

SINGERS



peter maguire

Singers

Peter Maguire

First Edition 2018

Without a song the day would never end

Without a song the road would never bend

When things go wrong a man ain't got a friend

Without a song

Vincent Youmans

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Tina North



The night is like a lovely tune

Beware, my foolish heart

How white, the ever constant moon

Take care, my foolish heart

I

Back Cannon Street was a cul-de-sac. A dead end. Narrow pavements, to the left and to the right, grey stone slabs, sooty rain had ended some minutes before, glistened fish scale damp in the glare of a sodium yellow street light.

The three pace width roadway was cobbled, never having been sufficiently important to smell macadam. Flanked by three storied buildings dating from the late Victorian and the early years of the century following. it had always been the street of minor offices and small workshops, providing services that were essential, but without an importance that necessitated their location on streets with greater pretensions. Bookkeepers. Leather goods. Ribbon makers. Money lenders who specialized in small sums at high interest rates.

It was nine thirty in the evening. All doors were now shut. Not one lonely, dust flecked, forty watt light bulb, glimmered out though a grimy window.

The current commercial occupants, following trades not dissimilar and outlook when compared with those of seventy or eighty years earlier, having departed to their comparatively more sanitary and mod con residences in the suburbs.

Tina North turned right off Corporation Street and into the narrow way. Back Cannon Street boasted only a single street light. Heels clicking, she walked with penguin shuffles up the impasse, her thoughts showing no concern or curiosity about the workshops and offices that lined her route, their history, past or present, the neglected doors, office widows which here and there displayed a faded gilded label. Her dress her primary focus. She had run it up that very morning. The hem. Ankle length. Was much too tight.

'Shit.'

Dark hours and street lamp, rendered feeble, sodium glare defeated by unwashed air, yellow one eyed owl perched high on a cast iron post. Something you expected in this city. So familiar that most people never noticed or even imagined it could be any different.

Tina North having gone more than three quarters along the street was not disconcerted, perhaps even comforted seeing though the gloom the familiar neon sign. Fixed high up on the wall that blocked off at the end of the street, attempted to shine out and proclaim with a modicum of glamour *Chez Joey*. In the half open doorway beneath this chewing gum green neon sign, a bulky coated mass, edgeless in the half light, stood the chilled guardian of this portal to paradise. Never known by a surname, just Dave.

'Evenin Tina.'

He smiled at the slight figure, her ankle grazing hem, tottering and clicking along the pavement towards him.

'Hello Dave. Not much of night.'

'Sure is not.' he drawled, responding with a hint of what he assumed to be Mid-Atlantic parlance considered appropriate for the doorman of what was reputed to be one of the better night clubs in town.

Tina North stood still for a moment, her five foot one inches, wearing heels, along side the cliff face that was Dave.

'Thursday. Not too many people on a Thursday.'

Dave was an optimist, always happier when admitting punters through his door, than, when he needed too on rare occasions, ejecting them between the jambs into the street. *Chez Joey* was a well run establishment with an insignificant number of riff-raff being allowed in to prop up the bar.

'Let's wait and see.' was his neutral response.

Tina North smiled. Dave smiled back with a benevolence large people are able to afford small people and pushed open the door to give Tina unencumbered entrance into what a local newspaper had described, within recent memory: "*A Great Night Out*".

Entering the club at this time of an evening, for most regulars, would have been most unfamiliar. Night clubs thrive on illusion. Dim lights. Music. The smell of tobacco, paper and leaf wrapped, the understated sound of alcoholic liquids being poured into glasses and drawn from beer pumps. Indecipherable chatter and whispered conversation. Now and then a - 'look at me' - voice piercing the background hum. For Tina North, who once had illusions, now long gone, this was the reality before the evening properly commenced.

Ronnie, the owner of the *Chez Joey*, was somewhere out back in his office. Sue and Albert behind the bar shuffled glasses and polished them needlessly. The brimming optics were in place, their bull's eyes ready to dispense Caledonian tipples. Thin slices of lemon already cut. Maraschino cherries stickily red in bowls. Cocktail sticks to hand. All the necessaries required to assemble aspirational drinks.

The Band Stand was the fulcrum around which the club pivoted. Semi circular. The performing surface two foot higher than club floor level. White Baby grand piano. 'No upright pianos allowed in my classy establishment.' Ronnie had been heard to say rather more than once.

