very curious. Very, very strange, he thought. Words were his lifeblood, so to speak, but they seemed to be a bit like silly putty here. Perhaps it was his intonation. So he tried again. 'You said you wanted some chewing gum, didn't you?'

'No,' she said with some exasperation, 'I asked whether you had any gum.'

This time it was his brow that was wrinkled. 'Yes, that's what you said...'

She pointed up at the pipe. 'To fix the leak...'

He looked up at the rusty fixtures in the ceiling. 'You want to fix the leak with chewing gum?'

'Daisy does it occasionally...' she said, with some annoyance, as she finally pulled some papers from the pile.

'She fixes the leak with chewing gum?'

'Occasionally...'

'And does it work?'

'For a while,' she said while glancing through the papers she had selected. 'Damn! This isn't it!' she muttered, stuffing them back from whence they came.

'Why don't you just get it fixed properly?'

She looked up at him from her searching as if he were the Madman of Challot. 'What?'

'Get it fixed. Get new pipes put in,' he said, suddenly wondering if, somehow, the word 'pipes' had a reference or innuendo he didn't know.

She took a deep breath. 'Mr. Thomas...' She slowly let her breath out and then took another one, counted to ten quietly in her head and then started again. 'Mr. Thomas, if I had the power to get the pipes replaced, don't you think I would?'

He nodded.

'Then why, for heaven's sake, would you even broach the issue?'

He thought about that for a moment. 'Because you asked me for some gum?'

She shook her head and looked back down at her desk. 'I'm sorry, I can't find it...'

'The gum?'

'No, Regina's time table...' She looked back at him, feeling an extreme annoyance begin to surge up from someplace deep within her that made her ears begin to tingle. 'What are we going to do with you?' she sighed.

The words were said to herself. At least that's what she had meant.

Jim was now feeling more than uncomfortable. He didn't want to be here. And she didn't want him to be here. But he was there.

Miranda, for her part, was in a quandary. It was very possible she had given away most of Regina's classes to others whose timetable was short. She half thought of sending him home, but that wouldn't have been right either.

'Can you teach communications?' she said finally.

'Communications?' He was aware that he seemed to be repeating everything she said back to her. But that was only because all her words appeared to be coming

out of some other universe that looked almost the same as the one he was in but where everything was just slightly different.

She shook her head. 'Oh, it really doesn't matter. You'll catch on quick enough. It's not permanent mind you. It's just that Mr. Anderson is out sick again and I need someone to cover him.'

13

'You're actually very lucky,' Miranda told him noticing his facial features had become even more distended after having escorted him to what she said was to be his office but seemed more like a slightly oversized closet with just one small window looking out onto a barren courtyard. 'Most of our staff are in rooms with many more desks...'

Jim wondered how they had managed to fit even two inside this postage stamp space as he placed his leather briefcase onto the wobbly wooden table that had once been Regina's and where, he imagined, she spent numerous hours staring out that tiny grime encrusted window plotting her escape to America. He looked over at the larger desk which faced the adjoining wall and ate up at least half the room. 'Who sits there?' he asked, somewhat enviously.

'That's Daisy's desk,' Miranda replied. 'I've asked her to see to you for a bit...'
Then she looked at him in a perfunctory manner as if to say that her duty was now complete and as she had much, much more important things to do she had delegated this rather unpleasant task to someone else.

As if on cue, that 'someone else' barged in the door at the very moment her presence was invoked. She – Daisy – looked at Jim, looked at Miranda, and then made a face which was not very pretty at all. Without a word she dumped the load of notebooks and papers she had cradled in her arms onto her desk with a great big thump, turned in the manner of a gladiator about to meet some slimy adversary who had the bold temerity to enter her domain and then reached into the pocket of her cardigan for a smoke.

Jim's eyebrows shot up in horror. And pointing at the offensive cylinder that Daisy had just rolled with the harshest tobacco she could buy at the cheapest market on the High Road, he said, 'Whoa! You're not going to light that thing up in here, are you?'

And with that, Daisy, who really, truly believed that actions spoke volumes more than words, took out her tarnished brass Ronson (given to her years ago by a friend who subsequently disappeared into the Yorkshire Dales) and lit up. Then, taking an extremely deep puff on her blazing cigarette, she let out a cloud of smoke that totally encompassed the tiny office.

'I'll leave you to it then, shall I?' said Miranda, rhetorically, as she quit the room, closing the door behind her as she departed.

14

Daisy's office was connected to another, larger room called 'The Drop-In Workshop'. This room was an open area with several long tables, an assortment of unstable chairs and shelves filled with very old books that were left over from the time when the college was a girl's school (which had been so long ago that hardly anyone remembered anymore – except one old man with a grey beard punctuated with tobacco stains who might have been a janitor but nobody was quite sure and who prefaced every statement with 'I remember this place when it was just a girl's school....')

There was another office connected to the workshop – at least that's what Jim, who had retreated into the open room after being driven out by Daisy's ferocious display of brimstone and fire, suspected as there seemed to be a vague semblance of symmetry about the place and also the workshop door had a number – 12, while Daisy's office door was labelled 12A and the other door was designated 12B.

He was wondering whether the inhabitant of 12B also had a fearful symmetry when the workshop door opened and a woman entered who Jim recognised as the very one he had seen the day before – the woman with ebony skin who had been staring through him into space. She glanced at him questioningly and said, 'Are you the workshop teacher?'

Jim shook his head. 'I don't think I am,' he said.

'Oh..' she said, quite disappointed 'Could I wait for the workshop teacher, please?'

'I don't mind,' Jim replied. And motioning to one of the workshop chairs, he said,

'Take a seat.' He wasn't exactly sure if 'take a seat' was the correct instruction, but he said it in a very professorial tone which made her certain he was a man of authority – something she knew anyway because he was wearing a suit and a tie and nobody wore a suit and a tie at the college unless they were a person of utmost authority.

As he watched her sitting there, looking very uncomfortable, he remembered how he had been struck the day before by her extraordinary demeanour. And though he really wasn't in the mood to strike up a conversation, his curiosity got the better of him.

'Where are you from?' he asked her.

'Africa,' she replied. 'I am from Burundi. Do you know Burundi?'

He shook his head.

'It is by Rwanda. Do you know of Rwanda?'

'Yes. I read about it in the newspapers. I don't know much about it though. Are there any tigers?'

'In Burundi or Rwanda?'

'Burundi – that's where you're from, isn't it?'

'Yes,' she nodded.

'Yes, that's where you're from or yes, there are tigers?' he asked.

'Yes, as I told you before, Burundi is where I am from. And yes, there are the tigers or so I am told but I have never seen the tigers except at the zoo in London.'

'Oh...'. He thought a moment. 'Is there a zoo in London?'

'Yes, in Regent's Park.' She looked up at him to see if there was any sign in his face that she had passed what seemed to her like a curious language test.

He made a note on a slip of paper. 'Zoo in Regent's Park' and slipped it into his shirt pocket along with the pen he wrote it with. (She, of course, believed that his

pocket now contained a note with a determining mark about her linguistic abilities.) Then, looking back at her, he said, 'They speak French in Rwanda, don't they?'

She nodded. 'And in Burundi they speak French like Rwanda. That was my language. But now I must speak the English. Can you help me?'

She said it with such trust and openness that he found himself hard put to reply. 'Aren't you registered with an English class?' he asked.

'Yes but we have no teacher yet. And I need help because I speak and write the English so bad.' She cocked her head slightly. 'Can you help?'

'I'm sure there will be a teacher with you shortly...' He said that even though he wasn't sure what this drop-in business was all about. Maybe the whole idea was to drop in and sit and, maybe, if you felt the urge, help yourself to one of the mouldering books while you waited. But, then again, maybe no teacher would come at all, and if they did, maybe this was the wrong protocol. Maybe she was supposed to sign something first. Maybe there was a list somewhere.

He saw the tears well up in her eyes. For an instant he considered knocking on the door marked 12B but quickly thought better of it. (For who knew what manner of beast lurked within?) Then, looking back at her, he asked, 'Is there something wrong?' He asked it with a certain amount of hesitancy because he realised that questions like that just beg for a response which could mean the transfer of much soppy emotional baggage – something that didn't really appeal to him at the moment because he had too much soppy emotional baggage of his own right then and there just wasn't room for even a tiny little pathetic drop more.

'It is very, very important that I learn the English.' And then she repeated it again, even more emphatically. 'It is very, very important that I learn the English very fast!'

For some reason a variation of the mantra he laboriously pecked at over and over again when he was first learning the typewriter keyboard came into his head – 'The quick brown African jumped over the wobbly chair.' Then, teleporting himself back to the present, he said, 'You look like a pretty intelligent woman. I'm sure you'll learn soon enough. In fact, you speak quite well already.'

She shook her head and he watched the tears stream down her cheeks which

made him wonder all the more what the urgency was. 'I must learn now because I must get the job.'

'Oh, I see.' That made sense. It certainly made sense in America. And it probably made sense here, too, he thought. 'But you mean a job, don't you? When you say, the job you are referring to a particular job. You need to pay more attention to your articles.'

'So you are the teacher!' she smiled.

"A teacher. Not the teacher,' he corrected.

He looked up at the shelves and saw all the boring and outdated books on grammar and rhetoric and a few ridiculous novels – some of which referred inappropriately to the school days of a boy called Tom Brown. Then he noticed one that he recognised and going over he took it down.

'Do you know this story?' he asked, showing her the book with the lovely water-colour drawing on the cover.

'Madeline!' she smiled. 'How do you know?'

'Know what?' he asked.

'Madeline!' And she pointed to herself.

'You are Madeline?'

She nodded her head and laughed. 'Yes. Yes. Madeline! That is my name! I am him!'

15

They had quickly gone over the story as it was actually quite short and Jim had given her an essay assignment to mull over: 'Write five hundred words on the allegorical statement made in this book about the essential nature of conformity. What do you think would have been the heroine's reaction if it were one of the other little girls who had her appendix taken out?'

It was only after the African woman had left that Jim became aware of another

presence hovering in the room (when he thought about it later, he pictured her as great bird of prey waiting for just the right moment to swoop down, grab him in her claws and fly off toward the North Atlantic where she would drop him with a plop into the frigid ocean.)

He looked at her and cleared his throat. She didn't look happy. Maybe there was a sign-up sheet after all. 'Uh...hello...' he said. 'I didn't know where the sign-up sheet was...'

Daisy was tapping her foot impatiently and looking at him with ... contempt? Contempt was far too mild, he thought.

'What was it you taught again?' she asked, finally, after staring at him so long it seemed like the next day.

'Modern English Literature?'

'Are you asking or telling?'

'Nineteenth Century British Novelists, actually. I don't know what you call it here...'

'Here we call it ESOL.'

'Oh,' he said. And then, after another moment of reflection, 'What's ESOL?'

To Daisy's ears it was as if someone had just flushed an overfilled toilet. Why? Why? Why? Why her? Why him? Why now?

Jim watched her grab her bag and stomp over to the door and then, opening it, she stood frozen for a moment, let out a very deep and protracted sigh and then, without turning around, said, 'Are you coming or not?'

'Coming where?'

'Oh, never mind!' she said and stomped off.

A few seconds later he heard footsteps returning. She stuck her head inside the door, glared at him and said, 'I thought you were coming!'

'Where do you want me to go?' he asked.

'Don't ask so many bloody questions!' she commanded.

16

They were sitting in the empty canteen opposite one another. Daisy had watched in awe as Jim took a paper tissue from his pocket and proceeded to wipe the chair before sitting down. Now he had taken another fresh tissue from the cellophane packet and was wiping the table top.

'Will you please stop that!' she snapped. Her voice sounded like the brittle cracking of a dry twig.

'Stop what?' he looked at her wondering what cultural regulation he had transgressed.

'What you're doing,' she said, making it clear with the motion of her hand that she was referring to his one-man cleanup job.

'But it's so greasy!' he whined, making a face that showed his displeasure of anything having to do with saturated oils.

'I don't know what you're on about,' she replied, with an expression that said her displeasure of him was greater than his of insoluble fatty substances. 'Grease is good for you.'

'As good for you as cigarettes?' he asked, in a vain attempt at baiting the unbaitable.

'No,' she said, 'cigarettes are better. What do you drink? Coffee or tea?'

'I drink both,' he replied. 'What do you drink?'

She closed her eyes. 'I meant – what would you like to drink at this very moment. Coffee or tea?'

'Oh. Coffee please.'

She got up from her seat and in a moment she was back with two Styrofoam cups

that looked exactly the same even though one was supposedly tea and the other was supposedly coffee. 'I forget which was which', she said. 'But you said you drink both – am I correct?'

'Yes,' he said, not wanting to make any more of a fuss with this woman who seemed to take everything he said as if it was coming from the mouth of Dinah the Drunken Elephant. Then, looking at her straight in eye – or at least trying to at any rate – he said, 'Can I ask you something?'

She stared back at him without replying.

It was difficult for him to know what to do next. He wasn't used to silence. She might have said, 'No you cannot ask me something.' Or she might have said, 'Yes, you may ask me something.' Or she might even have said, 'I don't know.' But saying nothing threw him for a loop.

'Well?' she said after a while, 'I thought you were going to ask me something.'

'Oh...oh, yes.' During the interim his mind, tired of waiting, had taken a two week holiday in Mexico – or so it seemed.

'Well?' she said again, prompting him with an impatient hand that would have been more comfortable holding a conductor's baton than a Styrofoam cup filled with either coffee or tea.

He cleared his throat. 'Ah ...hmmm...well...'

'Please say what's on your mind, Mr Thomas, my tea is getting cold.'

'Or coffee,' he reminded her.

'Whatever!'

'Did I say or do something to offend you?' he blurted, finally.

'Yes,' she said quite matter-of-factly.

'Oh.' He thought a moment and looked down at the table. Then, looking back up with wide, innocent, questioning eyes he said, 'What?'

'Too many to mention,' she replied. 'Now let's get down to business, shall we? Did Miranda give you a timetable?'

He shook his head. 'Couldn't you give me a clue?'

'You were supposed to take over Regina's classes. Not all of them, mind you – some of the full timers are a bit short this term.'

'No, I mean what sort of things I did to offend you.'

Was it possible to have trod the earth as long as he had and still be so puerile? she wondered. 'Look,' she said, trying to contain any sense of malice or cruelty, as neither of those nouns actually applied to her (or so she thought) 'I don't wish to be unkind but I just find the very thought of you offensive.'

'Oh...!' He looked truly crestfallen as he had never thought of himself as an offensive person. Maybe a bit priggish at times, but not truly offensive. Then, raising his brow in a rather supplicating manner he said, 'Why?'

'Do we really want to get into this?' she asked.

'Well, yes. I mean, frankly, I don't know you and you don't know me. I might see you as sort of a bully, but I'm willing to admit that there maybe are other sides to you not quite as narrow-minded as the side you're showing now. Is it because I'm American?'

'That has something to do with it,' she admitted. 'But more to the point, there are a number of dedicated people here who have some idea what it's all about. And I'd venture to say you haven't a clue, do you, Mr. Thomas?'

'I probably don't,' he agreed. 'But I also didn't think I was coming here...'

'And where did you think you were going?' She opened her eyes wide, trying to replicate his inquisitive demeanour.

'Not here...'

'I see. Perhaps someplace a little whiter?'

'No...'

'Someplace a little less brown, then?'

'I'm not a racist,' he said defensively.

'All right. Perhaps someplace a little greener?'

'Green would be nice. And maybe pipes that didn't leak. And an office you could breath in. Yes, I suppose so.'

'So we're agreed that you don't belong here,' she said.

'Yes. But I am here.'

'Unfortunately.'

He nodded and shrugged. 'Such is life,' he said with a boyish smile, trying to keep to the tenet of his aged Grandmother who insisted that making the best of a bad thing is better than eating stale bread (though he never truly understood the 'stale bread' reference).

The boyish smile not only didn't work, it actually had the effect of making her even more nauseous. 'It's not "such is life", Mr Thomas. It's "what the bloody fuck are we going to do now"? You see, some of us have worked too hard at this place to see it all go up in American napalm.'

'I didn't bring any napalm. I promise...'

'Metaphorically.'

Maybe it was the napalm remark that got his goat, but suddenly his disposition shifted. 'Look, lady,' he said with some rancour, 'I'm tired of being treated like some sort of dirty rag ever since I arrived. I'm a teacher. That's my trade. I've come here to learn and to exchange my skills for whatever that's worth. I'm willing to uphold my side of the bargain even though, frankly, I'd rather go home. But there's only so much crap I'm willing to put up with, even from you!'

Daisy smiled. 'Well, blimey! I didn't think you had it in you!'

'Do people really still say "blimey" here?' he asked, suddenly pricking up his ears.

And pulling out some paper from his shirt pocket, he made a note. 'I thought it was one of those lovely little British burps they only used in costume dramas like *Upstairs Downstairs*.'

17

Somehow his brief tirade, if one could really call it that for it was much too brief even to be called 'brief' and not extremely tiradable – anyway, his little puff of smoke like a wimpy little rocket with a saggy tail that goes a few inches into the air and then falls to the ground with a plop ... well, at least it made Daisy think that he wasn't such a total twerp after all. Perhaps.

'You asked me a question, now I'll ask one of you,' she said.

'All right,' he agreed. Despite it all there was something about her he liked. He couldn't put his finger on it, exactly, but she did have spirit even if it was misdirected. And her face did look attractive. Maybe even sort of pretty, he thought. Well – sort of.

'What the fuck was that all about up there?'

'Up where?' Suddenly he was back to square one and her face didn't look the least attractive.

'Up in the workshop! I mean, really! How could you have asked her if Burundi has tigers?'

'Well did you know?'

'Did I know what?'

'If there are tigers there...'

'I don't give a rat's ass if there are tigers in Burundi, Mr Thomas! It's not an appropriate question to ask...'

'Why not?'

'Because it's like asking a Black American if watermelons grow in Georgia, that's why!'

'No it's not!' he said. 'Besides, what's wrong with asking someone – black or white – if watermelons grow in Georgia? It's just informational. What's wrong with it for heaven's sake?'

'It just shows your ignorance!'

He shrugged. 'If you don't ask, you don't know.'

'That's what books are for! And, while we're on the subject, what on earth were you thinking about when you gave her that ridiculous children's story?'

'Madeline? I sort of liked it as a kid. It's funny that it turned out to be her name...'

'I couldn't think of a more inappropriate book to give one of our ESOL students! It's classist and sexist and totally out of keeping with our communicative English approach.'

'Well I didn't put it there, did I? Why do you have it on the shelves if you feel that way?'

'Because it's one of the leftovers and I haven't had time to sort it out. But just because it's there doesn't mean you have to recommend it! And what did you have in mind when you set that ridiculous question – "write about the allegorical statement the book makes on the essential nature of conformity" ...

'It was just off the top of my head...'

'That woman has a vocabulary of about 500 words! You can't give her an essay at GCSE standards!'

'What's GCSE?'

Daisy slapped her forehead. Then, closing her eyes, she took a deep breath and counted to ten in French. Then she counted to ten once more in German. When she opened her eyes he was still there. So she closed them again and tried counting in Serbo-Croatian.

'Oh – and you were also going to tell me what "ESOL" meant...'

Mr Anderson's communication class was stuck out in a special annex separate from the rest of the college in what seemed to be a no-man's land between the old school buildings and the dingy tower blocks that loomed starkly behind casting a dark shadow on the bleak rectangular structure and hopelessly squeezing out any last remnant of luminance. It was surrounded by a wire fence which could have been viewed as creating a cordon sanitaire between the annex and the main structure if it wasn't for all the gaping holes cut into it.

'What am I supposed to do?' Jim had asked when Daisy gave him his marching orders. 'Who am I teaching and what am I supposed to be teaching them?'

'They're a group of young apprentices on day release,' she said. 'I don't really have anything to do with them.'

'So what am I supposed to do?' he asked again, astounded at the sudden shift in her attitude. 'You've just finished raking me over the coals because I gave a student the wrong book and the wrong assignment...'

'Well, you won't have that problem with this group,' she said with a look that he interpreted as somewhere between obliging and sardonic.

'What do you mean by that?' he replied, narrowing his eyes and adopting an expression that was oozing with suspicion.

'I mean you can pretty much do what you want with them. At least that's my understanding,' she said with a perfunctory smile (she did smile occasionally, albeit not with the same nonchalance as ordinary mortals). And she handed him a folder that contained a register and a few scrappy sheets of paper which seemed to be a rough outline of a syllabus.

He stared at her with mouth agape. 'Is that all you're going to tell me?' he said, watching her finish whatever substance was in her Styrofoam cup, make a face that related to its extreme yuckiness and then rise from her chair, giving Jim a clear indication that she was about to leave him sitting there alone.

'Wait a second!' he called out. 'You can't just leave me like this!'

She looked at him with an expression that the French, in their supreme under-

standing of the curious mechanisms which make humans such sublimely complex creatures, call 'faux naïf' – a term which Jim had used occasionally in his more esoteric reviews for the literary magazine his college published (and which was sent out quarterly to over thirty subscribers) but one which he never truly understood until now. 'I am sorry if you feel you're being left out on the limb. But Mr Anderson is more than often out with stress related illnesses and his class suffers from a certain lack of continuity. So, in this case my advice to you is that if you can possibly finish with the desks and chairs in an upright position then you will have had quite a successful day.'

And with that she left.

19

The noise which he at first took to be that of a demolition crew taking a wrecking ball to the adjacent towers was actually more rhythmic the closer he came to the annex. As he neared the building which began looking more and more like a bunker, he realised the commotion was coming from inside the annex itself and, in his heated imagination, began sounding to him like the banging of tribal drums mixed with the visceral chanting of a war party about to add to their shrunken head collection.

Reaching the annex door, a great metallic entry way that might well have fit the specifications for a high security prison, he stood a moment with his hand on the cold steel knob and thought that life had actually been very short and not very sweet and if he were to be thrown to the lions, he would have liked to have had at least one or two victories (or maybe three) like getting a brief mention in the New York Review of Books or unearthing a long lost manuscript by Nicholas Pearl.

The chanting (or so his mental apparatus interpreted the commotion from within) grew louder and louder, the rhythmic pounding more intent. He suddenly knew what Dante might have felt when he was in the same position, poised at the gate of the Inferno.