A lone microphone awaited the nicotine flavoured breath of a vocalist and the

resident trio were doing the things musicians do. The drummer flicked a cymbal with his brushes. The bass player tuned a string. The pianist played a chord or two, not basic three note spans, more advanced harmonies. This was a club with attitude and a class trio.

Sitting on a chair in front of the rhythm section, casually holding a trombone, sliding the slide and applying a drop of oil, the reason why some people specifically came to the *Chez Joey* to listen to the music. The trombone player, a small round man, solid rather than fat, his straight fair hair brilliantine glossy and combed back.

The trombone is one of the more vocal instruments and Kenny, the trombonist, could make his instrument talk and weave dreams. He could create sadness, gaiety, thoughtfulness, having that quality all gifted musicians possess, an effortless ability to tell a story. Not a particularly handsome man, his general conversation hedged towards the taciturn, however there was no argument when it came to attracting women. You could also argue, that much good it did them - getting to know Kenny - fidelity and consideration did not feature as the solo spot of his off bandstand repertoire.

Soon the red velvet curtain that shrouded the bandstand from the public view would be closed. Only to be opened again as the band moved into the opening number of the evening during the time when public began to trickle into the club, via the coat check, the heavily curtained inner archway and find their way to sit at a table or perch on a bar stool.

Standing inert for an instant 'Stupid cow.' Tina North said to herself, inwardly admitting at yet again having been deluded. But this inevitable moment of anticipation coming through the door, regardless, generally raised her pulse rate a notch or two. There were nods all round. To bar staff, to the band, nothing emphatic, this was a familiar six nights a week routine, less of a greeting than an acknowledgement that they were all there and still breathing. The curtain would shield off the band stand. The bar staff fix their professional smiles and assumed bonhomie. The lights would dim. Yet another evening at the *Chez Joey* would commence. Ronnie, who had a developed sense of theatre, personally choreographed and insisted upon the performance of this every evening opening routine.

Tina North slipped past the bar and into the small room that doubled as band and dressing room. There was mirror, in tribute to the dressing rooms of more august and legitimate establishments, several shadeless light bulbs were fixed at intervals around the unpainted wooden frame. To one side and opposite to the dressing table, a worn leather covered settee. The band's street coats hung from a row of hooks fixed on the wall adjacent. One flat cap. Two Trilby hats, one black, one brown, and a dark blue Fedora. Unemptied ashtrays graced a small table, half a bottle of cheap scotch whiskey and a couple of recently drained glasses providing them with company. One thing you could never say about the boss 'Ronnie' that he grudged the band and singers a free drink or two.

Tina North took off her coat and hung it on the spare hook, swore at the self-inflicted hem of her dress and sat down in front of the illuminated mirror. She took a cigarette from her handbag, lit it, using a cigarette lighter that always invoked unwelcome thoughts, inhaled deeply, blew a stream of smoke into the face of her reflection in the mirror. It would be an least an hour before she would have to stand up and sing.

'Why the hell do I keep it ?' interrogating herself and putting the cigarette lighter back into her handbag. It was a chromium article. Not especially expensive. It could have been replaced and then discarded without even creating a small tremor in her budget. The cheap chrome shined back at her from the depths of the handbag. One side of the machined metal was engraved with large italic letters: *From Jeff with much Love.*

Simple objects can and do open doors into places where good sense might tell us not to enter. The barriers we construct within our minds are breached and unwanted recollection floods though fissures that are too large for any Dutch boy's finger to stem the deluge.

II

Tina North had always loved to sing. With the choir at school. Was always willing to stand up in front of people during sundry family occasions to perform the most recent additions to her catalogue of songs. Generally they

were not the school taught 'Lover and His Lass' and similar traditional airs and melodies. Tina North had at a young age developed a fascination with what had become known as *The Great American Song Book*. It was the natural result of a daily life, from a very early age, living with the radio ever on, seventy eight revolutions per minute vinyl playing on the wind-up, or in a more affluent later, the cherished and admired Danset.

Manny, her Father, had managed to leave Germany sometime in the mid thirties his perception of what might be proving rather more acute than some. Recently married with one small daughter, Tina North's elder sister Ruby. His first choice of destination would have been the United States, but this had not been possible, so England, where he already had family members, provided a sort of welcome.

Manny loved all things American and not having the opportunity to settle there was a regret in life remarkably free of any regret. Popular music in particular. Show tunes. Bright tunes. Happy tunes. Sad tunes. Sophisticated harmonies and lyrics that elevated the best examples of the genre that could be appreciated - by the unbiased - almost as an art form. He would wander the house spontaneously reciting, half singing, seriously clever and intricate couplets.

Then you and I came wandering by

and lost in a sigh...

They all laughed at Christopher Columbus

When he said the world was round

They all laughed when Edison recorded sound...

I make a date for golf and you can bet your life it rains

I try to give a party and the guy upstairs complains

I guess I'll go through life just catching colds and missin' trains...

Word games, set to music entranced the young Tina North and surprisingly

early thoughts, hinted that singing to live and living to sing might be a possibility when she became older.

Leaving school at sixteen with the dull job in an office inevitable, a period of stagnation most young girls accepted without question, knowing, also without questioning, the real business of life, a man, somewhere to live, and children, would at last release them from the penal confines of metaphoric stationery cupboards. So too for Tina North the journey into adulthood commenced. The difference and possible escape route, Tina North had a talent.

Talent night at the local Working Men's Club was for her first success. There was no question that a pretty girl with doubtful vocal abilities could be looked upon kindly. Talent nights were evenings when wives were reluctantly admitted and this excluded the presentation of more venal entertainment. Tina North was both pretty and did have actual vocal ability. Ordinary menfolk, a description not intended in any way to be pejorative, on occasion, could and did raise their line-of-sight above the breasts of a performer towards the vocal chords and the sounds this subtle organ was producing.

Tina North quickly became a noted and valued performer on *The Circuit*, an ubiquitous network of social gathering places covering the surrounding counties in much the same way a fish-net stocking enhances a fine leg. A mesh of not unpleasant venues providing cheap beer and conviviality, an appetite for entertainment and performers that was almost insatiable.

Workingmen's Clubs. Trade clubs. Labour Party clubs. Liberal Party clubs. Conservative Party clubs. The British Legion. The essential attribute of all these establishments the provision of solid familiarity, migrating typical front-rooms, lounges, perhaps even a drawing room at the upper end of the strata, into a larger arena. They were a place where you could meet - almost always male only - friends, work mates, colleagues, and acquaintances, the appellation determined by the social mix of a given establishment. A degree of comfort without pretension. Untroubled by the presence of women or wives. The only female exception, mature, fanciable, unthreatening, and unavailable, serving behind the bar, an honorary man with curves.

Sunday lunch times, at clubs lower down the social scale, featured comedians

whose repartee was in general as blue as their five-o'clock-shadows. Such weekly presentations often included tired woman, whose inwardly bored routines, involved removing their clothes with an illusion of slowness that was in reality haste. The audience trading shared bravado rather than a meaningful aura of group eroticism. Sunday lunch times were popular, particularly for wives, getting the men out from under their feet so they could get on with cooking the Sunday dinner.

After much debate, and in some places bitterly contested guerrilla resistance, women reluctantly began to be admitted on certain, well defined, days of the week, but only if accompanied by a related male person. So evenings of more legitimate and titillation excluded entertainment, included the presence of wives, girl friends, and now and then a disapproved of, but silently sideways glanced at fancy women. Tina North flowered performing to these mixed sex audiences and rapidly developed her act into an anticipated favourite. Generally she sang the kind of songs that Manny loved and continued to love. The audience, most of who where of a similar age to Manny loved them too.

Gaining both experience and confidence, the dull office job paroled her without regret, the office manager and the other girls wishing her well without disclosing or discarding their own inward reservations. Tina North began her career as a professional singer. Quite something for an eighteen year old. The money was good. Other girls she knew, though now saw much less of them, talked between themselves about her doings with some envy and an unspoken shudder, concerning the risk of breaking away from what was expected, surely would precipitate.

III

Working the club circuit Tina North provided very little time or inclination to get involved in relationships casual or otherwise. Most of the young men she had known from her school days had by this time become a couples, frivolity being replaced by serious consideration about acquiring three piece suites. Those who floated freely, when she did occasionally meet one, appeared cautious. Tina North had become very self confident and because of her life as a performer exhaled a certain touch of glamour. Young men prefer a sense

of being dominant within relationships, even though this is often an skilfully woven fiction. There were much less demanding rocks for them to climb. So just a smile or two.

'How are you?'

'Great you are doing so well.' -

'See you around.'