So ferociously loud was the banging, so intent, he felt that his head was a coconut about to be split open by a thousand machetes. And still it grew louder and louder and louder. His sweaty hand gripped the knob, tightening with each amplification of the angry decibels until he felt the steel in his grasp would burst from the pressure along with his brain which he visualised as in some Alien type film where suddenly a head bursts open and all this stuff that looks very much like

oatmeal mixed with wiggly worms (and probably is) splatters over the room creating an awful mess. (He sometimes wondered about the people whose job it was to clean up all that muck. Did they have horrible dreams at night? Or did they keep samples of stuff in little specimen bottles to sell to collectors – ‘This is the actual vomit that erupted from the mouth of Linda Blair when she was possessed by the Devil. You can have it for fifty bucks!’)

He would have liked to have turned and bolted. But he couldn't. He was transfixed. Besides, the humiliation would have just been too much to endure. He was, after all, a representative of America – albeit a rather minor one. And there was such a thing as national pride. Besides, how could he face that woman, Daisy? He could almost visualise her smirk (or what he thought her smirk would look like since, no matter how sardonic Daisy got, she wasn't the smirking sort – not really.)

So he took a very deep breath and held it. Then, letting it out, he took another very deep breath and held it again. ‘All right,’ he said to himself aloud, ‘on three. One, two ...’

Suddenly the door pulled open from the other side, hurtling Jim, who was still clinging to the doorknob, in.

20

‘Sorry, sir. We was waitin’ for you and I had to take a piss...’

Jim looked up from the floor where he was thrust. It was a fairly large room with the chairs and tables around three quarters of the periphery so that the front part, where he had landed, was like a proscenium. And all eyes were on him.

‘Hope you not hurt, sir,’ someone called out as Jim got up and dusted himself off.

Surveying the room, he found that nothing was as he expected. He was dreadfully embarrassed but nobody was really laughing – well not that loudly anyway. There was no raw meat being hacked up on the floor and passed around from one hairy hand to another nor was there any obvious satanic rituals being enacted. No one seemed to be openly shooting up heroin and there wasn't even a sign of lethal weapons being brandied about. True, one kid was sniffing something that looked vaguely suspicious and there was a pornographic magazine being slavered over by a pimply-faced guy with his tongue hanging out, but, besides those minor

things and the innocuous card game that was going full swing in the corner, there wasn't anything one mightn't see in any publicly financed college in America, Jim thought.

'Hello,' Jim said after clearing his throat and adjusting his glasses. 'My name is Mr Thomas and I'll be your teacher today, though, frankly, I'm not exactly sure what I'm supposed to do with you. Can someone clue me in?'

'You an American, sir?' It was one from the group who had pulled their table into the corner and had been playing cards.

'Does it show?' asked Jim, surprised that he had been found out so quickly.

'It's your accent, sir,' someone else called out.

'You talk like that geezer in them old films. You know – Indiana Jones...' someone else said.

'Oh, yeah?' Jim quite liked the idea of being thought of as a latter day Indiana Jones kind of guy even though he didn't look anything like Harrison Ford.

'Or maybe Homer Simpson,' said one from the card group.

'He's a cartoon, fuck head!' said another.

'So what? There's a real bloke talking the words, ain't there?' The kid who was speaking looked at Jim for support.

'Well...' Jim started, but was quickly shouted down.

'How the fuck do you know?,' the second kid retorted. 'Maybe it's a computer! They got computers that can do that nowadays, don't they, sir?'

'I...'

'You fuckin' think a computer can talk like Homer Simpson? You got shit for brains!'

'No he got diarrhoea,' someone else chimed in.

'Somebody opened up his head and dumped their load, that's why he talks like

such a pussy,' said another.

'Probably put some fuck juice in his ear while they was at it,' said the first.

'Sir, you shouldn't let them talk that way to me, sir...!

'Yeah, you're probably right,' said Jim. And then, to the class, he said, 'Let's try to be civil, OK?'

'Sir!' The pimply faced kid who was reading the porno magazine raised his hand.

'Yes?'

'Do people have diarrhoea for brains in America?'

'And fuck juice in their ears?' said one of the card players.

'Well, I guess whatever you have here we have there, too.' Jim said.

'Sir! Sir!' A kid near the back was waving his hand.

'Yes?'

'What kind of gun you have?'

'Gun?'

'Yeah, don't Americans have guns?'

'Some do, yes...'

'I thought you had to have 'em.'

'No, I don't think so...'

'So what kind of gun would you have if you had one?'

'I'm not all that interested in guns...'

'I bet he does have a gun,' said one of the card game kids.

'You better watch what kind of shit comes out of your mouth or he'll shoot you!'

'He wouldn't shoot me ... would you sir?' said the kid who brought the issue up.

'Can you shoot someone in America if they talk shit?'

'Hey, they got the death penalty in America. They'd fry his ass if he killed a student. Wouldn't they sir?' said one of the card players who was black and whose accent, Jim thought, was vaguely Jamaican.

'Sir! Sir! Do they fry you or gas you if you get the death penalty?'

'Sir! I heard there's still a place where they hang you in America. Is that true sir?'

'Sir! Can you just go down to a shop a buy a gun? Like Tesco, sir? Could you buy a gun at Tesco in America?'

'What's Tesco?' asked Jim.

'You don't got Tesco in America?' said one kid, seemingly outraged. 'What you have if you don't got Tesco?'

'Sir! Sir! Why'd you come here, sir? How come you didn't stay in America? Why'd you want to come here?'

Jim looked around the room. 'Don't you guys like it in England?'

There was a moment of silence and then someone spoke up. 'England used to be great but it's a shit hole now! The only thing good about it is Arsenal!'

'Milwall!' someone else shouted.

'Hotspurs!' another piped in.

'What don't you like about it?' asked Jim.

'Too many Pakis,' someone shouted.

'What's a Paki?'

'Don't you have no Paki's in America?' someone asked.

'How can I say if I don't know what they are?'

'Pakis. You know, Wogs! I bet you got 'em.'

'What do they do?'

'Nothin' They sit around and eat curry all day.'

'What don't you like about them?'

'They smell.'

'Everybody smells,' said Jim.

'Not like a Paki!'

'So you'd like to go someplace without Pakis, is that it? Where would you go?'

'Australia,' someone shouted.

'Canada,' someone else said.

'You sure they don't have Pakis there?' said Jim.

'Maybe they do but the weather's better and you can get good money in the building trade.'

21

Daisy was sitting in the staff room when Jim wandered in, tired and slightly shell-shocked. He hadn't started out for the staff room. In fact, he didn't know there was a staff room. It's just that he was disoriented enough to miss the turning for the workshop and ended up walking into the chemistry lab just as they were starting their sodium sulfate experiment.

'If you do it right it will smell like a stink bomb', the instructor - a rather portly Asian man with thickly pomaded hair - had said, holding up a beaker and a

pipette oozing with something disgusting.

'Or one of your farts,' a student mumbled back.

'Are you looking for the staff room?' asked the Instructor, looking angrily at Jim as though it was Jim and not the student standing next to him who had made the farting remark.

'Is there a staff room?' asked Jim. 'I wasn't told...'

'Everybody comes in here looking for the staff room!' the portly instructor had complained. 'They should put a sign on the wall!'

So he had searched up the Staff Room as it seemed to be a likely alternative to the cramped office and his rather unpleasant co-tenant. It was not without a certain irony, he thought, that the only person he saw there when he finally found the rather soulless room of mismatched furnishings with faded colours and busted springs at the opposite end of the corridor, was none other than – herself.

'You're still alive I see,' said Daisy without looking up from her plain organic yoghurt that she was spooning into her mouth with the frenetic movements of someone half there and half somewhere else.

'And the chairs are still upright,' said Jim, collapsing into the seat opposite hers.

'How about the desks?'

'I can't vouch for them.'

Daisy peered at him over her yoghurt pot. There was just a very brief moment, looking at the pathetic character opposite her, slouched in his chair, that she felt a wave of sympathy – or maybe it was the first sign of flu. She made a mental note to take a spoonful of Echinacea when she got back to her flat.

'I'm just curious. You didn't read to them from the Madeline book, did you?'

'No.'

'Somehow I suspected not. No essay assignments on the perils of conformity then?'

He shook his head. 'No. I set one on guns.'

'Guns? How very American!'

'That's all they wanted to talk about,' he said. 'That and execution techniques. Oh, by the way, what's a Paki?'

She put down her yoghurt and stared at him in a manner that suggested he had put his foot into something very malodorous and sticky once again. 'Are you trying to be funny, crude or just plain stupid?' she said.

'Just plain stupid, I guess. Really, I've never heard the expression. Is it an all purpose slur or is it just reserved for people from Pakistan? And, if that's so, why Pakistan and not India?'

'It's used by very dim-witted people who can't tell the difference. And if you're a dyed in the wool racist I suppose it has a certain cachet that Indi doesn't.'

'But there was a Black kid in the class – probably from Jamaica judging from his accent. He was just part of the group. Nobody seemed to be down on him...'

'Afro-Caribbeans are cool because they're tough. If you're from certain parts of London, being Afro-Caribbean is top of the pops. It would be a little different though in Saffron Waldon.'

'It's so much simpler in America,' Jim said. 'It doesn't matter where you're from as long as you can control your suntan.'

'Well there you have it, don't you?' said Daisy, finishing up her yoghurt with a final flourish of her plastic spoon. 'You can forget all about economics and colonialism...'

'They don't like England very much,' Jim said, watching her pack up her things, preparing to move on to places he had never seen and was never likely to – if she had anything to do about it.

'Who? I thought everyone loved us – especially the Irish.'

'I meant the construction apprentices on day release.'

'England hasn't done much for them, has it?'

'I wouldn't know.'

'Well, you can take it from me, then.'

'All right,' he agreed.

'Miranda has worked out your timetable,' she said, almost as an aside, as she stood up to go.

'That's sweet of her,' Jim muttered.

'It's on Regina's desk.' Daisy pursed her lips and then looked at him more seriously. 'She's given you an Intermediate ESOL class. Do you think you can handle it?'

'I don't know,' said Jim. 'You still haven't told me what ESOL is.'

'It stands for English as a Second or Other Language.'

'Why "Second or Other"? Why not just English as a Second Language?'

'Because, Mr Thomas, some of our refugees already have a second language. English might be their third or even their fourth.' She cocked her head slightly. 'How many languages do you know, Mr Thomas?'

He cleared his throat. 'Are we counting Pig Latin?'

22

He had gone back to his office ('My God!' he thought to himself. 'Am I really starting to think of this hole as my office?') to collect the timetable that Daisy said was waiting for him there. It was, as promised, on Regina's desk with a big yellow stick-on note which read 'See Josephine M!'

'Who is Josephine M? And why should I see her?' he muttered to himself, although realising it was most likely that Josephine M. had something to do with the ESOL class he was scheduled to teach (he glanced at the timetable again) in room AD302B.

He thought about it a moment. The class was starting in an hour. He had no idea in the world who he was supposed to teach, what he was supposed to teach or how he was supposed to teach it. And the only clue he had was a woman named Josephine with only a letter for a surname.

Miranda's office was, sensibly, his first port call. She wasn't there. In fact, though it was just past noon, the place seemed to be curiously deserted.

So he made his way back to the Staff Room, hoping to find someone who might clue him in, or, at the very least, give him a slight hint as to what he was supposed to do in a little less than an hour.

The Staff Room wasn't brimming with life either. However, there was a body sitting in one of the plasticated chairs, drinking from a thermos and munching on a baguette.

'Excuse me,' Jim began, trying to establish the proper etiquette without the slightest idea of what the proper etiquette was, 'are you a teacher here?'

The man – for the body was most definitely a man – looked up from his lunch (or late morning snack – it was hard to tell what his eating habits might have been) and said, in a rather sonorous baritone, 'In all honesty I wouldn't know how to answer that.' Then brushing some baguette crumbs from his silvery white beard, he stared at Jim with a penetrating gaze and said, 'Could you?'

Jim rubbed his forehead which, for some reason, was starting to throb in a similar way it did the time he was lost in a very dense forest and had mercifully found another hiker who, in answer to his question – 'How do I get out?' - had said, 'It all depends on your definition of "in".'

'I'm sorry,' said Jim trying desperately to think of how to rephrase the query which had seemed at first so very simple. 'I just thought that maybe you were a lecturer here...'

'Yes.'

'Yes, you are?'

The man nodded his head and said, with a twinkle in his deep blue eyes, 'That is my occupation at present, yes. Being a "teacher" is a fish from an altogether dif-

ferent kettle. It's a notion that promises so much and bestows so little...'

It was his smile that made Jim feel that he wasn't being played with like a little toy mouse that was being wound up to run furiously in ever decreasing circles until his spring broke and he lay lifeless on the floor. For the smile was totally without guile even though the words made him feel as if he were a minor character in a story by Lewis Carroll.

'Right,' said Jim who wasn't really in the mood for grand philosophical discourse at the moment, 'Maybe you could give me a hand with this...' And he pulled out the note with the bright yellow sticker that he had found on Regina's desk just a few minutes before.

"Ahha. Hmmm. Yesssss..." The man looked at the note and then handed it back to Jim.

Jim waited for a reply but none was forthcoming. So he asked, 'Do you know this Josephine M. woman?'

The man took the note back from Jim and stared at it again.

'It's only two words,' Jim said.

'Three if you count the initial,' the man pointed out.

"Yes,' Jim agreed. 'I wasn't counting the initial.'

'Quite right,' said the man. 'One wouldn't count an initial as a word. So let's just say two words and an initial.'

Jim felt slightly as if he were stuck in a bowl of gelatine that was oozing through his toes. 'Do you know her?' he said.

'Who?' The man gazed at him with an expression of pure, unadulterated innocence. (Or could it have been what was in his thermos? The thought did pop into Jim's addled brain before finding the jumble there a bit too much and popping back out again.)

'Josephine. Josephine M.'

The man shook his head, looking truly and sincerely sorry. Then he thought a moment and suddenly his eyes lit up and he said, 'Unless we're talking about Joe, that is.'

'Joe?'

'Yes. I'm not quite sure of her surname. Lontgomery... Vontgomery... He scratched his head.

'Montgomery?' Jim suggested.

'Montgomery? Yes, I think that's it. Yes...'

'So you know her?'

'Oh, yes. Most definitely...'

'Where can I find her?'

'Ah, well that's another question...'. And he took another swig of whatever it was inside his thermos.

'Let's put it another way,' said Jim. 'Do you know what room she's supposed to be in?'

'That depends...'

'Depends on what?'

'She's either in the loftiness of heaven or the depths of hell. She lords it over both like some corpulent Greek Goddess who hasn't yet decided whether to offer mankind a cornucopia filled with manna or strike them down with plague and pestilence.'

His name was Oscar and even though Jim had found him at first painfully disconcerting, like the man who wasn't there, still something about him made Jim feel as if a curious connection had been made which, though he couldn't really put his finger on it, related to a vague literary idea much too difficult to put into

words so why even try? Besides, it might have been all in his head.

Regardless and despite the gut wrenching dialogue Jim felt there actually was some hard information he received. For instance, Josephine M. was someone known familiarly as Joe with a surname that most likely was Montgomery. And she was both loved and hated – in an allegorical sense at least – by Oscar and therefore he could surmise that she was probably a woman with strong character who got (or at least tried her best to get) what she wanted at the expense of people like Oscar and perhaps others (unless Oscar was a world unto himself which hadn't been ruled out by Jim as yet).

And then there was the room that according to the timetable he had been given and was soon to teach a class in - AD302B. 'A curious way of designating space,' Jim had said. 'Couldn't they have been a bit more straightforward in their numbering process?'

'Straightforward?' Oscar had visibly recoiled. 'I would have much preferred a more poetic approach – "The Chamber of Fading Light" or perhaps "The Little Room of Tears".'

Jim sort of liked the idea of naming rooms like that – part of him did at least - but too many years in academia had made him into a defensive rationalist and he found it necessary to point out to his new – dare I say it? – friend that it might be a bit confusing to new students and staff to use that sort of system – though, in fact, designating something AD302B didn't immediately bring to mind a sequential order unless perhaps you were a cryptologist.

'They have their method, I suppose,' Oscar had said, with a trace of sadness or perhaps pity for the depths to which the human mind had sunk, 'The first part, AD, refers to the block – in this case block A – and the section – section D. The second part, 302, refers to the floor – the third in this case – and the number of the room – 02...'

'But there's only two floors,' Jim pointed out.

'There's a bit of attic they've made into a room,' Oscar explained.

'Is there an AD301?' Jim asked.

'I'm not sure,' said Oscar. 'I think it's a broom closet.'

'And the B at the end?'

'They divided the room in half.' Oscar had looked at the timetable Jim had handed him again. 'You're teaching in the B section and someone else is teaching in A.'

'Who?' asked Jim in trepidation, thinking perhaps it would be a six headed hydra with a hyphenated name.

Oscar smiled and gave him a wink. 'It's me, dear boy. Let's meet afterward and pop out for a drink!'

24

Jim followed his new mentor up the narrow staircase that led to the attic chamber divided as Oscar had said into two rather cramped spaces, one with a large table running down its length and the other with rows of chairs set up in boringly traditional classroom fashion. A small anteroom contained a single file cabinet and an old rickety wooden desk which, Oscar explained, held the key to both rooms 'A' and 'B' inside its drawer (though if you were carrying a handful of papers and books and couldn't be bothered the same result could be obtained by giving the appropriate door a swift, well directed kick aimed at a particular spot).

Also, and more importantly, the aforementioned desk drawer also contained the only document that truly mattered in this curious world that Jim had found himself thrust – the class register. It was this document upon which the entire lifeblood of the college rested, Oscar explained, prying open the swollen drawer with some effort and then taking out a manila folder from which he extracted an official looking sheet of A3 paper folded in half and emblazoned with the words, 'This is a legal document subject to audit by the Further Education Funding Council', as if this warning alone would bestow upon it a certain aura and deference.

'One must be rather careful here,' Oscar told him, as he showed Jim the various boxes to mark with either a diagonal line or naught. 'There is a farcical game which has been foisted upon us which is known in our trade as "bums on seats" – not your kind of "bums" which I understand in American means "vagrant" or "one who has little resources and therefore must resort to begging" but here means one's derriere – so it is essential that there be a certain number inserted in the space provided,' he said pointing to a box which indicated the total present

in class that day.

'But what if not that many students show up?' asked Jim.

'Ah, but some are there in spirit, aren't they?' Oscar replied. 'Sometimes there is a transcendent quality to existence, wouldn't you say? Of course, there is the occasional body count but the sudden emergency might arise, mightn't it?

Once I had marked ten students present on the register and when the man we refer to as "The Tin Pot General" showed up with his clipboard and asked rather ungraciously why there were only two people in class I was forced to go through eight different excuses starting with Abdul who had a sudden attack of the runs and concluding with Zemika who had an appointment with Social Services and couldn't stay. Of course, each of these excuses was true, it's just that the sequential order might have been a bit skewed. Zemika is always being hounded by Social Services, poor girl, but that day she had failed to show up because she lost her bus pass and she had to walk to college from her bedsit in Harringay but then her ulcer started acting up and she was forced to stop at the chemist to get more medication and by the time she made her way to the front of the queue the class had already started. At least that's what she told me later and why should I believe her any less than the man who decided that if I put too many naughts next to her name she wouldn't be issued another bus pass the week after?'

25

Jim glanced at his watch. It was already five minutes past the hour and still no students had arrived. Minutes before he had tried to get Oscar to tell him what he should be doing with them as he had never taught an ESOL class before. But Oscar had just patted him on the shoulder and had said, 'You'll be fine, dear boy. Just do what comes naturally. And don't worry so much. It's not good for the digestion.'

'Isn't there a text book or something?' Jim had asked.

'A text book?' Oscar had thought a bit. 'Well the industry has spewed out mountains of them. You could take your pick...' Then, with a wry little smile he said, 'Do you know what England's greatest export is?'

Jim shook his head.

'TEA, dear boy! Teaching English Abroad! Iran might have her oil fields, Bolivia

her poppies, but the linguistic world is us!’

The wrinkles on Jim’s brow indicated he wasn’t exactly sure what that had to do with the question he had asked so he asked it again in a slightly different manner. ‘I’d feel more comfortable with a textbook,’ he had said.

‘You would?’

‘Yes. Where could I get one?’

‘Well I suppose you could look in the book room...’

‘The book room?’ Jim ears had perked up. ‘Where’s that?’ He felt so foolish going into class as naked as he was. A text book would help, he thought, because then he could at least read them a passage or two instead of just looking at them stupidly for two hours.

‘You must descend to the underworld, I fear. And then, of course, you’d need the key to get in. The door to the book room is not quite as cooperative to persuasion as the ones up here...’

‘Who has the key?’ Jim had asked, glancing at his watch and realising there wasn’t much time before his class was due to begin.

‘Ah, the key. It’s held by the Mistress of the Gates, isn’t it?’ Oscar grinned and Jim began to suspect that perhaps he was being toyed with again. But Oscar was really trying to help. It’s just that he couldn’t help from being himself.

‘The Mistress of the Gates – would that be Josephine M?’

‘The very one.’

‘But she isn’t there,’ said Jim.

‘She rarely is,’ Oscar agreed.

Jim let out a breath of air that told of many things but mainly an excess of bad coffee, stomach cramps and mental confusion. And then looking at Oscar and narrowing his eyes in a manner of an inquisitor trying to gain a modicum of information from the world’s greatest spy, he said, ‘What book do you use with your class?’

'Me?' Oscar knitted his brow. It seemed to be a simple question but nothing was simple in Oscar's world, Jim suspected. 'It depends...'

'Depends on what?'

'On how I feel. Today, for instance, I think I'll read to them from Durell...'

'You're having your basic English class read Durell?' Jim asked in disbelief.

'His poetry. Does that surprise you?'

'I suppose so, yes,' Jim said.

'But why does it surprise you? Great poetry is universal. It can be appreciated by a nomad from Somalia or a lawyer from Sarajevo.'

Jim shrugged. Durell wasn't one of his favourites. But he hadn't read much of his poetry. 'So you do whatever strikes your fancy?'

'I suppose so. How else could I stay here?'

Jim rubbed his chin and considered this as he waited for the students to arrive. And he thought that maybe, perhaps this wasn't going to be so bad. And then at ten after the hour the first of his students wandered in.

26

Her eyes lit up with pleasure and surprise as she walked in the door to AB302B and spotted him. 'You my teacher!' she shouted a bit too loud and then, embarrassed, she put her hand over her mouth and giggled.

'Hello Madeline,' he said, nearly as pleased as she was because having a familiar face to focus on meant that he could be more relaxed and, perhaps, could even use her to thaw the ice that was likely to form whenever an unknown teacher meets an unknown class of unknown students. And then, looking around at the sea of empty chairs, he asked her, 'Where are all the others?'

'Oh, they come. Some of them. Maybe soon. Maybe not.' And she grinned. Then, digging into her bag she pulled out a folder and waved it at him. 'Look! I

do it!’

‘Do what, Madeline?’ He looked at her somewhat confused.

‘The homework you ask,’ she said and the light in her face suddenly dimmed as she realised that he hadn’t remembered.

‘Oh, yes, of course. Thank you, Madeline. It’s just that when you said “I do it”, using, the present tense of the verb “to do” I thought you were going to do something instead of having already done something – which is – or was – in fact what you meant. Isn’t it? Or, rather, wasn’t it?”

She looked at him with an expression of complete bewilderment but not wishing to be impolite, she nodded.

Sensing her confusion, he tried to elaborate. ‘You see, Madeline, using the correct tense of a verb is important to ascertain temporal meaning. If you use the present tense when the action really happened in the past then the sequential referent is lost and you lose the chronological connection, the temporal meaning – which indeed is what happened to us...’ He stared out into the void of blankness. ‘Do you understand?’

Her eyes opened wide. Did he think she was stupid? Of course she understood – sort of. If only he didn’t use such big words! And he seemed so nice and patient before. She nodded energetically and wrote something down in her notebook to prove it – ‘Prezent .. means .. tempura ..’ And then she looked back up at him and smiled a great big smile.

Ah, well, that was a relief, he thought to himself. This wasn’t going to be so bad as long as he remembered to explain things structurally and repeat them in several different ways, like he had to do when trying to get information from Oscar.

27

The students did, indeed, begin to wander in slowly as Madeline had predicted. It was, thought Jim, a rather motley crew, as diverse as the streets of New York and comprising the varied shades of pigmentation found in the garden of humanity where the genetic dice are thrown.

It was after the first half dozen of the wide-eyed students had come through the door and had taken a seat, scattering themselves throughout the vacant classroom like disconnected dots on a blank sheet of paper, that he realised just standing there in front of the class, trying to give each of them a welcoming smile (but not quite succeeding as welcoming smiles weren't really his thing) – that this wasn't going to be enough and the time had come for him to do something. The problem was he didn't know what to do. He thought (or hoped) it would just come to him as Oscar had said – that he would do what came naturally. But (as Oscar hadn't known or expected) doing what came naturally for Jim was often doing nothing at all. So he just stood there looking out into what was becoming a small sea of very interesting faces which, as yet, had no individual identity but were interesting in the way clouds are interesting as they evolve into a myriad of shapes and he began to realise, with some dismay, that this sea of faces was looking back at him with a certain amount of expectation that he would soon do more than return their looks like a little plastic ball in a very boring ping-pong game.

Eventually someone from the back of the room – it was hard to tell who because Jim hadn't yet connected voices with faces so it just seemed to emerge as a disembodied sound – anyway, someone said, 'Hello.' Whether the emanator of this word was male or female wasn't clear. The sound itself held no clue for Jim as to its gender (or, as they sometimes said in Jim's college back in New York as a way of confirming objectivity for insurance purposes, it was 'gender non-specific'). It just rose from somewhere, hovered above their heads for a moment and then gently exploded in the air like a tiny firework – like a sparkler that is guaranteed safe for little children as long as they don't stick it in their ear.

It sort of broke the ice – or at least it would have done if there were any ice to break. Ice, however, implies coldness and the atmosphere wasn't cold – just the opposite. In fact the room was getting stuffy in the way rooms do when people are uncomfortably squirming in their seats waiting for something to happen which isn't and is beginning to seem as if it never will. So whoever said, 'Hello', sort of bust the bubble of expectation (rather than the igloo of ice) and once it was burst, someone else even laughed which burst the bubble even more - if a bubble can be burst more than once (maybe it was a different bubble? – ed).

The time had come, Jim thought, for him to act. He was a teacher, after all and he had always found something to say in a classroom even if it wasn't very interesting. But then he always had time for preparation. And Jim was a great pre-

parer. Perhaps he wasn't the most exciting teacher the world had ever known, but he always had a ream of notes and a stack of index cards with cues for opening lines of each successive paragraph of his lecture which he kept at hand and turned over one after another, placing the used card neatly underneath the stack when he was finished with it. After years of teaching the same subjects over and over again he was so expert at this little ruse that it didn't seem to the students he was reading from his cards at all (which of course may have been because they had fallen asleep from tedium).

However, it was now, not then and there was no time to prepare index cards even if he could. And since he had no idea what he was supposed to teach, there was nothing he could prepare anyway. So taking a deep breath he said the first thing that came into his head which was - 'Hello. My name is Jim.' (This was the second thing that came into his head, actually. The first thing was 'Help! Get me out of here!' but he couldn't have very well said that.)

Someone laughed. And Jim looked nervously once more into the small puddle of faces which had grown into a slightly larger one during the interim. He wasn't particularly what one might call 'defensive' – a word that is often used to make us feel that life is just one incessant football game – it's just that this ill defined laugh (which might not even have been a laugh but a nervous cough of the sort one hears at performances where the audience is getting restless because nothing is happening) – this throaty response made Jim feel that maybe the zipper of his trousers was undone and caused him to look down to see if it wasn't.

'Are you American?' someone asked.

Jim looked up again after verifying that nothing improper was going on below his belt, trying to put a face to the words. 'Who said that?' he asked, perhaps a bit more harshly than he meant.

It was Madeline who came to his rescue, of course - dear, sweet Madeline. 'He did, Sir,' she said, pointing a finger at a young man with a dour face who sat across from her.

The young man with a dour face who also had dark eyes and dark hair and seemed as emotionally intense as his features implied, looked back at Madeline and glared at her disapprovingly – not because he felt that the question was improper but rather that he had left his country because people were always accusing each other of trivial deeds which got them into trouble.

'Your name, please,' said Jim directing himself to the intense young man who Madeline had fingered.

The young man furrowed his brow and spoke in a voice so low that Jim could hardly hear him. What he could make out was something like 'Jzasldfassll' and he suspected that wasn't right.

'I'm sorry,' said Jim, 'I couldn't hear. Could you repeat?'

'Abdul Jamara,' the youth repeated in a more distinct voice and then watched as Jim wrote something on a sheet of paper that Abdul suspected was a note to his superior about Abdul's disgrace in asking his new teacher such a personal question but actually was Jim's way of learning the names of students by drawing a quick grid and making an impromptu seating chart with the student's names penned in if and when they spoke so he knew them next time as individuals rather than a generic preposition.

Jim wrote Abdul's surname in phonetics so he would know how to pronounce it and then, to the young man's surprise, proceeded to answer him.

'Yes, I'm American. How did you know?'

This response caught Abdul off guard and he wasn't sure how to reply. His impetuosity had got him into hot water more than once and he was determined to be more careful this time. But what to say? Anything he said would certainly be taken wrongly, because he actually had no clear idea why he suspected his teacher was American except that's how he came across to him. Why is a frog a frog? How do you explain it – especially in a language you're not particularly familiar with? So he said nothing, even though he felt saying nothing would surely be taken as an admission of guilt for whatever he might be guilty of.

'Is it my accent?' Jim suggested.

'What is accent?' asked Jamal, suspecting this might be a trick question.

'The way I pronounce my words.'

'You pronounce the words very good,' said Jamal forcing his facial features into an ingratiating look of the sort that a shopkeeper might give if trying to convince

you to buy a bad tomato.

'Yes, but I pronounce them differently than your last teacher, don't I?'

'Of course,' said Abdul. 'My last teacher was woman.'

29

It was now Jim felt that Abdul might have given him the entry he was desperately searching for. He hated the touchy - feely approach used in some classrooms which always reminded him of some treacly twelve - step, self - help venture, but Abdul's blundering question opened up a possible direction, a way to proceed and even though he felt very strongly that personal lives should be kept outside the classroom (not the bodies, just the stories that sometimes accompanied them), still he was willing - even eager - to make an exception in this case because, frankly, he couldn't think of anything else to do.

So, taking a deep breath, he said, 'Well, Abdul was right. For reasons he prefers to keep to himself he discovered that I am indeed American. I come from a state on the East coast of the country, called New York. The weather there is hot in the summer and cold in the winter. I teach at a small college and this year I made an exchange with a woman who taught here and wanted to teach there...'

A hand shot up in the air, breaking his train of thought. The hand, and the arm that propelled it, belonged to another young man slouching in the back of the room. He also had black hair - in fact, looking around the room, Jim noticed that everyone, except for a certain heavily made up woman, had black hair. But this young man looked very different from Abdul. For one thing his features seemed to Jim more European - whatever that meant (and he probably would have had as much difficulty explaining it as Abdul had in explaining why he thought Jim was American). For another, he was tall and slim whereas Abdul was rather short and squat. But those differences were merely cosmetic. What really distinguished the two young men in Jim's mind was their demeanour. Abdul seemed reticent, withdrawn and suspicious; this other lad - whose name was Mikhail - appeared to be open, alert and inquisitive.

'You in the back. Did you want to say something?' Jim asked, with a mixture of annoyance and relief - annoyance that he was being interrupted, and relief that someone else wanted to participate in the class.

'Yes,' said Mikhail. 'I want to say something. I want to say – "Why?"'

'Why what?' asked Jim, confused again. Everything was going fine while he was narrating his mini-biography so why did this young man have to interrupt and confuse him? Then he reminded himself that he was speaking so that others would respond, so he relaxed his facial muscles which were preparing to look scornful and instead made a quick change into what for Jim was a more accepting countenance and which others would have probably seen as opaque emptiness, like the face of the moon on a foggy night.

Mikhail thought it obvious what his 'why' meant and so did most of the other students. But perhaps this was the new teacher's way of getting him to express himself correctly in English. His last teacher hadn't been satisfied until he formed his sentences complete with subject, verb and object (which he thought his question contained) but as this was a new teacher it seemed not out of the question that there would be something more required of him. So he tried again: 'The "why" I ask is because I wish to know the reason for you to come here instead of stay there.' And saying that, Mikhail smiled a satisfied smile and nodded to the student next to him who threw him back a corrosive glance.

Jim ran Mikhail's words through his mind and then rephrased it aloud as a way of clarifying it both for the students and for himself: "'I want to know why you came to England instead of staying in the United States.'" Is that what you meant to say, Mikhail?'

'Yes,' Mikhail agreed, and then ruminating over Jim's verbal reconstruction he muttered 'I think I say that.'

'You did say that in essence, yes. But there were some grammatical and syntactical errors that made it somewhat hard to understand.'

Mikhail looked at Jim blankly and then turned to the woman sitting next to him with the mordant face and whispered. 'I not understand.'

The woman, who also looked European and spoke with a Slavic accent, shrugged. 'I think he say you are stupid.' She said it softly so that Mikhail could hear but the teacher couldn't.

Jim, however, probably wouldn't have heard even if she had said it louder because he was busily mulling the question over in his head and was wondering

how to answer it. Should he admit to them that he was bamboozled, that it was a dreadful mistake and if he could somehow work it out to go back tomorrow he would? Or should he just say 'Shit happens,' as his old roommate from college said rather philosophically one day when their ceiling caved in.

Instead of saying either of those things, however, he decided to throw the ball back into Mikhail's court. 'Well, why did you leave wherever it was you came from?' And then thinking what had come out of his mouth didn't sound quite right he said, 'Where do you come from, by the way?'

'My country was once country and now it is not country anymore and why I leave is because I not want to fight for country that is not country and the country that is not country wanted that I fight for it so I say, "no" and I leave but I come here not because I wish to be English but because I wish to be American and America is difficult for someone without country to go so I come here and maybe then if I stay here and learn the English good I can later go to where you come from and don't say why you leave there.'

It seemed to Jim that Mikhail had said that all in one breath though Mikhail had actually taken a quick intake of air somewhere in the middle. But, even so, it was quite a bit of verbage to spit out in even two breaths and Jim quite admired him for it.

Some of the students nodded their head in agreement. A few even applauded which made Mikhail smile broadly and turn to the woman next to him and say, 'See, I not stupid!'

30

Jim let the class out fifteen minutes earlier than scheduled. No one objected, in fact they had been growing so restless over the course of two hours that he had begun to fear they would walk out on their own accord if he didn't pull the plug himself.

Through the wall that separated him from the adjoining classroom he could hear the muffled buzz from next door. Oscar clearly had his class under control. From the occasional laughs and giggles that spilled into his rather morose chamber he could tell that Oscar had them eating out of his hand. And this made him feel even more depressed.

But what did he expect? Or, from his perspective, what did they expect? He had been cast to the wolves, so to speak, even though the wolves in this case were mostly stray sheep. But the analogy referred not to the bodies in his class but to his state of mind. His identity for the last decade had been that of 'teacher'. Before that, in those dark and miserable days prior to landing a job at a third rate college deep in the backwaters of academia, he had no identity at all. He was simply Jim, an empty vessel trying its best to absorb bits of other people's lives because he hadn't one of his own – one that he particularly wanted, at any rate.

It's not that he was exceptionally pathetic. There were lots of 'Jims' around. It's just that most of them weren't as conscious of their malaise as our tragic hero. And as we have seen, what made Jim somewhat different (though not as different as perhaps he would have liked) was the fact that he had another life that existed in his mind and was inspired by his books. Jim read not to learn but to nourish his imaginary being. And, if given the choice, he would have much preferred to have stayed in this fantasy world rather than suffer the indignities of real life.

However, unlike some people who learn to blur the edges of the boundaries between the real and the imagined so that 'reality' becomes an amalgam of perception and desire, Jim's feet were firmly placed in the visceral world. His other life was simply that – another life. There was the world of the real - the world of the living - and the world of dreams – the world of ghosts. And rarely the twain did meet.

But though he preferred the world of ghosts because it was the world where he could finally allow himself to touch his emotions, it was the world of the living that paid the rent and enabled him to buy the books that allowed entry into the world of ghosts. It might have been a Faustian bargain but it seemed to work. And therefore becoming a teacher had been very important to him for it was the one career that gave him an identity in the visceral world and didn't force him to disconnect from his world of books.

And because it allowed him to pay the rent, grow his petunias, and feed both his belly and his soul (by providing the cash to buy more books) he tended to see his profession as a salvation of sorts. Therefore, being a teacher was more than being a teacher for him - it was more than a job, it was his identity. And it meant that he was supremely loyal to it in the way that one is supremely loyal to oneself.

We might, therefore, have a bit more sympathy for Jim caught in the pickle he

now found himself. True, this was a pickle of his own making. No one had forced him to come. But we are often put in positions where we find ourselves in a somewhere that is other than what we thought when we first considered it.

And Jim was also caught in what eminent philosophers and social scientists tend to call 'a contradiction'. He was a teacher. He wanted to teach. But he couldn't teach if he wasn't told what to teach.

Now this, some might say, is simply a definition of a bad teacher. Some – like Oscar – might say that teaching must come from within and therefore one couldn't be told what to teach. You teach, therefore you are a teacher. But we must remember that Jim was not that sort of teacher. Teaching for him was a 'career' with a formulaic structure as well as being a means to an end – the end being that it provided the sustenance that allowed him to pursue his other existence, his world of ghosts.

But therein lay the contradiction. If he could only teach what he was told to teach and wasn't told what to teach then he couldn't be a teacher. And since his identity was that of 'teacher', not being told what to teach deprived him of his identity. But being without an identity made him very depressed and nervous. And the only way he could stop being depressed was by getting his identity back. And the only way he could get his identity back was if they told him what to teach so he could be a teacher again. And this they were clearly not about to do.

Thus is the nature of contradictions.

31

Oscar had once read a few lines from Baudelaire which he had translated to his class of intermediate ESOL students:

'Oh Death, old captain, the time has come! Let's depart!
This land loves us. Oh Death! We must now cast off!'

The OBE (Old Battle Axe) had found out about it and had hit the roof. 'You don't read a poem like that to those kind of students!' she had shouted.

'Why not?' he had responded, raising his eyebrows in a manner that the OBE had considered patronising but, in fact, was a facial gesture Oscar quite often used when he was truly surprised at something he shouldn't have been surprised about.

'Because these are fragile people with fragile lives!' she replied. 'Poems about death are not appropriate. They've seen too much of it!'

But the students had related to the poem differently.

'Why does he say death is captain?' asked Mustafa, an Algerian with wiry hair that smelled of cardamom and a body that looked like a long-distance runner's. 'Captain is soldier, no?'

'A captain can also be the master of a ship,' Oscar had explained.

'I like idea - land love us,' a young Kurdish woman had said. She had never spoken up in class before and Oscar, pleased that she had finally come out, had encouraged her to say something more. She had thought a bit and her eyes had grown misty. 'In my village flowers grow. Very beautiful flowers...' She had hesitated, trying to put the thought into words.

Oscar had smiled and gently nodded. There was no hurry. There was all the time in the world. She just needed a bit of space to nurture her words, he had felt.

'I love land,' she had said, finally. 'I not think land love me back.' Her eyes had suddenly come alive in a way Oscar hadn't seen before. And he found the idea very touching that this evocation seemed to transport her to a part of herself that was still sitting in that little flower garden – wherever it was - in a former land that no longer existed except in her imagination.

A man from Bosnia with very intense features – who could have been twenty, thirty or forty, it was hard to tell - had responded to her. 'It not country of flowers he take you to. It country of dead!'

'How you know country of dead not have flowers?' the Kurdish woman had asked him.

'Because I know,' the Bosnian had said. 'It country of bones. It country of dry bones and terrible smell!'

An Ethiopian woman who Oscar once described as having a face that would make the angels weep, had said, 'When my father die, I was just small girl and I look out of window and see him sail up to clouds in little wooden boat that was many,

many colours.' She had said no more but her lips had retained a trace of smile, like the afterglow of something bright and beautiful that lights up the sky for a precious moment.

An older man from Somalia, who Oscar thought was sometimes very wise and sometimes very stupid, just like himself, and therefore they had developed an interesting friendship, had asked, 'Was this man Baudelaire a Moslem? Because a Moslem could write this, I think.'

'Why?' asked Oscar, intrigued.

'There is no fear in it like Christian death. He see it as journey. A nomad see life as journey. Why not death? This man, Baudelaire say when time to go, time to go. You not be afraid. Just another journey to another land. Am I correct?'

Afterward, after the class had ended, the Somalian whose name was Omar, had come up to Oscar. 'You like what I said?' he had asked.

'Yes, very interesting,' Oscar had replied.

'So you give me good mark then?'

32

Behind the college was a housing development - tower blocks, Oscar called them.

'You ought to call them what they are,' said Jim. 'In America we have a word for it.'

'You mean slums? That's just a state of mind. Anyway, these aren't the worst,' Oscar told him as they walked along the path that led through the maze of dilapidated buildings to a place on the other side that Oscar said held the kind of surprise that could be compared to finding a little twinkly gem in a pile of festering dog droppings.

If they weren't slums, what were they? Jim wondered. The mix of odours and sounds wafting from above were intriguingly repellent. It was, thought Jim, like competing orchestras with the brashest of instruments trying to murder one another. What came through was not a melody but a musical and culinary war of

bruising sounds and smells like angry missiles being blasted from one window to another – missiles of burnt spices and strange things fried in rancid oil combined with shrill electronic wails and screeching so visceral that he felt his head was being drilled and boiled.

‘It’s sage versus turmeric, Marmite versus garlic, lager versus bitter, rice versus chips, Marley versus Minogue – isn’t that what cultural warfare amounts to?’ Oscar replied after Jim had voiced the essence of his thoughts. ‘And yet in hell there is always bits of heaven. And the other way around, I suppose. Sometimes you can get what they call “fusion cuisine” that can be truly superb!’ (It seemed to Jim after Oscar said that he licked his chops. Food for Oscar, Jim was to discover, could be metaphorically erotic or erotically metaphorical – as could wine, whether white, red, green or purple, and women of similar complexion.)

‘Is it dangerous?’ Jim said, nervously looking over his shoulder at several shadows hovering in the doorway they had passed.

‘The food?’ asked Oscar.

‘I meant is it dangerous walking through here,’ Jim replied, trying to pick up the pace a little.

Oscar shook his head and then shrugged as if to modify his first gesture. ‘No. It can be. But not really. Sometimes, I suppose. If you’re the kind of person who attracts trouble.’

‘I am,’ said Jim.

‘Well then maybe you shouldn’t walk through here alone. You could always go along the main road. But it’s just quicker this way and then we have more time to sit and drink at our leisure without thinking about going back to that dastardly place.’

‘I thought you liked that dastardly place,’ Jim said.

‘I do. That doesn’t mean it isn’t dastardly. Nor does it mean I wouldn’t prefer sitting in a café with a nice glass of vintage Bordeaux.’

What Oscar didn't tell Jim either because he didn't want to or because he just couldn't be bothered, was that the tower blocks were a world unto themselves. Nothing you could say about them and their contents was absolute. Or, to put it another way, whatever you said about them might be true sometimes or might not. It was easy to look at a place and dismiss it as a 'slum' with all the baggage that term brought with it – like a tea chest with a severed head. (If Jim had done a word association, this is what he would have come up with: slum, bum, knife, fight, dirt, squalor, stink, disease, smack, crack, cocaine, AIDS...and so on down the interminable line till he was well on his way to the urinal of Beelzebub.) But what Oscar knew and Jim didn't – at least not yet – was that most of his students lived in places like this. And, therefore, places like this held the infinite range of relationships that humankind offered. Take the block of flats they had just passed, for example. On the third floor lived an Eritrean gentleman who had once been the livestock inspector for all the pigs that were transported between Addis Ababa and Asmara. He had come to London during the long and crazy war between the two countries (all wars are crazy but this one was even crazier). He tried to get a place on an agricultural course but was turned down because he was 'linguistically challenged'. So he studied English for several years, applied again, and was turned down once more (reason not given). Then he decided to study computing because it was a way to get a job (he thought) but he wasn't someone who took easily to digitisation (especially when there was no particular purpose for things to be digitised except that everything was nowadays) so he decided to study English again. That's when he met Oscar who taught him the poems of Byron, a man he very much admired and had read only in Italian and, in a curious sort of homage to the man (Byron, not Oscar), he began dressing in tweedy suits that he bought very cheap at a second hand clothing shop.