The regulars at the various clubs on the circuit did usually include at least one - Jack The Lad - but they got nowhere. Time, a lack of time too, was also against them. Get to the club. Get dressed. Do your slot or slots in the evenings programme. Get changed. Taxi. Get home generally after midnight. Bed. Most nights of the week and especially late at weekends.

The Sycamores had a rather more upmarket ambience than the average club. The membership owned building was late Victorian. Kept in good repair. A bowling green at the back. The interior looked acceptable even when the main lights were on. Drinks cost a fraction more, but cheaper than in the pubs. Collar and tie neatly encapsulated the profile of the average regular.

George Mason, retired middle management of some description, regularly took his chair close to the podium when Tina North was appearing. His regularity, sitting off right of the band stand made him noticeable. Between songs and announcing the next one, looking on stage down on him, she thought that he must of once been a good looking man. He had retained a vibrant head of brown turning grey hair, unlike most of the audience whose shining pates jostled and bobbed like a cluster of pink planets. Very blue eyes. A gentle mouth and smile.

One particular Saturday evening when getting out of the club and home was not so pressing Tina strolled by his table towards the bar, he smiled a friendly smile, and politely offered her a drink, inviting her to sit at his table. She immediately felt comfortable. George Mason was no ageing lothario desperately needing to prove that he could still keep it up. They had a pleasant, none demanding chat, about this and that. He said how much he liked her singing and the songs, mentioned in passing his late wife and shared

her taste for songs she sang. Tina North noticed his very fine, strong white hands. There had been a time when he had worked underground. Flecks of coal dust under the skin on the back of his hands fixed a period in his past life as permanently as if they had been tattooed.

IV

An unscheduled Friday night at *The Sycamores* was one of those unforeseen engagements. They telephoned her during the afternoon. Tina North was unexpectedly free and they needed to find someone to fill a spot that should have seen another performer up behind the microphone. Some kind of family problem. So around ten on that Friday evening Tina North launched into her first number of the evening. This being a Friday there was not a free chair in the room. Performers tend fix upon one individual in an audience as a focal and vocal point of attention. George Mason was there sitting in his customary place. Tina North gave him a friendly smile of recognition and doing so realized that sitting next to him was a man in his early twenties, unmistakably, George's Son.

Standing on a stage and looking out you rarely take in detail. Faces here and there might or might not be recognisable later. Then there again, perhaps not. It creates situations where performing artists are greeted as being an old acquaintance, the delusion and illusion being, that they would surely have seen and remembered. George's Son came into that rarer category of a face that did emerge from the crowd, a hillock pushing its head above the flatness of the plain. Hair similar in waves and contours to his Father. Though not grey of course. A bit taller than George. Slim with angular shoulders. He was sporting a two piece suite that had never hung on the chromium rail of any cheaper retail outfitter.

Ignoring intuition is a dangerous game. Most people do. Only later realizing the undefinable importance of a wisp of first impressions. His smile, though similar to that of George Mason, was just a little different.

Jeff, if he had have been diamond would have shone out from the tumbling glint of glass and paste scattered randomly over the velvet display pad. Tina

North would in time future become aware that grading diamonds, no matter how much they sparkle, when viewed under a glass, can reveal many a hidden flaw. Diamonds are just compressed lumps of carbon even if they do sparkle. But that was then. Not now. The description *a rough diamond* did not apply to Jeff, his exterior appeared to be smooth perfection.

Tina North was in no particular hurry that evening when she had completed her stint under the spot light. The audience had been both warm and appreciative. Different class of crowd than the previous evening at working at a The Trades Club. There had never been a Jukebox installed in *The Sycamores*. Tina North retreated into, what was in comparison to many other venues, a well appointed dressing room. There was a private lavatory, a wash basin, and a hot tap that actually accessed hot water.

Changing without haste out of her stage dress, she cleaned her lips with a tissue and applied a slightly more muted shade of lipstick. The sounds of the final act of the evening, a comedian, doing jokes and a routine suitable for this more respectable club and audience, was finishing off with his song and signature tune. Soon after this most would leave for home, creating a quieter atmosphere to be enjoyed, while those who remained ordered a concluding round of drinks.

'George. How nice to see you again.' Tina North smiled walking directly to his table through the backstage door. Hand shakes and certainly not kisses constituted no part of the greeting. Anything other than facial recognition and response would have caused George awkward discomfort. He responded with evident pleasure. 'Come and sit down Lass. If you have time.' it was both an question and an invitation. She sat down opposite to George momentarily scanning the features of the young man sitting beside him. George called over the waiter and ordered Tina North a gin and tonic.