On the fifth floor lived a man from Zaire and his wife who was slowly going insane because she wanted to be back in Africa but knew she couldn't because they had been on the wrong side of the civil war. At first she would only stare at the wall which wasn't so bad but then she began trying to claw through the plaster into the adjoining flat which she was convinced contained a secret tunnel that led underneath England, underneath the Channel, underneath France and Spain, underneath the Mediterranean, underneath North Africa, all the way to the Congo where she would finally emerge into a field she knew as a child and where she used to pick berries for her father before he was taken away.

Directly above the couple from Zaire was an Iraqi family – a husband, wife and two small kids – who would huddle together whenever firecrackers were exploded (as they were every weekend in the air shafts because they made such a

fantastic sound and gave the boys who set them off the feeling that they were blowing to smithereens everything they detested). But the Iraqis were reminded of the guided missile that had whistled portentously a little song of death before sailing unhindered through an open window of the house next door to them where it vaporised a family of ten.

34

It was one of those small cafés that were dotted around London and could be found in the most unlikely places. Oscar had a nose for them. He could follow their scent, sniffing them out like hunters do in France when they're snouting for truffles. None of them looked like anything special and this one looked even more unspecial than the rest despite its rather fancy name – Maison Guernica (known informally by its loyal band of patrons as 'Tito's').

Tito, himself, was a man large of body and heart who, like a shipwrecked sailor had somehow ended up beached on this gastronomically deserted corner of London in one of those stories convoluted as a monkey's tail (according to Oscar, they grew ever more convoluted as he drank). In fact, Tito had actually been a sailor in the merchant navy at one time in his complex past, shipping out to ports as far off as Manila where, along with a few plastic trinkets, a taste for Philippine beer and a blister on a sensitive part of his anatomy, he brought back a wife who now worked in Maison Guernica as the bartender, cashier and general cleaner-upper.

When Jim first met him he was reminded of a picture he had once seen in a book about famous 19th century murderers – this particular one having to do with a French butcher who literally made sausages out of his customers who refused to pay their tabs. Not that Tito looked anything as ferocious as the picture of the grotesque man with a fat, sweaty face and bulging eyes, but the great walrus moustache both men wore as a badge of masculine identity and hirsute pride was almost exactly identical. (Later, when Jim got to know him better, he could see other resemblances. Even though Tito could be gentle, charming, convivial and fine fellow all around, once when Jim peeked into the kitchen and saw Tito with a cleaver poised over his head ready to chop a joint of lamb in half, there was a certain crazed look Jim thought he picked up on which brought the image from that book back to him again.)

But that was some time later. At the present moment Jim was standing with Oscar outside what looked to him like another dreary café in another dreary part of London. And he wondered to himself why exactly he had followed Oscar here –

except for the fact that Oscar was the only one he had met so far who would give him the time of day (if he was willing to go through several substantial circumlocutions before getting it, that is).

They sat down outside at a plastic table on a plastic chair tucked back against the side of the building underneath an awning. Tito came out and greeted Oscar warmly as if they hadn't seen each other for years even though Oscar had been there yesterday and the day before that.

A bottle of house red was brought out by the waiter who, Oscar said, had been borrowed from the set of Fawlty Towers (though Jim had no idea what he meant). Two glasses were poured. Oscar took a drink – though that's not exactly correct. What he actually did was lift his glass lovingly to his lips, tip it slightly and let some of the burgundy liquid flow easily into his mouth in a movement so beautifully constructed that Jim thought it almost like a dance. And then something curious happened. It was as if a magic potion had suddenly filtered through his system, cloaking him in a diaphanous aura and bringing his entire state of being at one with the eternal universe.

Peering out into the distance, Oscar directed his gaze not at the gruesome tower blocks but a small copse of trees on the other side of the road. And directing Jim to look over there as well, he said, 'You know, when the sun is out and I sit here with a glass of Tito's extraordinary ambrosia, with a plate of olives, bread and perhaps a few anchovies, thoughts of college fade into non-existence and I could be somewhere on a little island in the Aegean.' He looked over at Jim to see if there was any trace of understanding that had been transmitted.

Jim looked out at the clump of trees and tried to picture it as Oscar had said but what he saw was the rubbish underneath – rusty tin cans, abandoned newspapers and a pile of smelly shit probably dropped there by a passing animal with four legs (though the thought that the animal in question might have had only two did enter Jim's head).

Jim didn't ordinarily drink during the day, though a glass of wine at meals wasn't something unheard of for him. But now as he drank he felt the alcohol go straight to his head. Perhaps it was because he hadn't had a bite to eat all day, he thought as he sensed a rather nice haze start to envelop him. Whatever the reason, the feeling wasn't bad.

He did tend to run at the mouth whenever the level of alcohol in his blood increased beyond the contents of a Shirley Temple and this afternoon was no exception. Thus his saga of the last few days gushed out like a torrent of water shooting through a hole in some dyke that a certain Dutch boy forgot to put his finger in.

Oscar listened silently. Sometimes allowing himself a little knowing smile. Sometimes closing his eyes while sipping his ambrosia. Sometimes looking over at a passer by. Sometimes fiddling with the little napkin the waiter, out of habit, had given him.

'It's quite nice, isn't it?' said Oscar after Jim was through regurgitating.

'What?' asked Jim, confused. Was Oscar referring to life, love or the weather?

'The red,' said Oscar, pointing to the bottle. 'He brings it up himself, you know. Every several months. From a little vineyard in the Basque region.'

'Really,' Jim replied, a bit too light-headed to be truly upset by Oscar's apparent lack of interest in his personal soap opera.

Oscar smiled, emoting a rather nice glow. 'So...' he said. And then he emoted again.

Jim took another sip from his glass while he waited patiently for the sentence to be completed.

'So...what do you think of our fair college then?'

'The college?' Jim looked over at the copse of trees that Oscar had so admired. 'How shall I describe it? A little like a shit-hole, I guess.'

'Ah, yes...'

Oscar poured himself another glass from the rapidly depleting bottle. 'A shit-hole.' Oscar swirled the words around in his head the way a connoisseur might swirl a vintage Chardonnay before imbibing it. 'I suppose it is. But a very interesting shit-hole,' he said.

Jim wondered about the difference in shit-holes that might make one more interesting than another. 'A shit-hole is a shit-hole, isn't it?'

'Perhaps,' said Oscar, now appearing very Buddha-like except for his reddening skin, 'but there's quite a variety of shit, wouldn't you say? It matters what is digested and the intestinal track that services it. The range of colours can be quite extraordinary...'

'I don't think I've actually ever looked...'

'Well, you should, dear boy. You should.'

36

"YOU THERE!"

These words uttered with the authority of a tank commander who had just engineered a very bloody coup stopped them in their tracks.

They were in the corridor on their way to the staff room when the shattering sound occurred, vibrating the walls and curdling the milk being timorously sipped by a student who was unfortunate enough to be passing by at that precise instant.

'ARE YOU THE AMERICAN?'

Oscar didn't have to turn around to know that it wasn't him about to be skinned and fried like a wet cat plucked out of the neighbourhood nazi's fish bowl. So he said, 'See you later dear lad!' and disappeared before Jim knew what had happened.

'HELLO? IF YOU ARE THE AMERICAN, I NEED TO SPEAK WITH YOU!'

The nurturing, pink haze that had lifted him hesitantly from the grime of life had belched him out again. Turning toward the bellowing voice behind him he saw, to his horror, a twelve headed hydra, which, as his eyes started to focus, became six, three and then, as the many heads converged into each other, finally one (uglier it seemed to him than all the previous eleven).

'ARE YOU OR ARE YOU NOT?'

Questions of ontology had always disturbed him. He thought, therefore he was.

But what happened when he didn't think? Was he not?

'I SAY! ARE YOU DUMB?'

"Dumb" as in not being able to speak or "dumb" as in stupid?" he asked aloud in a voice that didn't sound like him at all but rather like a mouse whose tail was caught in a snappy-like object made of a very hard substance.

'SO YOU ARE THE AMERICAN! I CAN TELL BY YOUR GOD AWFUL ACCENT!' she said, propelling her booming voice like a bowling ball quite used to knocking down wooden pegs that stood there dumbly (or stupidly) as Jim was doing now.

How could he deny it? He was proud of his country and was even known to have waved a flag or two on July the fourth. And why would he deny it? More than an accident of birth, America for him was the belief in his inalienable rights codified in the first ten amendments to the Constitution, a copy of which he held on a plastic card that he kept in his wallet (not the entire Constitution, of course, just the Bill of Rights – in case he ever had to refer to them as he would have now except that he wasn't in America).

'I NEED TO SPEAK WITH YOU IMMEDIATELY! PLEASE ACCOMPANY ME TO MY OFFICE!' she commanded.

Fingering his wallet and the sacred card within he followed her glumly down the hall, wondering all the while whether this was what a prisoner of war felt like and if he shouldn't just cut and run like Oscar had done.

37

Josephine Montgomery had a face that could have been chiselled out of granite. Since it wasn't actually hewn from stone, there had to be another reason to explain why her features seemed so hard and immutable. She, herself, had spent an extravagant amount of time trying to figure it out, standing in front of her ornate mirror, studying each crevice, each rocky mound and crater in that visage which stared back at her with an expression unyielding and rigid. A stubborn finger would sometimes travel the gravelly road from her temple to her chin, feeling its way over the rugged terrain. She would do this with her eyes closed, trying to imagine what it would be like if she were blind and couldn't see the dreadful image in the looking glass. She did this more or less out of habit because years ago she had to keep them shut lest her anger forced her to obliterate the reflec-

tion by smashing the glass while railing on about the unfairness of life which had bestowed upon her the features of a loser in the game of genetic lotto.

That was many years before. Now she had come to accept her lot(to) and, what's more, she had come to see it as a blessing. Not exactly a blessing in the ordinary sense of the word, bestowed by a benevolent God. What she had in mind was more of a clockwork deity that didn't really give a fuck whether it was running a paradise or an inferno. Hers was a rather utilitarian god that held no truck with the notions of 'beauty' and 'ugliness' but just in the manner things could be used to maintain a semblance of order in a very anarchic universe. And in that cosmos the design of her countenance took on an entirely different appearance. Looked upon from a purely functional standpoint, it was a face perfectly shaped to promote the concept of regulated discipline (which, in certain people's minds, is what teaching is all about).

But, unfortunately for her, Josephine was not simply the type of person her face had turned her into. Deep inside (very deep inside, to be sure) was another Josephine who had an entirely different face constructed of entirely different features. And that Josephine was quite different from the major-domo who commanded the Kilburn ESOL household. That Josephine actually had a heart and a soul. And sometimes, on certain occasions, when she was least expected, that Josephine would pop out and do the most outlandish things (outlandish, that is, from the standpoint of a major-domo).

Which is only to say that Josephine Montgomery was a very complex individual.

38

Her chamber was below ground, just a few doors down from Miranda's office – not a great distance, really, but mentally it was a million miles away. No leaking pipes here, Jim thought, no wads of gum. No piles of papers teetering precariously in damp, mildewing stacks. No iconic posters on the walls. Josephine's office was neat and tidy. Jim could be neat and tidy himself (when he put his mind to it) but this was frighteningly so – like the streets of Singapore where you could be caned for dropping a chewing gum wrapper on the ground. (Not that he chewed gum, but he certainly didn't feel people should be caned for dropping the wrapper. Dropping the gum itself was another matter.)

Josephine sat down behind her enormous desk like a monarch taking her place upon her throne. Jim stood stiffly by the door feeling annoyed that he was being

treated like a truant child and nervous for precisely the same reason. Here he was, he thought, a college lecturer of some standing (no matter how slight the standing was) being treated like a pimply faced adolescent malcontent. And though that hurt his pride and made him want to huff and puff and say something like, 'Look here – do you know who I am? Do you know that I once wrote a critical piece on a biography of Jane Austin that was referred to in a New York Review of Books footnote?', there was the other side that was truly intimidated by this big, blustery woman. (How she had sensed that emotionally he wasn't so far removed from a pimply faced adolescent malcontent was quite beyond him but it was that knowledge, and the fact that he knew that she knew that he knew, which gave her power over him.)

And, what's more, to his surprise and consternation, once she had seated herself on her magisterial bottom, she seemed to ignore him, and, instead, took up a pen and started going through some documents on her desk.

Jim made a show of looking annoyed, glancing conspicuously at his watch, clearing his throat very loudly and coughing once or twice – all to no avail. Finally, after a while of quietly doing everything short of smelling up the room with an enormous fart (unlike some people he knew, he wasn't in that much control of his bodily functions) he got up the nerve to say, 'Well, I think I'll go now. I've got a class...'

As there was no response and since he felt (strangely) that it was rude to simply leave like that he cleared his throat again and muttered, 'What's all this about?'

She finally raised her terrible head and the look she gave him made him wish she hadn't. 'What all this is about? Are you really asking me what all this is about, Mr Thompson?'

'Thomas,' he corrected.

'Really? Are you sure?' she said looking down at a paper on the desk. 'It says Thompson here!'

'Thomas. My name is Thomas,' he repeated.

'Oh, well! Thompson, Thomas, they're not all that far apart, are they?'

'Except Thomas is my name and Thompson is not.'

It didn't appear to be a difficult concession, but Josephine had trouble conceding anything – especially to people she hadn't known long enough to fully trust that she could manipulate them. She looked down at the paper again, 'Perhaps I could use your Christian name. Jim?' She made a face of disapproval. 'Could I call you James, instead?'

'My name is Jim Thomas not James Thompson.'

'Well isn't Jim a diminutive of James?'

'Not in my case.'

'What does it say on your passport then?'

'Jim Thomas.'

'Are you sure?'

'Yes I'm sure.'

'How very odd!' She drummed her stubby fingers on her desk as if she were trying to work something out in her head. 'How very American!'

39

He didn't really have a class. But she knew that because she had a copy of Regina's timetable which she, as the head of ESOL, had made out herself. However, Josephine liked playing games of cat and mouse – just as long as she could play the cat.

'Have you settled in?' she asked him, while at the same time studying his face for any clues to weakness she could exploit at some time in the future.

'No,' he replied, wondering about the sudden change in attitude. Why had she now adopted a tone of beneficence whereas moments before it seemed she was about to devour him like a hungry troll who had just come across a juicy stranger?

'It does take time,' she said. 'You taught English literature in the States, I understand.'

'Yes.' Where was this leading? he asked himself as his body stiffened and his guard, always on call except when he had a drink or two, doused himself with water to quickly sober up.

'Poetry?'

'Sometimes.'

She bowed her head and spoke in a the voice of someone other than herself:

'If I could write the beauty of your eyes
And in fresh numbers number all your graces,
The age to come would say, "This poet lies;
Such heavenly touches ne'er touched earthly faces".'

Looking up at him again he saw her eyes once fearsome had become almost doe-like. 'Do you like the sonnets?' she asked.

'Actually, I'm not a Shakespeare man,' he replied.

'Who do you like then?' Her features hardened again.

'Auden.'

'Auden?' She crinkled her brow so that her eyes now appeared like slits through heavy armour.

'Yes, the poet. The one who said, "My face looks like a wedding cake left out in the rain."'

He didn't know why he said that. It just came out. He regretted it, but it was too late. Then again, part of him (the pimply-faced adolescent part) didn't regret it at all.

It seemed that the guard who had doused him with water had splattered some on her as well. She shook herself and he could see her facial muscles tense up, distorting her features the way a belt does to a belly when cinched too tightly.

'You haven't taught ESOL before, have you?' she said in what sounded to him

like the low hiss of a serpent.

'No, I haven't. It wasn't really in my career plan...'

'It's not a matter for jest!' she snapped.

'I'm not jesting,' he said. 'I tried to find you earlier today to see if there were any books...'

'Are you actually telling me that you waited until the first day of class to set a text? Hadn't you done any preparation?'

'How could I prepare for something I didn't know I was going to teach?'

'You applied for this post, didn't you?'

'I applied for a post, yes. Not this post.'

'But you accepted this post. Am I correct?'

'I did, I suppose...'

'Did you or did you not accept this post?'

'I accepted an exchange of positions...'

'Then you agree that you accepted this post.'

'I accepted this post however, as it turned out, I didn't know what post I was accepting...'

'Then, Mr Thompson you are a very stupid man, aren't you?' She smiled at him in the manner of a cat who had one paw on his tail while the other one reached for the salt cellar.

Daisy noticed he looked a bit battered (something akin to a piece of cod fried in used axel grease too long) and felt a twang of sympathy which she immediately subdued by concentrating on the mental image of a Cruise Missile. But not wish-

ing to be totally rude to the person she was forced to share her tiny office with and (probably more likely) to quell the low moan coming from the direction of his desk (which sounded to her something like 'WhatamI doingherewhatamI doingherewhatamI doinghere...') she handed him one of her precious Kit Kats.

He looked down at the chocolaty stick thing she had handed him. 'What's this?' he asked with a certain amount of well-founded suspicion.

'It's a Kit Kat,' she said. Then, almost regretting her act of generosity which suddenly seemed to her quite rash, she said in a voice even more suspicious than his, 'Don't you have Kit Kats in America?' (She could have said, 'Don't you have men who don't beat their wives in America?' and it would have sounded the same.)

'I'm not sure,' he said taking a bite and thinking it was rather strange to make such a fuss over a chocolate covered cookie but stranger things had happened that day and he was so low at this point that he felt touched at her charity. 'Do you have Mars Bars over here?' he asked, thinking he perhaps had found a topic of mutual interest.

'Of course we have Mars Bars!' she said turning around from her desk and giving him the dirtiest look anyone had ever given him (that might not have actually been true, but it felt that way). 'Mars Bars are British! Do you think America invented everything? Well, do you?'

She had swivelled around in her chair and was glaring at him, throwing everything her eyes could manage – daggers, old shoes, chipped crockery - and he thought – well, he thought ... 'How sweet. She really cares.'

'Would you like to go out for a drink with me?' he asked her.

Her jaw dropped twenty feet. The gapping hole kept getting larger and larger. For a moment he thought it would encompass the entire room and then he imagined it would implode, swallowing the entire universe so everything would have to start over again and maybe they'd do a better job with it next time but probably it would be worse...

'Are you crazy?' she said. The words echoed in his consciousness – 'Crazy...crazy...crazy...crazy...Are you? Are you? Are you? Are you?...'

'Yes. I believe I am.'

Suddenly Daisy realised that she'd been incarcerated with a lunatic and she was going to become a lunatic herself and the first thing she was going to do as a lunatic was to kill Miranda.

Grabbing her papers, she stuffed them inside her briefcase and then got up from her chair. 'OK! Let's go!' she commanded.

He watched her in amazement. 'Go where?'

'I thought you wanted to go for a drink?' she said.

41

There was a poster of Venice on the wall showing a typically clichéd scene of gondola and gondolier bathed in magnificent Venetian sunset which unfailingly drew Daisy into its magical orbit whenever she came to this little coffee bar despite (or, perhaps, because of) the fact that the poster was covered with infinite layers of grease from an infinite number breakfasts fried up by a sad-faced Italian who had promised himself twenty years ago that he would only stay in this little Kilburn dive six months before returning home again to his beloved Genoa. ('Why,' Daisy once asked him, 'do you have a poster of Venice on the wall to remind you of Genoa?' 'That'sa all I could find,' he replied. 'Justa posters of gondolas and pizza.')

Sitting there on the same sticky chair she always sat on (if it was available as it usually was because few people wandered in outside of feeding times) she wondered what had possessed her to come here with that strange, disagreeable man who was now standing at the counter ordering a milky tea for her, a cappuccino for him and a side order of buttered toast for them to split.

It's not as if this was the first time she had done something curiously out of sync, however. It happened with her occasionally as it does with most obsessive people who construct a tightly knit world for themselves with guards at every gate only to find that they have wandered out a secret passage the guards know nothing about. (The reason the guards don't know is because everyone who constructs their own secret prison also subconsciously constructs a secret escape route. And since this escape route is subconsciously constructed, it often comes as a surprise that it exists even to the person who constructed it.)

Anyway, to all intents and purposes, Daisy had gone out with a man she despised for no obvious reason. That is to say, she both despised him for no obvious reason and went out with him for no obvious reason as well. However, just because there is no obvious reason doesn't mean there isn't a reason. It only means the reason isn't obvious.

Daisy, being a very intelligent woman, wondered about this herself. Why was it that this man seemed to be able to press every button in her directory of unreasonable reactions? Who was he? What had he done to deserve her wrath? Then she looked up at the pathetic character standing at the counter who was collecting the drinks that he was about to bring over to the grease encrusted table and she thought – no, it wasn't him, not the man himself. It's what he represented.

But what did he represent? America? He didn't really come off as stereotypically American – he wasn't all smiles and chewing gum. And he seemed more confused and discontent than the versions she knew from telly commercials.

So what was it? Certainly there was an aura of something that made the contents of her stomach curdle every time she looked at him. But what it actually was that caused this visceral revulsion eluded her. She wasn't by nature someone who had such intense loathings. Of course she had strong opinions but she prided herself at being able to work with people who weren't quite as clear about the nature of things as she was as long as those people didn't stand in her way. And what way was that? It was the way of enlightenment – the enlightenment of all manner of people and beasts who were downtrodden and oppressed. And how was this enlightenment to be achieved? Through the greatest of all struggles – the struggle for language. And for Daisy this meant the right and obligation to possess a language at its roots, to make it ones own and to use it effectively as a tool or, if necessary, a weapon in the quest for liberation (a very tricky word that for her meant 'communicative empowerment').

For Daisy language and power were intimately related. And English, being the primary language of trade, commerce, science and war, was the linguistic vehicle of choice, as Latin had been some centuries ago. But what was English? Or, rather, whose language was it? England's or America's? Daisy would have taken that question a step further: India's? Kenya's? Jamaica's? She would have included any of a score of other places which had immersed themselves in the language long enough to have created their own literature.

Perhaps it was more than Jim being a gum-chewing American (even though he didn't chew gum) that was munching at her gut. Chewing gum was just a symbolic representation of a cultural junk explosion like Coca Cola, Mickey Mouse and Mac Attacks. She found that obnoxious to be sure, but no more detestable than being forced to drop the final 'me' from 'programme' simply because IBM dictated it and they wrote the fucking manuals, didn't they? So maybe it was America's usurpation of the English language that was sticking in her craw when she listened to his mincing of consonants and mashing of vowels. And it wasn't because she had a notion of dialectical hierarchy – she far preferred the melodic rhythms of Trinidad to the clipped constructs of Surrey – it's just that America was pushing its semantic weight around and she'd bloody well had enough!

42

'Well it does seem to me quite remarkable that you didn't ask what classes you were going to teach,' Daisy said after listening to Jim complain about his meeting with Josephine. 'You didn't have any idea?' She looked at him in amazement.

'Someone was going to write me. At least that's what Regina said...'

Suddenly Daisy remembered it was she who was supposed to have written. 'They were probably up to their neck in work,' she said. 'Didn't Regina tell you anything?'

'It was all so last minute...' He felt like an idiot trying to explain himself, especially to Daisy who clearly had little sympathy for him. But what was he to say? It was hard enough trying to retrace his steps. Maybe he could get himself back to the airport all right but after that it all seemed to merge into a purple haze of confusion.

In fact, now it all seemed nonsensical to him and if he had been on the other side of the table where Daisy was sitting, staring at him as if he were mad, he would have felt the same (although he probably wouldn't have stared at her without blinking the way she did because, in his mind, it was similar to being hit on the head with a rubber truncheon).

'Look,' he said, 'I realise we haven't had the best of beginnings but, you know, we're sharing an office and I was hoping that maybe we could patch things up even though I'm not sure what to patch. I mean, let's be frank, you don't like me

for some reason. So maybe if you let me know what it is about me that you find so difficult, I could try to not do it, or be it - when I'm around you, that is ...'

Tangled as he was in his inarticulateness (because it's very hard to apologise to someone for being something you haven't been introduced to yet), he looked at her imploringly as one does when words don't really work and the only things left are looks and gestures that attempt to leap over the hurdle of verbal insufficiency. There was something so pathetic about his expression that Daisy felt moved – rather like the way she'd be moved by the pitiful look of a recently neutered dog after she'd bumped up against its stitches.

But what could she say to him? How could she admit that she disliked him for no perceptible reason – except for being American (and that wasn't easily admitable). On the other hand, she realised he was right about one thing, they were fated to share a very small space for the rest of the year and, for that reason alone, it was probably advisable to offer a truce, no matter how shaky. So she did what is comes naturally when reasonable people suddenly find they are being unreasonable without understanding why - that is to say, she lied.

'I don't dislike you, Mr Thomas. Really, I don't know what gave you that impression...'

'Then maybe you could call me "Jim"', he said.

She closed her eyes and pretended she was in Spain under a coconut tree even though coconut trees are not very common there. 'All right,' she sighed. 'Jim...'

'And may I call you Daisy?'

In her dream a coconut fell from the tree and hit her on the head causing her to grit her teeth in distress.

43

'A lesson plan? Of course I've done lesson plans!' Then, he hesitated, thought a minute and said, 'What's a Lesson Plan?'

Only a half hour before he would have expected her to verbally throttle him without mercy for such an admission. But that was in the past. Now, back in their shared office, they were friends. At least that's what he thought.

In fact, Daisy hated Lesson Plans as much as anyone else. And she hated Lesson Plans even more than she hated him. So when he told her what Josephine had demanded of him – namely a Lesson Plan – she felt her rankles boil. And recalling the dictate that an enemy of an enemy is my friend she reacted not at all as he expected, but rather like a sympathetic co-conspirator in the eternal war against educational straightjacketing (of which the Lesson Plans was a prime example).

It should be said that Daisy, as a serious teacher (some would even say an overly serious teacher) had nothing against planning lessons. Indeed, everything in her life was planned to a certain extent, even her shopping trips to Sainsbury's. But Lesson Plans, with capital 'L', capital 'P', were fishes of an entirely different stream (not the quiet brook by the verdant shores of a,b,c's, but the shitty, effluent filled drainage ditch which carried the despised paper-work imposed by mindless functionaries). Lesson Plans were created by her nemeses, her archenemies in the world of formal learning – the Fat and Faceless Bureaucrats. ('Fat' because they feasted on teachers' tender flesh and 'Faceless' because nobody knew who or what they were, where they resided or whether they only came out in the darkness of night along with winged creatures whose fangs still dripped with hot and steaming plasma.)

Unlocking a special drawer in her desk she took out what she called her 'magic template' and showed it to him. 'It's the game of form and counter-form,' she told him. 'It's all based on a simple idea: bureaucrats need paper the way vampires need blood. It's not what's on the paper that matters, it only needs to be marked in a formulaic manner since it serves no function whatsoever except to prove to some other FFB that the drainage ditch is flowing and the sewage hasn't clogged up their filters with too much shit. Of course, as part of their paper empire, they (The Faceless Ones) have provided paper rationales for all this paperwork trying to paper over the cracks in their evil (yes, evil!) logic that attempts to argue in the most feeble and infantile way that there is even the tiniest iota of educational benefit in all this wastage of virgin forests where half of Sumatra has been clear-cut just to provide them with the material to keep churning out their vile excrement!'

'But I sort of like the idea,' said Jim.

'You what?' She stared at him disbelievingly.

Now that they were friends he felt he could tell her his deep, dark secret. 'I'm not a natural teacher, you see. Not like you or Oscar. I need a lesson plan so I know what I'm supposed to do in class.'

'You might need a lesson plan but you don't need a Lesson Plan,' she told him. A lesson plan is something you create for yourself to see you through your lessons. A Lesson Plan is something you create for them to wipe their bottoms with.'

44

This sudden outburst on Daisy's part had little to do with what it seemed to be focused on. It's one of life's sweet little aphorisms – the kind that were laboriously codified and made into cute and cuddly chapbooks by 19th century moralists – that when people get angry about something, it's usually not that particular something they're angry about. The object of their ire most often is like a lightning rod which juts impetuously from atop a structure only to attract the bolts of electrical energy swirling through the air lest they strike at more vulnerable spots and burn the place down.

In the cinematic version of Daisy's life, the role of the Lightning Rod would be played by the Horrible Lesson Plan, Stripey and Carnivorous. As she herself stated, she had nothing against planning lessons. But the Horrible Lesson Plan (S & C) was a horse of a different species (if you can picture a horse with three blind eyes and a snout like a pig then that would be nearly it – as long as you remember to include a tail of stinging nettles that it used to whip people with).

In Daisy's eyes, the HLP (S&C) was created for one reason and one reason alone: teachers and lecturers were hated and despised. (That's actually two reasons – ed.) What's more, they couldn't be trusted. (That's three.) Because if they were trusted and respected (though not necessarily liked since that was a bit too much to ask from a profession which made its living forcing people to do things like homework and writing papers which they would then put blotchy red and unreadable marks on) then there would be no need for the HLP (S&C or not).

So what was this document that Daisy found akin to a bad case of measles with mumps thrown in besides? It was a document that stated the impossible as if the impossible was fact. What it attempted to ascertain was what the teacher would be doing every second he or she was in the classroom. It divided the session into fifteen minute increments, obliging its victim to write down what would be taking place at – for example – 2:45PM when the use of gerunds, which were intro-

duced at 2:15PM, would be exemplified in the context of the present continuous with a series of transparencies displayed in glorious colours on the wall (ignoring, of course, that at 2:43 the cable of the overhead projector broke when a student punctured it because at 2:42 the fire alarm went off for no particular reason and the student in question, a young woman from Bosnia, thought it was an air-raid warning and tried to cram herself under the chair causing the metal leg of an adjoining table to cut into the flex). This ridiculous regimentation was made even more humiliating by the necessity of writing the purpose of each lesson and how that purpose was to be achieved as if two hours of boring tripe could be made more legitimate simply by doing so. What is the purpose of teaching gerunds, for heaven's sake? Daisy asked herself. Because they're there, I suppose. And being an honest teacher, that's what she put down. Needless to say, it wasn't good enough for the Faceless Bureaucrat who sat in her office going over the forms (and who never taught a class – never, ever (except for training sessions in how to fill out forms) and who sent that particular HLP (S&C) back to Daisy two months later with a notation in the errant box crudely lettered in purple pen – 'NEEDS MORE!')

But, to be honest, the Horrible Lesson Plan hadn't been forced on them yet in their day to day struggle to keep hold of their sanity. The experience Daisy had made reference to was externally imposed as part of a preliminary inspection to 'quantify, correlate, analyse and, subsequently, to standardise the educational provision in terms of the global marketplace'. And that, in essence, was the crux of the matter. A monumental sea change was taking place for teachers like Daisy and she could sense it with the foreboding of a mariner who had sailed the oceans long enough to know that when the fish start taking refuge in the mouths of sharks then something strange and frightening is starting to happen and you better start taking measures fast.

And with Miranda at the helm their little college did just that. Their hatches battened, they had tried to shut themselves off from the encroaching seas. But the times were changing quickly and like the pipes in Miranda's office, the leaks were proving more and more difficult to patch.

So, in terms of danger signs, the Horrible Lesson Plan was like a cannon shot reminding her that a great, defining battle was about to commence. And, thus, when Jim had used the dreaded term in Daisy's presence she had reacted as she did not because she particularly sympathised with him but because of what the idea represented - even though she knew full well that Josephine's lesson plan was not of the horrible variety (because Josephine herself hated the thought of

an external bureaucracy trying to compete with the internal one she had meticulously created).

Besieged and bewildered, Daisy was watching a lifetime of effort slowly being torn apart by people without names and without faces who had no idea at all what she was trying to do. And so she lashed out at the one symbol which seemed to encapsulate the idiocy this terrible new world had wrought, bestowing upon it the mythic power that enables words to go far beyond their literal meanings and to become, like 'saint' or 'devil', incantations of good or evil as if they alone could conjure up the raptures of heaven or the terrors of eternal hellfire and brimstone.

45

Jim came home that evening with a briefcase stuffed full of papers and books which Josephine had lent him with instructions about what he should prepare for tomorrow's class (which she would be observing).

The place had an aura of wet dog he thought as he opened the door cautiously, peering inside with a faint suspicion that somehow Wilberforce had picked the lock and was waiting for him with slavering tongue and wagging tail. But once over the threshold, bolting the door behind him (to keep out any other straying beasts who might be lurking around) he realised that the place reeked more of emptiness than anything else – there seemed to be a lingering mustiness that testified to the absence of life of a larger form which could stir up the air rather than the smaller form which is just content to sit there and mildew.

Once inside, having unburdened himself by dumping his briefcase in a corner and tossing off his shoes, he began searching through the cupboards for something to eat or drink, as he had totally forgotten to pick anything up on his journey home and now, safely locked inside, he had no desire to brave the world outdoors again. But his stomach had other ideas. Jim might not have wanted to go back out, and, as far as his stomach was concerned, that was fine and dandy as long as he tended to its needs some other way. And, to warn him of this simple but urgent demand, it let out a rather terrifying growl.

Not being one to defy any sort of growls – whether from a wild beast or internal organ - he launched this rather desperate search and seizure mission, combing the area for food that Regina might have left behind in her hurry to move out. The first and most logical port of call was the fridge, which he found had been

thoroughly cleaned to professional standards and, except for an iced-in freezer compartment, there was nothing organic which might have passed for grub (unless one counted a little ant that somehow had managed to work its way through the rubber seal and now lay, belly up, on the shelf above the empty vegetable compartment).

He had better luck when he looked through the cabinets finding some unopened tins and jars with strange substances – some of which he knew and some of which he didn't. Like Marmite. He could hardly determine what one was meant to do with it by reading the list of ingredients. And orange marmalade. He knew what that was, of course, though he had never tasted it before. Were the bits of peel he saw suspended in the gelatinous substance really meant to be eaten? And then there was the little tin of Devonshire Double Cream. Tinned cream? Doubled? What could that mean? Cream times two? Creamed cream? Or maybe there was a place called 'Devonshire Double'. But what really piqued his curiosity was a can of something called 'Pilchards'. He had never heard of pilchards before. That they were some sort of sea creature was evident from the rather unappetising sketch of a lifeless fish-like thing staring back at him from the label. He rather suspected they were something like sardines because he couldn't think of any other edible fish that were commercially crammed whole into that small of a can. But maybe it was part of a bigger fish they had stuffed in. If so, he asked himself, what part was it? The front or the rear? The head or the tail? Or maybe just a fin. What would appear if he dared open it? Two glassy eyes and a half opened mouth fixed forever in a rigid grin?

His stomach growled again.

He lined up his booty on the shelf – the Marmite, marmalade, Devonshire Double Cream and the pilchards. He moved them around several times, as if the arrangement would somehow make something click in his mind and he would intuitively understand the order of consumption. Marmite first, then pilchards? Or pilchards, then double cream, followed by marmalade with marmite for desert? No, that couldn't be right. Marmalade he knew was sweet and that should be last, shouldn't it? But maybe Marmite was sweet as well. And how about the cream? That couldn't come first, could it?

His stomach let out a horrible growl and this time pinched so hard that Jim felt if he didn't feed it soon it would start eating itself. So he located an opener in a drawer, twisted off the lids from the cans and poured everything into a bowl so that the little fish (indeed they were sardines sort of) swam around in the multi-

coloured goo. And he proceeded to feed his demanding belly. However, stomachs being the most ungrateful organ God ever created, two hours later would ask him in a grumbling and miserable tone, 'What the hell did you do to me? Pilchards, marmalade, Marmite and cream? Are you mad? Are you crazy?' But that would be two hours later. Right now, wiping the dribbles from his chin, he felt his stomach finally relax to the point that he even thought he heard it ask him for a small brandy and a large cigar as sort of an after-dinner accompaniment (thinking, incorrectly, that's what its British counterpart would have asked for after a meal of pilchards and the rest of that curious stuff). Just visualising the brandy and the smoke seemed to be enough for his stomach, for the moment anyway, and it let out a large, satisfied burp.

46

The telephone rang. At first he didn't recognise it. That is to say, he recognised it as a ring but not the ring of a telephone. The reason for this has to do with the History of Important Noises.

The History of Important Noises is not something we think about very often, if at all, but sounds are vital cues in organising our lives. In the earliest days people learned to respect the roar of the lion – it was a sound that had meaning to them in a way that it doesn't on the streets of London or New York. In fact, people back then probably learned to hear a number of different lion roars which they could distinguish as hunger, sexual desire or simply vocalising frustration caused by bad mane days.

Other deterministic sounds followed. The call of the sparrow. (Is it Spring or Winter?) The chirping of crickets. (Is it hot?) The humming of bees. (Is it time to collect the honey pot?)

Fast forward a few hundred thousand years and we get to the telephone. Now some people think that the telephone was quite a significant invention. And really who can argue? (Whether or not it improved our lives is another matter, but we won't go into that until page 454.) The fact of the matter is that once the telephone was invented, a collateral issue was created. We now had a device which connected us to someone else who was a bit further away than yelling distance. So far so dandy. But say you're the one making the call. How do you get the recipient to understand that it's time to pick up the receiver and listen?

You might send a messenger around to notify them – to knock at their door and

say something like, 'Excuse me, there's a telephone call for you. Would you mind picking up that new fangled contraption in the other room and putting it to your ear? That's a good fellow!' But that might have defeated the purpose as the messenger could just as well have delivered the message personally (unless, of course, the medium was the message – see page 456). Another possibility would have been to have the new call set off a spark which exploded a dish of phosphorous causing a brilliant flash of light. But there would have been two problems with that: firstly, it wouldn't have worked very well on sunny days (so that would have left out everywhere but Britain); secondly, it might have burned the house down, which wouldn't have done any good at all unless, of course, the message was, 'Excuse me, your house is burning down,' in which case it would.

So (finally!!-ed) that brings us to the bell. It could be argued that the bell was just as great an invention as the telephone (maybe even greater since the bell not only calls someone to the telephone but has also been used to call them to dinner). The fact that it was invented long before the telephone was ever thought of is hardly relevant. It's good enough to say that without the bell, the telephone would be nothing – just one of those failed ideas that had a lot of potential but ended up nowhere except Uncle Jerry's cluttered basement.

Which brings us back to Jim (finally!! finally!! – ed) and the ringing of telephone which he didn't recognise as such. The History of Important Noises tells us that in order for a noise to be important, it must be recognised as such (not simply as a noise, but as an important one). And, in order for that to work, the noise must be established as important. (Ref: Pavlov/ Dogs).

There are any manner of ways in which noises become important. If a lion roars and then eats the person standing next to you, the noise – 'Roar of Lion' – is immediately established as a Very Important Noise in your A to Z of significant sounds. Likewise, if a bell rings just as you are walking past a strange-looking piece of equipment and it rings again and you, out of curiosity pick it up and a voice says, 'Congratulations! You've just been chosen as a lucky winner in our 50 zillion dollar contest! ...' If that happened to you, the next time the bell rang you'd certainly pick up the curious contraption again if only to find out what the word 'zillion' meant.

The point to all this (you mean there really is a point? – ed) is that if we do not recognise a sound as an important sound then it is just a sound, full stop. In America the telephone rings in a certain constant rhythm, 'Ring...ring...ring...ring...' In Britain, it's diorhymatic (Ring-ring...ring-ring...ring-ring...) and so on and so

forth. Thus, to Jim, the ringing sound was just a sound and not the Very Important Sound of the telephone.

47

The telephone rang. He answered it.

The receiver was cold and forbiddingly unfamiliar. There was an uncomfortably voyeuristic feel as he lifted it to his ear, for the phone belonged to someone he didn't know and by answering its call he was taking one step further into a strange and mysterious existence - something he felt slightly nervous about already. On the other hand, he wasn't one who could stand by while a phone rang. Not to answer a ringing phone was both impolite and even a bit risky since you never knew who or what was waiting on the other end of the line. It might be an offer or a command. (In fact he was waiting for one offer in particular which would sound something like this: 'Hello, I'd like to offer you a job where all you have to do is read good books and eat and sleep as much as you desire.') However, more often than not it was a command (such as 'Jim, there's just one more little thing the Dean would like you to do...')

Anyway, he answered it: 'Hello?'

'Hello, is this Regina?'

How could anyone mistake his voice for a woman's, he wondered. So, forcing a deeper, rather gravely baritone, he replied, 'No. I'm sorry, Regina isn't here...'

'Oh...!' The voice sounded hesitant, slightly unsure of itself. 'Do you know when she'll be back?'

'In about a year,' he said (the words, as he said them, echoed in his head like a prison sentence).

'Oh...right...'

There was a silence as if the caller on the other end hadn't known what to say next but still wasn't prepared to hang up yet.

'Do you want to leave a message?' Jim offered finally, more as a way to break the

silence than anything else.

'A year is a bit long...' said the voice, a woman from the sound of it – but, then again, how could he be certain for she (or he) had just mistaken him for a woman (although Regina's voice was expected and one could always have had a cold, couldn't one?)

'To be away or to retrieve a message?' Jim asked.

'For a message. Things change, you know. Things move on. Messages grow old, don't they? They become rather dated.'

'They do,' Jim agreed. 'Unless, of course, they're not...'

'Not what?'

'Not dated.'

'Everything is dated, isn't it?'

'Well, a message could be something like 'I wish you peace, prosperity and good health.'

'For how long?'

'For ever and ever...'

'How can I say that? Who knows if I'll feel like wishing her peace, prosperity and good health twenty years from now?'

'Then you wouldn't leave that message, I guess. What message do you want to leave?'

'I'm not sure what would make sense to say now that would still make sense in a year.'

'I suppose I'll be in contact with her before a year. I don't think she'll have to wait that long to get it.'

'Could you get it to her tomorrow?'

'Is it that urgent?'

'Probably not. How about next week, then?'

'Why don't you give me the message and I'll see what I can do,' he said.

'I'm not sure,' she replied. 'I'll ring you back.' And with that she (for by now he was fairly convinced it was a she) hung up.

Jim stared at the receiver which stuck in his hand until it started to look like a big black misshapen banana. Then he put it down into its cradle, hoping it would lay there contented like a pacified piece of plastic fruit that fell into a deep, eternal slumber.

48

That evening Jim looked through the materials Josephine had given him which included a lesson book with cute little cartoon sketches illustrating grammatical mantras:

Repeat after me: 'The cat sits on the hat', (See the funny drawing of a silly-looking cat sitting atop a raggedy, oversized top hat) 'The cat sat on the hat' (See the strange bipedal cat walk away from much abused, crunched-up hat), The cat will sit on the hat' (See the ridiculous cat with hand-like paws put a finger to its whiskered head from which bubble has emerged with sketch of fresh, yet-to-be-crunched top hat).

'Did I really go to six years of university and struggle through a long-winded dissertation which took me four and a half years to submit and finally get up the nerve to endure a gruelling viva which had me shitting in my trousers for a week so I could teach people to say things like "The cat sat on the hat" in all the different tenses?'

It was one side of him that said that. The other side replied, 'What's wrong with teaching people how to say 'The cat sat on the hat' in all different tenses? It's useful, isn't it?'

'If you've got a thing about cats and hats. But most cats don't go prancing around like that, thank the Lord! If it was my cat, I'd kick its dumb ass out the door!'

'Now it's you who's being ridiculous, not the cat. That's supposed to be a model sentence, isn't it? A grammatical template, so you can plug in other nouns and verbs...'

'Like "The dog sat on the gooseberry bush?"' Or "The Pig sat on the poker?"' Here is where his stomach chimed in. 'Or "The man sat on the shitter." Why did you feed me all that junk before?'

'Shut up!' his other two selves shouted, in unison. 'We're having a discussion!'

'You can't talk to me like that!' growled the stomach. 'I'll show you who's boss around here!' And with that it let out a great big smelly fart.

'We better cool it,' whispered one of the selves to the other one (though it wasn't clear which one was which anymore).

'Yeah,' said the other one. 'Maybe it wants a glass of milk.'

'Fuck the milk!' said the stomach who obviously overheard. 'Bring on the whisky and the dancing girls!'

It was at that point Jim realised that perhaps he was having an emotional crisis of sorts and perhaps he should just call it a night and go to bed and maybe in the morning he'd wake up to find it was all a bad dream and he'd look out his windows and see his beloved petunias once more.

49

Jim had a dream that night and it wasn't about petunias. He dreamed of Daisy. It wasn't an erotic dream as erotic dreams go. In fact, it was rather sweet. All that happened in the dream – all that he could recall, at any rate - was that Daisy was being kind to him. They were talking together in the Italian café – the one with the faded poster of Venice – and she was listening to him and being very understanding and sympathetic. So maybe it was an erotic dream at that. For Jim craved a bit of gentleness in his life maybe even more than sex, which might have been one of his major problems because he was fairly aware that what he was actually looking for was a younger, wiser and more accepting version of his mother. And Jim certainly didn't want to have sex with his mother, even a younger version – not consciously, anyway.

Not that Daisy fit the bill. She was, indeed, younger and might have been wiser but she wasn't more accepting. Not by a long shot. And Jim realised that. But what are dreams for if not to make the impossible possible, the unlikely likely and the absolutely ridiculous rather staid and reasonable? (Actually they can work the other way as well, making the possible impossible, the likely unlikely and the staid and reasonable absolutely ridiculous. But those are mischievous dreams that shouldn't be encouraged.)

Regardless of the parenthetical caveat above, dreams can be – and often are – psychological prophylaxis. They are a balm from Gideon that soothes the savage soul by transporting the user into an alternative universe where plays and players act out a scene once more, but on a different stage with different scripts and different roles.

Jim, as noted before, was an experienced dreamer. His dreams mainly emerged from his beloved novels at night after he put the book down and lowered the lights (for he didn't really like sleeping in the dark.) They allowed him to get on with the disappointments of life because as horrid as life could be there was always the dream at the end of the day to take the edge off. And so dreaming of Daisy, while innocent enough, allowed him to transform her into something she was not (as all men do with women and most women do with everyone).

50

Next morning when Jim arrived at the college he made his way to his office after first passing the front desk and noticing that the secretary there was gazing at him strangely through the protective glass enclosure, like a caged animal who desperately wanted to communicate something to the outside world. The possibility that she had a message for him did cross his mind, but being rather in a hurry, he didn't stop to ask. If it were that important he'd find out soon enough, he thought.

Bridget, on the other hand, was quite heartbroken to see him pass her by without so much as a wink (a smile might have been too much, but a wink wouldn't have hurt anyone). However, by now she was so far down the road to her candy coated cottage in Never-Never land that she was able to incorporate almost anything into her self-constructed universe (which was becoming more and more like an adult version of a little mental village built of Playdough and Lego blocks).

She was able to excuse his seemingly callous behaviour by reasoning as follows: 'My dear, sweet Rocky needs to keep his identity hidden ...' (she felt she could refer to him by his pet name as they had recently consummated their relationship in her dream last night on an imaginary beach right outside of Hartlepool) '...therefore he must pretend not to notice me, even when there isn't anyone else around because he has to be very, very careful as he'd be liable for all sorts of taxes if his government found out he was still alive. Also there would be tons of unanswered telephone calls to catch up with, to say nothing of autograph hunters and mischievous reporters from News of the World who would hound him like they do to poor old Beckham and Posh...'

Then, it suddenly struck her, 'Of course! How could I have been so stupid?' she said to herself. 'It's the mobsters! They're the ones who are after him! That's why he had to disappear and take on a new identity!' She remembered it all from a film she had seen. She couldn't remember its name but she was sure he was running away from the mob in it!

As she shuffled all these cerebral Tinkertoys around in her head she felt a little frisson of tingles ran delightfully down her spine as everything fell neatly into position, like a syncopated jigsaw. And sighing sweetly she forgave him. Now she could bide her time until the moment was right and they could take some sort of disappearing pill and secretly sneak off. Till then she'd wait patiently and, just in case, she'd remember to pack a spare pair of undies and socks in a plastic bag that she'd keep at the ready in the bottom drawer of her filing cabinet along with her cache of After Eights and Twiglets.

51

The reason Jim was in such a hurry was that he hadn't done much in way of preparation last night and he was hoping someone – namely Daisy – would help him. And the reason he hadn't done much preparation was that he had hit a major snag: in order to prepare a lesson plan he needed to know what level the students were at. True, he had spent some time with them the day before but it was mainly an introductory session and, frankly, he hadn't a clue how good their English was since few of them had spoken and he hadn't any writing of theirs to look through. Josephine had said they were a class of Upper Elementaries, but what did that mean? Did they know how to conjugate irregular verbs like 'lay' and 'lie'? (Embarrassingly, he still had trouble with that and sometimes had to repeat programmed phrases to himself like – 'He lay himself down on the bed and said, "You made your bed now lie in it." After having lain in bed the idea of lying was

finally laid to rest.’ But was that supposed to be ‘lieing’ as in ‘verbal untruth’ or ‘lying’ as in ‘recline’ he always wondered.)

Could they use idioms? (Jack and Jill climbed up the hill and Jack fed Jill a riddle. Jill fell down and lost her crown and Jack cracked up in stitches.) Could they phrase a conditional sentence? (They would if they could, wouldn’t they?) Nobody had told him what Upper Elementaries were supposed to be capable of doing.

Of course the other reason he hadn’t done much preparation was because of his terrible stomach ache and the fact that he went to bed to try to quell the spasms. But that was a combined act of God and Marmite, he suspected, and he couldn’t be blamed for it.

Unfortunately, the first person that he saw when he opened the door to the workshop that led to his cramped little office wasn’t someone who could help him. (That’s what he thought at the moment, anyway). It was the African woman who he had met the other day and, as it turned out, also happened to be a student of his in the class he was supposed to be preparing for.

She didn’t seem to notice when he first came in but he could see that she had been crying. When she looked up and saw him she quickly wiped her eyes and gave him a very wide and beautiful smile that, even though it was forced, had a glow to it that seemed to him like a ray of sun bursting through a rainstorm.

Jim, like most men of his age, had trouble with tears especially if they came from women. He had trouble with tears from men, too, but that was a different story. Tears from men could easily be ignored because men who cried were usually so humiliated they’d rather pretend they hadn’t cried at all – which, in most cases, was fine by him. Women, on the other hand, often saw crying as a statement that needed some immediate response. But since nine times out of ten he didn’t know what they were crying about, the response was much the same as opening doors that might contain man-eating tigers waiting to be fed. That left one out of ten times when it was clear what they were crying about and then it was usually him putting his foot in his mouth anyway (a good idiom which Jim should have made a mental note of because the visualisation of someone with their foot in their mouth had a nice approximation to what people felt like when they did it.)

However he sensed that Madeline’s tears were different. They were unashamed, on the other hand they were private – that is to say, they weren’t meant for pub-

lic consumption. Jim realised this because he was neither completely stupid nor was he totally without compassion (a quality we sometimes refer to as 'empathy', though relating through identification and relating through understanding are often two different ways of relating to someone). It was just, like most people, he was overworked and underpaid – not in a financial sense of underpayment but in the more important metaphysical sense (where people rarely thank you for anything and really mean it). And this underpayment of a metaphysical sort meant the Jims of the world often walked around with an emotional deficit (to put it in the language of accounting which has also become the language of education) and thus they have little to give when confronted with real human emotion because they have spent so long trying to sublimate their own lest they finally implode and turn into a squiggly ball of jelly.

52

'Did you see the homework I give you?' she asked brightly. It was almost as if the tears of moments before had been a mirage.

'Homework?' He couldn't remember assigning any homework. He would have liked to have assigned them homework if only to prove that he had been doing something visibly educational.

She looked at him disappointedly. 'From the book with my name. All the little little girls in the straight line...'

'Ah, yes,' he said, recalling at last, 'Madeline...'

'So you remember?'

'Of course.' And reaching into his briefcase he searched for the paper she had given him the other day.

'There is something I want to ask,' she said as she watched him burrow into the depths of his leather satchel. 'What is the straight line?'

'It's what the English call a 'queue'. What people look like when they are waiting for a bus...'

'What they look like? They look unhappy I think...'

'Not the people in particular,' he explained. 'Their arrangement...'

She furrowed her brow. 'Their arrangement?'

This wasn't going to be easy, he thought. And then aborting his search for a moment, he took a pencil and some paper from a box on the workshop table and drew some marks. 'This is a straight line,' he said pointing to the first impression. 'And this is a wavy one,' he said, pointing to the second.

She put her finger on the straight one. 'My finger is in it or on it?' she asked him.

'On it,' he replied.

'So if my finger is all the little girls she is 'on' the line not 'in' the line. Yes?'

He thought for a second. Why was she trying to confuse him so early in the morning even before he had a chance to drink his first cup of greasy coffee? 'To stand in a line does not mean the same thing as to stand on a line,' he told her. 'If I draw a mark on the floor and you go stand on the mark I have made then you are standing "on the line". If I take some people and arrange them as if they were standing on the mark, but there really isn't any mark drawn on the floor, then they are standing "in line" not "on the line".'

She thought a moment. Then she said, 'What if I go where the people they stand "in line" and I take the crayon and draw the mark again where they stand. Now they stand "on line" not "in line". Yes?'

All the fluff in his brain seemed to be concentrating around his otic canals making him feel something like a clothes dryer with a build-up of lint. 'Would you repeat that?' he said, putting his finger in one ear and giving it a little twist.

'What if I go to where the people they stand...'

'OK,' he said, putting his hand up for her to stop. 'Then they are both "on the line" and "in line".'

He was about to pursue this apparent contradiction when, suddenly, it seemed to him that one of the adjoining offices had just erupted in flames – not his office but the one next to it. Smoke was billowing through the crack between the door and its frame filling the workshop with an acrid smell.

Temporarily extricating himself for the Gordian knot he was becoming tied up in, he went over to the smoking door and knocked. 'Hello,' he called. 'Is anyone in there? Are you OK?'

Then, twisting the handle, he opened the door and peered within. Like the thick, pea-soup London fog he had read about, the greyish haze obscured everything within an inch of his nose. But unlike the deadly smog of yore it quickly dissipated as it rose to the ceiling and clung there like a sombre cloud just before the rain.

As it cleared, Jim was able to make out the shape of a human. The human was sitting at its desk and had swung around in its swivel chair to see who had made this unwanted intrusion. What Jim saw was a wide pair of eyes peering out from a jet black face whose mouth held a long-stem pipe. He saw a hand strike a match that was put to the pipe which once again started puffing out smoke like a factory chimney in Coketown from Dickens's *Hard Times*.

53

Back in the workshop Jim noticed that Madeline had left. He found that somewhat annoying since he thought their discussion about lines stood on or in was still unresolved and he didn't like loose ends dangling around in his life. Resolutions, both literary and personal, were important to him. They were akin to wiping yourself after you went to the loo.

She was a strange young woman, he thought. Sometimes so happy and sometimes so sad. She had a Sphinx-like mystery about her, but she also seemed to be an ordinary mixed-up student who was just a bit more persistent about her demands.

He was thinking about this as he opened the door to his office. The first thing he saw as he entered was Daisy. She was standing by his desk, reading something and turned around in surprise when she heard him come in.

'Oh, hi,' she said, smiling a bit guiltily. 'I hope you don't mind but I saw this on your desk...' She held up the paper that Jim recognised as the one Madeline had given him. 'You know,' she said, 'I was wrong the other day...'

He raised his eyebrows in expectation. Was this really going to be the long awaited apology? Had she finally come to realise how awful she had been treat-

ing him?

'I thought you were just being stupid. And, of course, you were. I mean, you didn't have an idea in hell what you were doing, did you?'

'What?'

'I thought not. But still people sometimes in the depths of their callow torpidity can do things that, unbeknownst to them, work out in ways that aren't at all obvious...'

'Say what?'

She held the paper aloft. 'This is really marvellous, you know. You gave her the stupidest book in the world. The most inappropriate piece of literary tripe – sexist, racist, classist and, worst of all, mundane. And what does she do? She uses it to spin off a really brilliant critique of colonial hegemony!'

Was this an apology or was she beating him over the head with a wet fish again? He couldn't quite figure it out. Had he done something good or had he done something bad? Or had he just been more thick than usual?

'I haven't read it yet,' he admitted.

'Well maybe you could give it some thought when you do...'

'Yes...'. He cleared his throat. 'Daisy...'

She glared at him with a look that sent a bucket of ice-cubes down the back of his trousers.

'You said I could call you Daisy, didn't you?'

'Did I?'

'Yesterday. At the café...'

She scrunched up her nose. 'Well?'

'Uh...I was wondering whether you could give me a hand...'

She looked even more horrified. 'With what?'

'The lesson plan...'

'I told you what I thought of Lesson Plans...'

'No, I mean planning my lesson. I just need to know something about upper intermediates...'

'Maybe later,' she said, gather up some of her stuff. 'I have to meet with Victor now.'

'Victor?'

She looked up. 'In the office next door to us. Have you met him yet?'

'Just a few minutes ago...'

'Victor's brilliant. He's a gem.'

'We didn't say much. But he seemed to know who I was...'

'Oh, yes,' she said, smiling sweetly. 'I told him all about you!'

54

Jim sat down at his desk and looked through the paper Madeline had written which Daisy had so admired:

'This is the interesting story about the little French girls from Paris who live in the Straight Line. I not so sure what the Straight Line mean to say but everything the little girls do is same thing, same clothes, same hair, same bread which they break (why not they cut it?). But one girl who has same name as me want be different. She not like the Straight Line. (Note to new teacher: I find the word "line" in dictionary and it say to me – "to completely cover something with something else. Example – the wall was lined with books". And for "straight" it say to me "not crooked". And for "crooked" it say to me "to be not honest. So "straight" I think mean not not honest which is same as yes honest. Am I true? So "straight line" I think mean "yes honest completely cover walls", which not make sense. So I

think is what old teacher call the idiom. And old teacher say "look at the word in context" which mean "sometime the word mean different thing when you put together with the more different words in sentence". So I think "straight line" mean "people do same things same way". Am I true?)

'So Madeline not wish to live in the Straight Line like rest of the little girls. But the Straight Line not easy to escape. (I know because the Straight Line in Rwanda put there by the French from same place as the little girls.) So Madeline she escape from the Straight Line by having the pain in the tummy. (I know how she feel because I escape from the bad work at the convent sometimes me.) Then she go to l'hospital and there where book get crooked. At l'hospital she get treated so good with many, many presents. And she smile very much. But I know l'hospital is crowded and fill with people very, very sick and they cry many tears and there much blood and hurt. And in l'hospital many people die and the smell very bad because too many person sick and not many person to clean up.

'But little girls now all want pain in tummy and go to l'hospital. That not make sense. I think this what old teacher call – I forget what old teacher call it but it when you say something not really true but true in different way. Little girls from Paris want presents but if you have bad pain in the tummy you can't enjoy presents. What the little girls really want, I think, is they not be in the Straight Line any more. (And thank you very much to the good English people for let me to stay here. Thank you to be so kind and generous.)'

55

Reading Madeline's paper over again he wondered how he could mark it. He was intrigued by its earthiness and its open sincerity – an essence Daisy had picked up on but had interpreted in a different way. She was struggling to communicate, to make herself understood, but in so doing, in her determined clumsiness, she had communicated something more. If she had focused on the parts of speech, the proper tenses and syntax, the heart of the paper would have been lost because what would have been missing was the 'flow' (as Jim called it), that magic of connection where grammar, punctuation and vocabulary go beyond their literal meanings and enter a different realm.

What he had here, he felt, what he had read was a fragment, a piece of creation which was perfect in every sense. It was perfect in the way any artefact is perfect – it exists, therefore it is and must be seen for what it is, not for what it isn't.

Now this, as Josephine would have said, was a very bad attitude for a language teacher to take. Perhaps it would be more fitting for a social anthropologist (but Josephine wouldn't even have been so sure of that). However, as Jim was coming to discover, he wasn't a language teacher. In fact, the more he considered it, he wasn't even so sure he was a teacher at all.

He tried taking a pencil and straightening out Madeline's convoluted sentences, correcting the verbs and their modifiers, reassigning the predicates and polishing the pronouns. But when he read it over again he didn't like it at all so he erased the corrections. Then he read it over once more and decided he liked the original better.

What was he going to do, he wondered? And then he asked himself, 'What have I been doing for the last ten years?'

What had he been doing, indeed? Getting through each day as it came, he supposed. He actually hated most critical theory especially the kind that tore into literature like sharks tear into tuna. His own idea, though he rarely expounded on it, is that most books had their worth. It's just that some took him places he didn't want to go. Other did. Not that they did it purposefully, it's just that some of them provided an opening, a magic rabbit hole, that took him into the verdant lands of the imagination where he could once more roam free like a gazelle romping through the wilds. But that was a very personal connection with a book. The author had almost nothing to do with it except to provide the architecture. (And he gave the individual author about as much credit for this enjoyment of the space provided as he did the person who designed his apartment.)

So what then did Jim teach? A little of this and a little of that – just enough to get his students through the syllabus. He gave them the information they needed to know to pass their exams – but it had nothing to do with books. Not what he loved about them, anyhow.

56

Putting Madeline's paper aside, he tried concentrating on his lesson plan for the ESOL group. After five minutes of mind-numbing circularities he found that he was back where he had started and there was nothing to be done about it. So he gave up.

'It's time,' said a voice inside him, 'for a mea culpa'.

'No,' a different voice argued, 'not yet. Please, I'll try again. This time I'll do it,'. But that voice was smaller and weaker and easily intimidated like a whiny little kid who wears shorts and has a drippy nose whereas the first voice was like the class bully who wears long trousers and has a nose full of hardened snot that he can pick out with his little finger and fling at the drippy one.

'You've tried and you've failed! Admit it!' shouted the first voice.

'OK. I admit it,' said the second one, who, as indicated before, was easily intimidated

'That means you must throw yourself to the lions and be at the mercy of the Court of Last Resort!' commanded the bully voice.

'Really?' said the drippy one.

'Yes!'

'But who must I issue my mea culpa to? Josephine? Oh, horror of horrors!' the little puny voice gulped.

Just then the phone on his desk rang, startling the hell out of him – and the voices ran for cover, even the bully one (who, it turned out, wasn't so tough after all).

He picked up the receiver. 'Hello?'

Nobody replied. All he could hear on the other end was what sounded to him like heavy breathing of the kind you might expect on a premium rate connection.

'Hello?' he said again.

'Is that you?' a breathy voice answered, finally.

'Yes...if it's me you wanted.'

'Yes, it's you I wanted...'

'Oh.' He thought for a second. 'What did you want me for?'

Silence again. Then a voice, even softer said, 'I understand...'

'You do?'

'Yes, you needn't say anything more.'

'OK.' Telephone conversations were very curious here in England, he thought. He wondered whether it had anything to do with the weather, or, if not that, maybe the water. And then thinking that perhaps this was an appropriate time to hang up, but not really sure, he said, 'Uh...is that all?'

'Miranda needs to speak with you,' the voice on the other end said in a more officious tone. 'Could you come down to her office?'

57

The drip from the pipes in Miranda's office had gone from bad to worse. It was now beyond chewing gum, industrial size plasters, or even super-strength condoms. All these devices had been abandoned in exchange for a rusty bucket which now sat pompously in the middle of her desk with a look that exclaimed, 'Rusty or not, now I rule the roost, my friend. Maybe I once stood in the corner serving only as a container for smelly mops but, tell me this, where would you be without me? Bloody wet, I'd say! So what good your chewing gums, industrial size plasters or super-strength condoms, now, eh? Give me a rusty bucket any day!'

Miranda, however, was far too busy to hear its haughty claims for recognition (who could blame it, though? All those years holding smelly mops and now, finally, a chance to strut its stuff! Can you really fault it for being a little puffed-up?) In fact, she had become so inured to its existence she no longer heard the constant 'splot, splot, splot' as the brownish goo from up above hurtled down, relentlessly into that brave container.

However Jim did. Hear, that is. In fact he was rather awe struck as he opened the door to find such energetic activity – for everything seemed to be in motion. Besides the incessant splatting of the water into the bucket there were papers flying everywhere with Miranda frantically reaching into the air trying to catch them before they escaped out the window.

'Close the door!' Miranda ordered, as he stood there trying to take it all in like the

sole invited guest to a strange happening directed by a mad performance artist.

He closed the door behind him and, indeed, things seemed to settle down a bit as the wind tunnel between the door and the window was aborted. The papers fluttered safely to the floor and Miranda, looking down at the mess, sighed a sigh she sighed before.

'You wanted to see me?' he said.

She looked down at the papers and then up at him and thought to herself that surely there must be a better life somewhere – perhaps on a small island in the outer Hebrides where people just sleep with their sheep and eat porridge and groats.

Jim cleared his throat to accentuate the fact that he was still there and like the bucket he wasn't going away until he was told to.

'Did I want to see you?' she said, trying, for all the world to remember what she would possibly want to see him about.

'I got a call...,' he said.

'Yes?'

'That you wanted to see me...'

'Was it from a person - the call? Or did you hear a voice. Like one of your compatriots who came to my door the other day and claimed he was there because God had requested he provide me with some literature?'

'It was from a person – I think...'

'But you're not sure?'

'Perhaps your secretary?'

'Perhaps my secretary,' she repeated. And then she sighed sigh number three hundred and twenty-four. 'Well, Mr Thompson...'

'Thomas,' he corrected.

'Well, as you can see things are rather chaotic...' She motioned to the confused jumble of stuff surrounding her and, for the first time, Jim noticed that there were stacks of boxes, some open and some shut, which were piled up behind her.

'Are you moving?' he asked.

'Moving?' She chuckled (rather like the chuckle one might emit after fighting for the Republic and before being guillotined by Robespierre). 'Adjusting myself to the winds of change, Mr Thompson. One never knows where it might blow you, does one?'

Was this a coded reference to him opening the door too long, he wondered? But then he realised that he was being slightly paranoid and she was more likely referring to the boxes she was packing her things into. He would have liked to ask her about the lesson plan and maybe even complain about how he was being treated but he realised that this was probably not the appropriate moment. So, instead, he said, 'Well, I guess it was a mistake. So I'll be going then...'

However, as he turned to leave it suddenly struck her that she had indeed mentioned something to Bridget about asking him to come down for some reason or other.

'Oh, just a minute, Mr. Thornton...' she said.

'Thomas,' he reminded her turning back around. 'My name is Jim Thomas.'

'Right. I think there was something I wanted to say to you...'

58

He was to see a man named Damian, she said. It was about covering something or other and really she was so busy right now, up to her shoulders in troubled water, '...so, please, if you could excuse me, Mr Throckmorton...'

Following her sketchy directions, he managed to locate the office of Dr Damian Dolittle, PhD. (at least that's what a little brass plaque said that was affixed to the door) along the same corridor, midway between Miranda and Josephine.

He gave a knock and heard a voice from within. 'If it's who I think it is, I don't want to see you!'

The statement, firm as it was, presented a slight conundrum for Jim. Maybe it was he who Damian Dolittle thought it was. If so, he didn't want to see him. But maybe it wasn't.

He was thinking a moment about how to phrase a reply when the door opened and a very round and flaccid face with enormously weary eyes peered out at him. 'I thought you'd be gone by now,' it said.

'Was it me you didn't want to see?' asked Jim.

'How could it be you if I don't know who you are?' replied Damian (at least Jim supposed it was Damian since the sign on the door said it was his office and when someone fixes signs on doors or cages it's usually done because the person or animal – in the case of zoos – within bears some relation to the name or species on the sign unless, of course, the person or animal was moved and the mover forgot to move the sign in which case it wouldn't).

'Well, I guess Miranda could have phoned to say I was coming to see you and even though you didn't know me, you knew someone was coming and whoever it was you knew you didn't want to see them. However, judging from her present state of confusion I suspect she didn't phone and you probably know nothing about why she sent me to see you. Therefore, it's probably a waste of time for both of us.'

Damian blinked his sleepy eyes and opened the door wider. 'Come in,' he said in a tone of voice which made clear he really didn't mean it.

Jim entered the office the shelves of which were filled with books of every persuasion and the walls of which were covered with posters proving eclectic interests from football to opera.

'My name's Jim Thomas,' he said, holding out his hand. 'I'm doing a teaching exchange with Regina...' His voice trailed off as he realised that Damian was staring at his proffered hand with a horrified expression.

'I know who you are,' said Damian. 'Sit down and put your hand back in your pocket.'

Jim put his hand in his pocket and sat down. 'If you know who I am, why did you say you didn't?' he asked, taking his hand out of his pocket again as he found it was very uncomfortable sitting like that.

'When did I say that?' asked Damian giving Jim a very searching stare.

'Just now. You said "How could it be you if I don't know who you are?"'

'That's just an expression,' said Damian. 'Of course I know who you are. What I don't know is why you were so extraordinarily stupid as to have accepted an exchange with Regina. Unless New York has just been hit with a plague of Anopheles mosquitoes and everyone's come down with malaria. And even with that I'd still think you'd need your head sliced open – after you were dead of course – to see what strange kind of worm had infected your cranium.'

59

Damian Dolittle was a miserable man. Not miserable in the malicious sense of the word, but more like the essence conveyed by a floppy-eared quadruped whose morose manners were so marvellously captured in the seminal writings of A. A. Milne.

He wasn't always that way, of course (no one ever is). People aren't born to be donkeys any more than donkeys are born to be people. However, his long-suffering mother had noticed traits in the young lad that began when his contorted blue face emerged screeching from the womb and were still visible later when his countenance became flabbier and his colouring changed from blue to porcine pink.

But despite his congenital handicaps, Damian wasn't all that hopeless. In fact, he was quite clever in a didactic sort of way (something picked up on rather early by a prescient headmaster who wrote to Damian's mother saying 'Your lad could be bound for great things if he could ever learn to tie his shoes...')

Unfortunately for Damian, his mother interpreted the message from the headmaster in the wrong way and made what was to become the Fatal Blunder of Damian's painful existence. What she did forever fixed the traits that made him who he was, a frightened, stuttering and hopelessly sardonic shell of a man. That is to say she sent young Damian to Public School as a full-time boarder.

Now it's bad enough to send a fit, reasonably intelligent and hardheaded child to an esteemed British Public Institution For the Soon To Be Criminally Insane. But to incarcerate a clumsy, fairly sensitive boy whose face sort of resembles a barnyard animal in the confines of an adolescent torture chamber is akin to asking God for your child to be turned into either a raging lunatic capable of pressing the red button which launches the doomsday machine or a useless piece of fluff found inside your navel.

Of course, in either case the next stop would be Cambridge – which indeed it was for the deeply and truly disturbed Damian (who by now was emotionally somewhere between the character in *IF*, his favourite film, who blew up his school after shooting everyone inside it and a wet piece of rubber torn from someone else's previously used condom). At Cambridge things went from bad to worse. For there he was convinced he had received what amounted to an 'Education' and, with it, the right to inflict it on others – no matter how young or innocent.

With all this lumbering mental baggage and a third class degree (which would have been a lower second if he hadn't lost control of certain vital parts of his anatomy during his final examination thus losing valuable time and points when he was forced to clean up the consequence), Damian found he was perfectly suited for one thing and one thing only – a lectureship at a further education college in some backwater, cash-starved, poorly resourced urban constituency.

60

Jim was beginning to cotton onto the idea that information did not flow easy and unencumbered at Kilburn College. In fact, he was starting to wonder if there was any information that flowed at all, from mouth to source, without encountering several circuitous detours, a couple of major pileups and a few assorted cul-de-sacs along the path. In situations like that, he thought, what began as smoked salmon might end up as grilled tuna fish (if Kilburn College was a restaurant, that is, which it wasn't and thank God for that, he thought, judging by the coffee.)

Miranda had forgotten what she had wanted Jim to see Damian about. Damian, knew, but he didn't want to be burdened with more work that Miranda had slyly (in his way of thinking) bounced over to him. So Damian, at first, had thought to bounce it right back. Except he knew that she knew that he knew that the game was almost up and that something Big and Important was about to happen. Therefore, nobody was taking messages very seriously – except ones that had to

do with Big and Important Stuff.

Jim, however, knew nothing about what was happening and because he was such an innocent lamb lost in the confines of an abattoir he just assumed that everyone there was a little bit nuts. Which, of course, they were. But realising that people are nuts isn't enough to understand why things are happening the way they are. It's a bit too facile and it really doesn't get you anywhere.

In order to really understand what was happening, Jim needed to know a bit of History. Now the problem with that was several: firstly, there wasn't anyone who was going to bother to tell him; and secondly, even if they did, History is one of those curious animals which, like an amoeba, seems to change shape simply by looking at it. The story of History, in fact, is just a series of discoveries where a succession of Very Intelligent People suddenly discover that something didn't happen the way they thought it did and therefore they create a different version which is then modified by the next person in line until all possible versions exist – which is never – so it just goes on and on until the end of time (which perhaps is a circle and, in that case, we go back to the beginning again).

The story of History, therefore, depends on who is telling it. But if History is an amoeba (and always remember that too many amoebas spoil the broth) then it's also a many-headed hydra. And the many heads of this hydra are all very growly and they like to snap and bite a lot. In fact, they go around biting each other on the nose and ears, thus causing itself (the hydra) much grief and distress. So History is not to be messed with (except if we don't know what it is, how can we mess with it? – ed)

61

What Damian had wanted to tell Jim – or, rather, what Miranda wanted Damian to tell Jim (except she forgot) – was that his body was needed for cover. Not his mind, necessarily, but his physical person. It would be all right if his mind came with his body as long as it didn't get in the way. But that was really up to him. What was important, really important, was that the register be marked correctly indicating which students were in attendance (preferably in the flesh and not, as Oscar suggested, in spirit).

The reason that Damian was a bit reticent about giving Jim what should have been a matter-of-fact assignment was that Damian felt it wasn't his responsibility. His responsibility was to deal with the Access Classes and this, as Damian saw

it, was something else.

'It's not really an Access Class is it?' Damian had said when Miranda told him that Priscilla who had run the programme had gone off to Fiji and wasn't expected back for three and a half months (or was it years? Miranda couldn't remember).

'Well, we could stretch it a bit, couldn't we?' Miranda had suggested.

'What are they accessing then?' Damian had asked her, narrowing his eyes. 'I'm the Access Person. If they're not accessing something then it's not me.'

'You're the only one who could do it,' Miranda had cajoled.

'How about Josephine? Why can't she do it?'

In fact, Miranda had gone to Josephine first and Josephine had risen out of her Imperial Chair with her eyebrows heightened regally in the gesture of a 19th century monarch which said, 'How dare you even suggest such a thing!'

'If you do it I'll let you have Josephine's classroom,' she had told Damian in a desperate, last minute attempt to induce him without beating him over the head with the files she was carrying (which would have caused an incident and Miranda had enough on her plate as it was).

Damian had smiled, wickedly – internally, of course – at the thought of Josephine having to cram her twenty-five ESOL students into a small, smelly room, while his twelve Access students basked in aerated luxury. 'As long as there's no paperwork,' he had said, qualifying his reluctant acquiescence.

'Paperwork? Of course there's paperwork! If there wasn't any paperwork, I'd do the bloody thing myself!' Then looking him straight in the eye as if honing in on the little squiggly spot that made him so easy to dominate when she needed to, she said, 'Do you want the room or not, Damian?'

'How could you have done that, Miranda?' Daisy had said when Miranda had told her about her very rash action. 'I mean, you really are asking for it aren't you? What are you going to tell Josephine?'

'I'll deal with that when the time comes,' Miranda had responded, knowing full well what lay in store. But the way she looked at it, there were many, many things

that lay in store, most of which the cleaning ladies – two charming women, one from Portugal and the other from Spain, who only spoke their own languages but chatted together incessantly – wouldn't have touched, even though they had handled some pretty awful stuff, especially in the college lavatories.

62

The class Damien wanted Jim to cover was a course for a community programme that was being serviced by the college. Damien might have mumbled an acronym that identified it which Jim misheard or misunderstood. At any rate it didn't make much sense to him.

'What am I supposed to be teaching?' he had asked, nervously wondering whether this would entail another quest for a non-existent syllabus.

Damien had looked down at a sheet on his desk. 'Writing...' he had said.

'What kind of writing?' Jim had asked, somewhat suspiciously.

'The kind you do with a pencil or pen, I assume,' Damien had told him.

Which is how Jim had ended up in Room A302 without any inkling of what he was supposed to do. Not that he was at all surprised as by now he was already used to this method of induction, it just didn't do much for his digestion of the only thing he had to eat that day which was a sugar donut that had somehow ended up on his desk with a note saying: 'Eat Me. Love, You Know Who.' (Being extremely hungry, he had eaten it and had only later seen the note with the cryptic message written, he assumed, by Daisy.)

But now in Room A302 waiting for his mysterious pupils to arrive for the mysterious class he was supposed to teach but knew nothing of its content, he wondered about the note that came with the sugar donut and thought that it was either a peace offering, which delighted him, or an invitation which filled him with dread.

He was thinking about this, running the words over in his head and trying to remember where the punctuation went (was it 'Eat Me (comma) Love...' or 'Eat Me (full stop) Love,...' when someone wandered in through the classroom door.

It was an elderly woman who appeared very confused and uncertain – rather like

Jim, himself. 'Hello,' she said with a pixyish smile that wouldn't have looked misplaced on the mouth of a fifteen year old. 'Is this the writing class?'

'I think so,' said Jim.

'Are you the teacher?' she asked, her suspicions aroused by his lack of certainty. For, even though she was reaching the tender age of eighty, she still heeded the words of her dear departed mother who had told her always to be careful of strange men standing in doorways who pretend to be something they are not (though her mother was never specific about which pretence she should be careful of and therefore everything was suspect, even dog catchers and milkmen).

'I think so,' said Jim.

'You aren't sure?' asked Louise. That was her name, as Jim later found out. Louise. She would have left there and then except she really was a feisty sort who might have heeded the words of her dear departed mother but also ignored them ever since she was a wisp of a girl.

'I'm sure about very little,' Jim said. 'But I'm here and you're here and I'm a teacher, supposedly, so I guess I'm your teacher.'

That made a bit of sense to Louise. Not much but a bit. And as she herself was sure of very little even though she had reached the age of wisdom (according to the ancients, anyway) and still she was unsure of things, she rather liked the idea that her supposed teacher was unsure of things as well. It made her feel safe, somehow.

63

Louise sat at the front of the class because she was a little bit deaf she told Jim and she wanted to be able to hear everything except that even when she was up close she couldn't make sense of what he was saying either.

'Are you English?' she asked.

'No,' he said. 'I'm American.'

'You speak like someone in a very bad film I saw on the telly. Maybe that's why I can't understand you. Perhaps if you tried enunciating your words...'

'I'll try,' he said. Then, nervously looking around the room at all the empty chairs he said, 'Is it just you and me?'

She cupped her hand around her ear, straining to make sense of what he said. 'What's that again?'

'I asked if it were only the two of us. Aren't there any other people in the class?'

'In the class?' She thought a moment. Then she said, 'Yes.'

'Yes there are?'

'Are what?' She looked at him strangely.

'Are other students. In the class.'

'Yes.'

He looked at her. She looked at him. They looked at each other. And Jim felt more and more uncomfortable.

Finally, after what seemed like eons (whatever eons are), the door opened and a very big, very black woman hobbled in. 'Hello Louise,' she called out, completely ignoring Jim who tried smiling at her as a sign of welcome which fell as limply as Damien's non-existent hand-shake. 'You all right, girl?'

'What's that?' said Louise, cupping her ear.

'I asked if you be all right. But I guess you are 'cause you look fit as a fiddle, just can't hear, that's all.' Then, finally, she looked over at Jim and said, accusingly, 'You be the new teacher?'

Jim, correctly sussing out that this woman wouldn't take kindly to the same kind of mealy-mouthed uncertainty that he laid on Louise, said, 'Yes. Are you a new student?'

'No I am not!' She threw him a warning in the shape of a look that had her eyebrows furrowed and the sides of her mouth turned down like thumbs of judgement. 'I be a very old student! Seventy-nine next October!'

Her name was Janet. And Janet wasn't to be messed with by anyone – especially by some punk teacher from New York (where she had once visited some years ago and had found the manners of the youngsters to be far, far worse than in Jamaica where she had come from fifty years before.)

'Are there only two of you in the class?' asked Jim hoping that he could get a straight answer out of this one.

'No, there be five of us. Sometimes there be ten of us but that depends...'

'Depends on what?' asked Jim.

'Depends on how good a teacher you be. If you be a good teacher we tell the others come on back. If not, maybe you only have Louise, 'cause she can't hear nothin' anyhow and maybe Maureen 'cause she ain't got no place to go ever since she be flooded out of her home...'

64

As if responding to the mention of her name, Maureen came trundling through the door in her wheelchair with Mina and Dave in tow. Maureen had a head-full of frisky curls that bouncily accentuated her bright and playful eyes. Her sparkling demeanour was in stark contrast to the wheelchair that gave out the impression she was somehow disabled, which wasn't the case at all. The wheelchair was just a convenient form of locomotion enabling her to compensate for a leg that seemed to have a mind of its own and wouldn't join forces with the rest of her more cooperative parts.

Mina, who came in next, was a middle-aged Asian woman, slight of bearing to the point of near invisibility (a physical trait that seemed to be replicated in her personality). She was followed by Dave, a wispy, white haired man who seemed a bit unsure of where he was.

The three late-comers took their seats (except for Maureen who was already in hers), greeted the two who were already there and then looked up at Jim in expectation.

'Well,' said Jim, 'I suppose we're all here...'

Louise and Maureen smiled and nodded. Janet frowned. Mina looked non-committal. And Dave still seemed unsure of where he was.

Jim cleared his throat. 'Ahemm...'

Louise and Maureen smiled and nodded again. Janet frowned more severely. Mina furrowed her brow ever so slightly. And Dave suddenly realised he was in class – but he couldn't remember what year it was.

'Perhaps one of you could tell me what you've been doing up till now,' Jim said. It was like rolling a ball into centre court and waiting for someone to kick it.

'We was writing,' said Janet. 'What you think we was doin'?'

'I see,' said Jim. 'Ah...perhaps you could tell me what sort of things you were writing.'

'I wasn't really writing much,' said Louise.

'Neither was I,' said Maureen.

'I didn't either,' said Mina.

'Neither did he,' said Louise, pointing to Dave.

'But he read us some lovely things he had written before,' Maureen chimed in. 'Didn't you Dave?'

'Did I?' said Dave.

'Certainly you did,' Maureen replied. 'That lovely story about when you were in Africa. Remember?'

'Oh, yes,' said Dave and then thinking a minute he followed that by saying, 'When was I in Africa?'

'She's been writing though,' said Mina gesturing in Janet's direction. 'She's a real writer. Not like the rest of us.'

Janet nodded as if to accept the recognition due to her.

'What kind of things do you write, Janet?' Jim asked.

'None of your business!' said Janet.

'Of course it's his business!' said Louise. 'He's the teacher!'

'He don't seem like no teacher!' said Janet, looking at Jim accusingly.

'My God!' Jim thought to himself. 'Found out so soon and it's only ten minutes into the class! That means there's one hour and fifty minutes left! What the hell am I going to do?'

'Why don't you give him a chance, Janet?' said Maureen. Then, looking at Jim she said, 'She doesn't mean it. She's just sensitive because the last teacher promised to send her poetry out to some publishers and then he disappeared.'

'Takin' my poetry with him! He probably stole it sos he could publish it hissself under his own name!' Janet said.

65

The class, as it turned out, had been meeting for quite a while and had been through a number of teachers all of whom had stayed with it for a brief spell before floating off to other more laudable lands in that strange world where putting liquid ink on paper has somehow become a cult where the right combination of squiggles could reap handsome rewards.

'What were you doing over the last two years?' Jim asked again.

'Learning to write,' came the reply.

'But you already know how to write, don't you?' Jim said.

'Not that kind of writing,' they said.

'What kind of writing, then?' asked Jim.

'Story writing,' they said.

'But you know how to do that, too,' Jim argued. 'You've written letters haven't

you?’

‘Yes...’

‘Well, letters tell a story, don’t they?’

‘Not that kind of a story,’ they objected.

‘What kind of story, then?’

‘Book stories. Stories published in magazines. Yes, books and magazines. We want to learn how to write like that,’ said Mina, suddenly coming alive and attempting to speak for the class.

In fact, Jim wasn’t being meaninglessly provocative. That is to say, there was a point to his incitement. And it was an argument he had before – back at his college in the States when the dean was looking for volunteers to launch a creative writing course.

‘Why?’ Jim had asked back then just as he had asked now.

‘Because everyone runs creative writing courses,’ the dean had replied. ‘It’s just remarkable that we haven’t set one up till now. Don’t tell me you’re objecting, Jim.’

‘Of course I’m objecting,’ Jim had replied – surprising the dean with his insistence as it was very rare that Jim objected to anything.

‘How could you object?’

‘Because you can’t teach creative writing.’

‘You mean you, Jim Thomas, can’t teach creative writing, don’t you?’

‘No, I mean creative writing can’t be taught.’

‘Why not?’ the dean had asked, giving Jim a stern look that strongly suggested he think carefully and watch his step. ‘What are schools for if not to teach? Are you trying to say our students are incapable of learning or our teachers are incapable of teaching?’

But this time Jim was not to be deterred. 'I'm not saying creative writing can't be learnt. I'm just saying it can't be taught – not in a classroom at least.'

'You can teach technique, can't you?' the dean had asked.

'I do that in my literature class. But why should I suggest to students that they learn to write like Faulkner? Faulkner wrote like Faulkner because it was appropriate for him to write that way. If they wrote like Faulkner, it would just be a contrivance, a pastiche, not appropriate at all to what they wanted to say.'

Frank, one of Jim's colleagues who was gunning for a new post as head of faculty and had sensed that creative writing might just be an untapped gold mine waiting to be exploited (preferably by him), had snuck into the conversation like a two-headed snake trying to mediate by sticking its fangs into each of its rivals.

'What you're saying, Jim, is that creative writing students need to find their own voice. It can't be set up like a literature class, you're right about that. So you're probably not the person to teach it.' And then looking over at the dean, he had said, 'We need to give this more thought. I suggest we set up an independent working committee.'

'Good idea,' the dean had said. 'Would you lead it?'

'Sure, I'll give it a go,' Frank had said, modestly, while internally celebrating the plum idea of heading a New Creative Writing Empire which would bring him the three things he craved most deeply – wealth, power and unlimited sexual encounters.

66

It was as if some malevolent demon had thrust him into an Orwellian nightmare where his most horrible fear – being trapped in a class of creative writing students – became his Room 101.

And why was that? He loved books didn't he? Novels were his lifeblood. So how could he have possibly objected to the idea of a class that taught writing? Could it be that it stirred up another, more basic fear within him? Is it possible that he really wanted to be a writer himself and had failed?

The answer to the above is simply this – NO, NO, a thousand times NO! As difficult as this may be to believe, it actually was so. Jim had no desire to write - none whatsoever.

That isn't to say there weren't a few brief adolescent encounters with something that might have been a second cousin once removed to the Muses. Didn't everyone? But Jim had quietly put them aside along with his short pants and sugar coated Cherrios when he discovered his obsession with literature. As we know, books for Jim were an entry into a magical world. Thus they were sacred. The authors themselves were secondary. They provided the framework, that's all. In his mind they were little more than scribes or messengers connected to unseen forces who used these so-called authors as vehicles to transmit their wonderful words like whispering sweet melodies into Mozart's ear as he pulled down notes from the heavenly sky to create his magnificent sounds of the angels (and who could create the sounds of angels except angels themselves who whispered them to a smelly little boy called Mozart?)

Thus, in his heart of hearts, Jim felt that authors weren't made but chosen. And those who were called were a strange and curious lot drawn from all segments of the world and who, themselves, were nothing special but were somehow in tune with that other universe, which was the realm of Mnemosyne and all her delightful daughters. So, given this notion, why would Jim want to write? What he wanted was to enter the magic door. Why try to build it himself (an impossible task anyway except for the chosen) when others had built it for him?

67

Except that something else happened – something he wouldn't have predicted. Here he was in his Orwellian Room 101 and enjoying it. Well, perhaps not exactly enjoying it but at least finding it quite fascinating.

It's one of those curious aspects of life that we all fear something that can haunt us day and night but, at the same time, we often thrive on those fears because they can help define our very essence of being. (Question: Who are you? Answer: I'm someone who's afraid of spiders.) These very fears, you see, can also be a protection similar to an empty hole that is filled with some vile substance. If the vile substance hadn't filled the hole something else could fall into it. Once the hole is filled it reaches a state of completion – it is no longer empty and thus is no longer a hole. However, if we pump the vile substance out, an empty space is created and the hole reverts back to being itself. For example, if I introduce you to

Jonathan, my pet Tarantula, a warm, furry and very friendly arachnid if there ever was one, you might lose your fear of spiders (then again you might not, but, for purposes of argument, let's assume you did). Now if I asked the question, 'Who are you?' You wouldn't say 'I'm someone who's afraid of spiders'. You'd say something different - like, 'I'm someone who's afraid of large-eared hyenas with their tails cut off'.

The point is, by no longer being afraid of spiders the hole appeared again and needed something to fill it. So all this is to say that it might be very nice to lose your fears, to enter your Orwellian Room 101 and find, to your surprise, that it's decked out with cosy furnishings and bowls of raspberry flavoured cocoapops. But you don't want to empty out your hole just to fill it again with something worse. (I hope you've understood all this, because I haven't! – ed)

Anyway, Jim, to his surprise, found the creative writing class quite interesting. Not because he felt he now could teach again (not creative writing, at least – he couldn't and he wouldn't) but because something happened that he hadn't expected. And what that was this:

'Would you like to read me some of your work?' he had asked (more out of a need to find something to kill time than anything else).

And they did. First Janet. She had read a poem set in Jamaica many years past when she was a little child (not big and fat as she was now but shy and slim with her hair woven together at the back of her head into a little appendage that stood up like the tail of a very sweet pig). It was a simple poem but Jim found himself enthralled. For the brusque woman with the snappy tongue and thick lips who seemed to be simmering like a kettle with a faulty lid, transformed herself into someone else. Something else. It was a transformation that took them all – the wispy headed David, the perky Louise, the bashful Mina, the lovely, wheel-chair bound Maureen and Jim himself – on a magic carpet ride to the Caribbean of 1943, where they communed with Janet's toothless grandpa sitting on the porch of his ramshackle house who grinningly exposed his gums while offering them the most delicious mangos they'd ever seen.

It was a poem filled with wonderful sounds – Jim could hear the reggae beat in the musical intonation – and sensations. He could feel the mud from the wet Jamaican soil ooze up from the cracks between his toes as he walked barefoot down the path that led to the market by the old Port Royal, savouring the alluring scents that filled his nostrils of caramelised sugar, deep roasted coffee, molasses and rum, and oh, so ripe bananas that you could feast on at your leisure just by reach-

ing up your hand and picking one. Calico covered ebony skin baking in the afternoon sun, dipping her toe in the clear blue water and breathing the air heavy with the smell of hemp – she was there and so were they. The girl who came to England and grew fat and angry, hurt and hostile, lived again in those words which rippled from the pages held tight in her black and blistered, firm and loving hands.

68

Mina came next but she had to be coaxed.

‘It’s not that good,’ she said, turning slightly pink behind her ears (which few people could see unless she bent them down – her ears, that is). But her modesty was an overlay to a very fragile ego that truly believed somewhere deep within existed a brilliant and quite beautiful creature just waiting to be discovered, like a princess trapped inside a stone.

Jim, who didn’t know her yet, misinterpreted this bashful look as simply an expression of self-conscious modesty rather than a coded plea for understanding and eventual redemption. For Mina, each and every teacher, since the tender age of twelve held out that alluring possibility for about ten minutes until she realised that they were just the same as all the others – uncaring, uncultured and therefore unable to break through the stone to free her latent majesty.

All those years of failure might have stopped others less certain of their inner potential and ultimate worthiness. But Mina had persisted through a dreary convent education in British occupied Kuala Lumpur. Her parents, low-level but well educated civil servants, had later sent her off to Edinburgh after reading *The Prime of Miss Jean Brodie*. (Whether this was a coincidence or actually related to something in the book, Mina never found out as both her parents died while she was in Scotland. However, she once attended a lecture by Muriel Spark and tried to speak with her afterward just to say that they were curiously related but she never got the opportunity – which was just as well since she wasn’t sure how to phrase such an obscure idea anyway.)

Her education bought her a minor civil service career in London similar to the career her parents had back home. But it was a boring job with boring people who lived in boring houses and ate boring food, who hardly ever talked with her (and, when they did, she found that boring too). So she wrote mainly to give herself a life again.

What she wrote, however, had no story and no plot. It was just little shreds of life – scattered scenes and impressions from the past as they occurred to her at very curious times – like when she was getting off the bus or crossing a busy thoroughfare or even when she was about to pay the checker at Sainsbury's. So she had taken to carrying a little notebook in her jacket pocket that she would whip out on those occasions so as to jot down the images before they had departed again into her semantic subconscious. (This, of course, led to all kinds of difficulties, like the checker at Sainsbury's tapping her food impatiently while the queue of housewives behind her grew more and more restless as they couldn't understand the urgent need to get those volatile words on paper before they decomposed like the chicken in their baskets which required the preservative services of their freezer back home.)

She took out a sheet of lined yellow paper from a folder and smoothed it on the desk as if to iron out the crinkles (she was a neat and tidy person, very careful about appearances.) And then she read:

It was about a man, very thin and worn who lived alone in a housing estate and kept all his treasures in a box at the side of his bed. The man was elderly and very forlorn as he no longer had contact with family or friends (or so it seemed, though this was never made explicit). The focus of the piece seemed to be as much on the contents of the box as on the man who Jim could hardly picture. The image was ghostly, half there, tenuously clinging to life, interested only in his decaying artefacts. The man could easily have slipped into the netherworld without anyone noticing. He had no reason for existence. He was a relic himself, Jim thought.

It was a claustrophobic piece, very dark and distant. It was hard to place – it could have been anytime and anywhere. Just a man and his box in a dreary housing estate. But, all the same, Jim felt there was something compelling about what she read, both because of the way she read it – with a voice that had suddenly become more certain and confident – and the relationship she developed between the old man and the box. For when he opened the box, his eyes began to glow and he was no longer an old man nor was he alone in the housing estate. He and the box were one. He was the box and the artefacts within it. And the box, itself, was the man.

Then it was Dave's turn. Aware that suddenly everyone was looking at him, he

said, 'Why is everyone staring at me? Is my zip undone?'

'No, we're waiting for you to read,' said Maureen.

'Read what?' asked Dave.

'What you've been reading us before.

'What have I been reading you before?'

'About your adventures - your wonderful adventures,' said Mina.

'My adventures?' Dave was looking more and more befuddled.

'In your bag,' said Janet pointing to a sack sitting next to him on the floor.

Dave looked down at the bag. It was black and shiny with a tag that had his name written in big red caps, so he supposed it belonged to him.

'Open it up,' said Louise, 'and take out the binder.'

Reaching down, Dave undid the clasp. He opened the sack and, sure enough, there was a binder just as Louise had said and pulling it out he set it on the desk.

The class waited in quiet expectation as Dave looked down at the binder, bemused, but feeling more and more as if he had seen it somewhere before and that, very likely, he and the binder had an intimate connection.

He glanced over at Louise. She nodded her head. He looked back at the binder again. Then, placing a weathered hand on the cover, he opened it up and gazed down at all the curves and curlicues that criss-crossed the page. At first it made no sense whatsoever – just a bunch of disorganised scribbles. But as he gazed down, the scribbles started to gain a certain familiarity. And then, slowly, ever so slowly, he remembered:

'I was born in Newcastle in 1919,' he read. 'Just a few years after the Great War...'

Watching the old man read, Jim was convinced he knew it all by heart and the pages were just elaborate cue cards freeing the trapped memories that once re-

leased began to flow unaided and unobstructed from his lips.

And it was a fascinating story that he told. About a boy growing up in the poverty of the north with only one pair of soulless shoes that needed to be stuffed with paper to protect his feet when he hiked to school in the all-too-common wind-swept torrents (a rather maudlin image but told without pity or regret but simply as a fact in contrast with the youth of today being driven to school wearing hydraulic trainers with logos branding them as hip). He wrote not about the deprivations of poverty but the closeness that comes from mutual need - how the tenements, as grim as they were, could also be a sanctuary, where disparate families became one and where life, out of necessity, became communal.

He told about taking a freighter, he and his brothers, from the Port of Newcastle to the Port of London – the cheapest way to travel back then - meeting his parents who had moved there several months before. In the midst of the growing depression they had managed to find lodgings and meagre work. He, at the age of twelve, became a delivery boy for a tailor who had him running across town on errands from six in the morning till eight at night for a few shillings that went, immediately, into the pocket of his mother's apron to be used for either rent or food because there was nothing else, not even a single farthing, left over for anything more.

As the old man read these words that spoke of the harshness life imposed back then, Jim was struck by the lack of regret – there was no lament that somehow he had been dealt a lousy hand, no trace of jealousy because others might have had it better. It was simply a document, written with care and integrity – an individual history from below, striving for the same detail that Dickens had gleaned from above but without the moral judgements. And as he listened, what fascinated Jim was how people could have survived in tact, with dignity and a sense of personal honour in conditions that nowadays would be looked upon as simply the breeding ground for ruffians.

70

Louise was more uncertain about reading. 'I don't really have nothing to show,' she said, apologetically. 'Just a few notes...'

'Well, why not read us your notes?' said Jim.

The rest of the class (except Dave, who was still mentally immersed in his mem-

ory stream that continued to flow now that the sluice was ungated) nodded their agreement, so Louise, reluctantly, went along, if nothing else then to show she was a good sport.

'It's about the war and when I was a girl living in the East End. The bombing had started and they began evacuating the children...' Then she looked down at her notes, as if trying to re-establish her train of thought.

'All the children? They were all evacuated from London?'

'Not all. Some stayed. But you was encouraged...'

'Where did they send them?'

'To the country. If you had family, you sent them there. But most of the East Enders didn't have relations in the countryside – none they kept contact with...'

'So where did they send you?'

'You didn't always know. We was all allowed one suitcase and we got on a bus and we drove for a long time. And we was all very frightened, of course, because most of us had never been away from home before...'

'You didn't know anyone?'

'Just my brother and my sister...'

'How old were you?'

'I was seven...'

'And your brother and sister?'

'My sister was six. My brother was four. I was the eldest and I was supposed to look after them. My little sister was cute as a kitten and she didn't need no looking after – by me anyway - because everyone liked looking after her. But my brother, he was a handful, a little gamin – always getting into mischief...' And she smiled as the thought of that wee little lad she had clearly loved and cherished filled her head.

'Where did they take you?'

'To a village. Someplace in Somerset. It was late afternoon when we got there and I remember we all piled off the bus into the village square and then all the townspeople gathered round and one by one they came and looked us over, you know, inspecting our clothes and hair and then they'd say, "I'll have this one or I'll have that one" and the one who was chosen would take their suitcase and follow the family who chose them and that went on for a while until there was just us East Enders left, and it seemed that nobody wanted us 'cause our clothes weren't all that good and some of us had bugs in our hair.'

'So what happened?' asked Jim, envisioning a scene similar to the one at the Charleston slave market he had once researched where children were paraded around for potential buyers to inspect their flesh.

'It was getting to be night and there was only about ten kids left and no one wanted us, it seemed, so the woman who was in charge started taking us around the village going door to door asking anyone if they would have us and it was getting later and later and my little sister was getting really frightened and she was crying (I remember her tears were soaking into my blouse 'cause I was carrying her by then) and a couple of people said they'd take her but they could only take one but she didn't want to be separated from us...'

Her voice trailed off as she relived that moment of utter despair when she was brought to the point that every child fears greater than anything else – that feeling of being truly and deeply unwanted. And that moment had remained with her for over sixty years, a moment embedded in her soul like an indelible tattoo, never to be erased, never to be forgotten.

'You've sort of left us dangling,' said Jim, breaking in on her reverie. 'How did it end?'

'Oh, we finally reached the last house in the village. It was already very late and the woman who was in charge was dying to go back to London so she pleaded with the family to take us in and they finally relented and said, "OK, we'll take the two girls but not the boy". And my brother looked at me and started crying and I said there wasn't any way I'd leave him that we was a family ourselves and we wasn't going to be separated and that she could take all of us or none and if not we'd just go back to London 'cause we'd rather live there and maybe get hit by a bomb then live in stinky old Somerset anyhow...'

Jim could almost feel himself drift into the moment, like a voyeuristic fly lured back into the reaches of time by a softly spoken pheromone. It was her simple words that brought him there - even though her description was imprecise, like a quick pencil sketch where things are only indicated and none of the lines are fully drawn. Even so, it had the elements of literary seduction - three children huddled together on a doorstep in a strange Somerset town where nobody wanted them, brought there, reluctantly, by some faceless functionary desperately trying to place the last of these little urchins so she could finally get back home again. Who was she, this woman, he wondered? A teacher? A beleaguered civil servant? Or was she a lady who worked with some voluntary organisation that provided for orphans and stray cats and who spent each and every Saturday chatting about all her do-gooding at fancy teas at Selfridges. And where was Somerset in relation to London anyway, he wondered? Probably not all that far on the map, he thought. (In his mind he related it to Middle England and the primrose fields where T. S. Eliot was buried.) But back then it was probably some light years away from the East End of London about to be pummelled into dust by those terrifying rockets with the silly name of 'Doddlebugs'.

'And then? What happened then?' asked Jim, like a kid who wanted a bedtime story completed so he could fall asleep and dream the rest, giving flesh to old bones and life to dead skin.

'She took us in, reluctantly,' said Louise. 'And we was treated like scullery maids for about two years after...'

71

Now it was only Maureen who hadn't read. Jim looked over at her and she smiled at him in a manner that was soft as a summer's breeze - alluring, seductive and gentle, a palliative to the ardent heat and emotional zeal which had been injected into this strange container, this insalubrious classroom wrapped up in four bare walls and a chalkboard. Wheelchair bound she might have been but that was just a detail. She had a certain aura that transcended mere notions of mobility. It was, Jim thought, the case of a vibrant spirit inhabiting a body that no longer could keep pace with it - a state which usually manifests itself as disappointment, despair or even rage as the fading light recedes into the realm of unknown terror. In her case, though, the spirit was forgiving. Instead of fighting the flesh it acquiesced as if to say, 'We shall live together in peace, you and I, in recognition of time past and time yet to be, the twin provinces of hope and memory'.

And all this came out in a smile from an elderly woman trapped in a wheelchair that was transmitted from the rear of an abused classroom, with desks scared from sharp objects dug into it by students suffering the sheer frustration of having to sit through hours and hours of blatant tripe and interminable boredom, and floated silently with the wings of an imaginary dove to the front where Jim received it like a bystander who suddenly is handed a bouquet of flowers for absolutely no perceivable reason.

'Will you read us something?' Jim asked.

She shook her head. 'Not yet.'

'Maybe later?' he asked, hopefully.

'Maybe later,' she said.

72

After the writing class was over and the students had drifted off, each in their separate directions, alone, to become yet again specs in an unforgiving universe, he began to realise something special had happened, though he wasn't quite sure what it was. It wasn't awesome or world-shaking; not his long awaited epiphany by any means. It was, on the face of it, simply some elderly people gathered together for a writing class; very ordinary people, the kind you'd pass on the street without giving them a second glance. But something special had happened during that brief time in encapsulated space. Something had been transmitted to him.

He had taught them nothing. In fact he had taught them less than nothing. What he had made clear to them (tried to, at least) is that he couldn't teach or wouldn't teach – which, in their eyes, amounted to the same thing. Though that wasn't to say he didn't feel he served some purpose in that rather strange and curious performance just enacted. He was, after all, at the front of the class. The readings were directed to him as the receiver.

So what did he represent? If he wasn't a teacher, what was he? If he was simply a receiver, couldn't they just as well have propped up a dummy behind the desk and read to it?

Possibly but it wouldn't have been the same, he thought. He might not have

been a teacher, in that he didn't teach, but he was the teacher in that he was the official representative of the college chosen (whether willingly or not) to be in that specific class at that specific instant. And as such, he represented authority – a rather minor authority to be sure since he wasn't a very authoritative person.

But he wasn't even an authority, really. He had no power over them. They weren't young and threatenable. They came, he supposed, because they wanted to and could leave for exactly the same reason. So perhaps he was more like a totem.

Yet he wasn't a totem, either. A totem was a religious icon and he wasn't playing God or even demigod. If anything the representation was more like one of those Grecian deities, full of failings and always doing something unexpected and getting themselves in trouble for it, but, none the less, was considered a divinity because, for better or worse, that's what they were. (He liked the Greeks for creating gods that were playful and problematic and whose relationship with people was dubious to the point of sometimes not even knowing who were the deities and who were the mortals; a notion that allowed for a wonderful uncertainty about what existed in that ethereal space between the profane and the sacred).

Yet to truly act as a receiver of those words that came from another realm, not the mechanical routine of a robotic trainee but the soulful process of coming in touch with the essence of the spirit, the feelings and desires that define the human condition, to play that role it was better not to be a god, but a representative of the gods rather than a representative of the Institution. As a representative of the gods, one left it to the deities to judge. As a representative of the Institution, one had to judge on the basis of funding criteria.

73

He was still drifting somewhere above the clouds oblivious to the world below (while, at the same time, managing to navigate himself down the corridor that led to his office) when he bumped into Daisy.

'Where are you going?' she asked, looking at him suspiciously. (As she always seemed to look at him suspiciously, he took little notice of it.)

'To the office,' he said. 'I still haven't got the lesson plan together for my ESOL class.' And saying that, it suddenly occurred to him that in fact he hadn't done it

and by all rights he should be panicking since Josephine had threatened to visit him while he was supposedly teaching which could all be dreadfully embarrassing both for him and his mother (even though he wasn't about to tell his mother, and, indeed, hadn't spoken with her for quite a while, he sort of believed that she knew everything that happened to him through some vague process of maternal osmosis).

'Not to worry,' Daisy said. 'Classes have been cancelled.'

'What?' he said, not daring to believe his ears. 'Could you repeat that?'

'Classes have been cancelled,' she repeated.

He suddenly felt like a schoolboy whose school had burnt down. 'Why's that?' he grinned.

'There's an important meeting we all must attend. There's a note about it on your desk,' she said. And then she rushed off.

74

He felt a lightness of step as if an enormous weight had been lifted from him. (It is a curious fact that mental stress far outweighs physical burdens by a ratio of seventeen to one. To put it another way, for every black cloud of emotional stress, you'd have to carry seventeen lead balloons to approximate it.) Indeed, he even seemed to be humming, off-key of course, something he hadn't done for quite a while (hum that is – he always sang off key. Actually, he was so tone deaf that whenever he sang the National Anthem it tended to sound like Bob Dylan's 'The Times They Are A-Changin' – something that got him into trouble more than once.)

Inside his office, when he reached it, was a note in the form of a memorandum propped up against a cup so it couldn't be missed. That is, it had been propped up against the cup so that it couldn't be missed. However, a few minutes before he arrived, it had slipped from its mooring and had come to lay flat on the desk. Then a little breeze had lifted it from there and sent it on a short journey to the floor where it had been stepped upon several times before Jim had noticed it. Fortunately, as Daisy had warned him there was a note on his desk, he was on the lookout for it. Otherwise, it would have lay there lost and forlorn until the Portuguese cleaner had come and swept it up and thrown it away with all the other

urgent memoranda that had been misplaced over the year. (The Portuguese cleaner's name, by the way, was Maria. She had come from Porto thirteen years ago, had three children and loved to cook fresh sardines when she could get them – which was almost never.)

75

The note had said there was an urgent and important meeting that afternoon. It also gave details of where that urgent and important meeting was going to be held – in the Little Theatre at twelve. Which wasn't much help to Jim since he didn't know where the Little Theatre was or that a Little Theatre even existed on the premises. And he wondered if calling it a Little Theatre implied that there was a Big Theatre (or, at least, a Bigger Theatre) and, if there was, where could they have put it since theatres usually take up more space than a closet and even if they had put the Little Theatre in a closet then the Bigger Theatre would have to be in someplace bigger (unless, of course, there was a Bigger Closet they had put it in).

The Little Theatre, as it turned out, was in a cubicle attached to a wing of the building he hadn't yet visited. And it wasn't so little – that is to say, it could easily contain fifty or sixty people if they didn't mind taking a deep breath and holding it in for the duration of the time they were sitting there. So the Little Theatre did, indeed exist – something we might call an 'objective fact' (except to those who came from a different time-space continuum like Martians or people from the other side of the Atlantic). However, objective facts are only objective when they have become factualised. Prior to that, they aren't objective facts at all. (They might be referred to as 'potential facts' as potentially there may have been a Little Theatre and probably there was - for why else would there be an urgent and important message asking staff to meet there? But until the Little Theatre had become factualised – that is, before Jim had hard physical evidence like a door with the words 'Little Theatre' written above it, then it couldn't really be termed an objective fact – at least to him.)

Thus, in Jim's mind, the Little Theatre wasn't really real yet. Since he was half convinced he was living in a dream ever since his plane had landed (only several days before – imagine that!). And ever since that time very many strange and curious things had intruded into his safely ordered existence. So, in his mind (what was left of it, at any rate), the term 'Little Theatre' might have been a metaphor. It might have been something that stood for something else – like Big Rock Candy Mountain (a place that Jim had endlessly searched for as a kid, only to find out that

there wasn't a mountain made of candy at all but just an allusion to failed dreams like the proverbial Pie in the Sky which he also searched for but never quite located).

The word 'theatre', after all, could have a number of meanings. For example, one could say 'It was seminal moment in the history of theatre when Jim arrived in England,' where 'theatre' refers to the act of performing rather than a place where the performance is held. So, 'Little Theatre', could actually have meant a performance as in, 'Let's do a little theatre, darling. I'll dress up as a dog and you dress up as a bone...' However, the fact that the first phrase of the note read, 'The meeting will be held in...' would make one believe it was the other meaning of 'theatre' that was being projected. And, of course, one would have been right. But this does not negate the other possibilities altogether (though it does raise the odds to about one hundred billion to one – almost the same as winning the National Lottery, but don't tell anyone).

76

So Jim set out in search of the Little Theatre as the message he found trampled on the floor had instructed him to. However, before we follow Jim on his quest for the elusive venue where strange performances were supposedly acted out somewhere in the artificial bowels of the college, leaky and constipated like some abandoned creature left to moulder – before we follow him on his quest for the unseen, unheard, and unknown, let us take a step back (or sideways) into a different universe.

In this other universe things had happened which Jim didn't know about. If he had known about them, it would have given him a little more insight. And as he had no insight whatsoever, a little more would have been enormously helpful since anything compared to nothing seems like a world in itself (remember, entire galaxies were created from something that was smaller than the smallest speck of dust).

Anyway, what Jim didn't know or couldn't have known, is that this meeting had been a long time coming. In fact, certain people, like Miranda and Daisy, were surprised it had taken so long.

What was it about then? What was going on? What was taking place and why was it so important? You might well ask and you'd be quite right for asking, for what had happened, what had caused this meeting to be called this day, was part of a seismic cultural shift of gargantuan proportions. At least it was from Mi-

randa's and Daisy's point of view. For others it was just the start of the millennium – out with the old and in with the new.

But for people like Miranda and Daisy it wasn't a question of just this or just that – for them, their whole reason for existence was under attack – everything they had striven for over the years was suddenly being questioned by people who had no idea in the world what people like Miranda and Daisy had been trying to accomplish (or, if they had some idea, they couldn't have cared less). And, to make matters worse, it wasn't even political – that is to say, it wasn't this party or that party ramming through change on the basis of some coherent policy that could be either accepted or struggled against. Not at all. This was something more like a natural disaster – like a vast, titanic and unstoppable tidal wave sweeping across the Atlantic (everything vast, titanic and unstoppable, of course, emanated from the west and swept toward the east, not the other way around). It was headed in their direction and the only thing that surprised them (Miranda, at least) was that it hadn't hit their little backwater college before now.

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