'With Ice?'

'Yes please. And lemon.'

"Meet my Son Jeff," said George with a touch of pride in his voice "Just finished at University." Stressing the word - University, to add additional importance to what was self evidently already important. Tina North leaned

across the small table and they shook hands, being younger, they had discarded some of the tactile inhibitions that plagued older generations. His hand was firm, dry, soft skinned, the only hardness a ring on the little finger, gold she noticed, a signet ring with *JM* in Gothic script engraved on its facet.

What followed did present anything especially significant. Jeff had finished University. Had a good job - not described or detailed - George did add however 'He gets a company car.' a statement that was enunciated with pleasure and certain measure of awe. They talked about her singing. The songs. Jeff told her how much liked them and her performance style. Not even a hint of wanting to gain anything other than surface information.

After about half an hour Tina North said she must go. A previously ordered Taxi had arrived. Jeff said it was a pity he had known this earlier and would have been more than happy to drive her home. She thanked him. Collecting her coat and bag from the dressing room she waved goodbye. Jeff slipped across the room and asked politely if he might be allowed to telephone her. Tina North thought about this proposal for a moment, considered, thought for a second or two more, and gave him one the small visiting cards she always carried in her hand bag.

Jeff looked at the card for a moment and said " You don't have an Agent?"

Tina North replied 'No. Do I need one? I always have more than enough wor.'

The taxi sound a horn outside. They exchanged polite smiles and she left through the main door and got into the already open rear door of the taxi.

V

Tina North could hear through the half closed door of the dressing room, Ralph, the master of ceremonies, singing the opening bars of the song he always sang to open the every evening cabaret at the *Chez Joey*.

She gets too hungry for dinner at eight

She likes the theatre and never comes late

She never bothers with people she'd hate

That's why the lady is a tramp

Ralph was neither a lady or a tramp. Tall and slim, his skin tanned to a degree pitched to a hue exactly between the cheap and the outrageous, honed not with a bottle, or time spent on sunny beaches, but the infra-red rays of a sun lamp. Clothes, bespoke suits, always immaculate. Beautifully groomed hair, blues eyes, and a set of teeth that added unfamiliar joy to the soul of his dentist when he went to the surgery for his regular check-ups. Shoes, never any vulgar two tone, cared for with exactitude and passion.

Ralph was a very good looking man, inclining towards the beautiful. He had a very good singing voice and knew how to work an audience. Any audience. Occasionally he took dates at clubs other than the *Chez Joey*, usually Sunday lunchtime sallies into sundry venues on *The Circuit*. Even the most male, of male discovered it hard not to silently admire him.

Women of course knew, unlike most men they possess intuition that rarely leaves a corner in darkness. Tina North, with some regret, also knew. Ralph, though not effeminate within any possible interpretation of this epithet, preferred men. He did like women and was in turn adored by them, but was disinclined, much to their regret, to invite them to share his bed.

Ronnie, who owned of the *Chez Joey*, knew the price and the value of most things valued Ralph, the allure he added to his beloved club, and nurtured both the man and his services accordingly.

Tina North took another cigarette from the packet. Put the tipped end between her lips, found the lighter and took it from the bottom of her bag, lit it and drew in a long slow breath. The chromium cap extinguished the flame with a click in an instant and dropped it from a murderous height back into the depths of her handbag.

VI

Jeff telephoned her a couple of days after their first meeting at *The Sycamores*. Polite, not insistent, apparently making no assumptions, he suggested they might have a drink some time soon. Evenings were of course difficult for her because of vocal commitments. It was agreed Jeff would collect her in his car that coming Sunday afternoon around midday. Manny who missed very little, scented the essence of the telephone conversation, but made no comment, but his face morphed into an expression of approval. That was Manny. Rarely asking questions. But nevertheless caring.

VII

The first month of her time spent with Jeff was a period of quiet restraint. He lived in a rented flat on the far side of town in a pleasant tree lined street lined with well maintained red brick detached houses. His job seemed to pay well. Though he never discussed in any detail of what his work entailed. Collecting her, usually on a Sunday afternoon, they would return to his flat, he would cook a meal, a good cook. They would talk, perhaps flirt a little. but nothing heavy. Jeff profiled the glowingly described type loved by women's weeklies, he was the elusive perfect gentlemen. Tina often had singing engagements on a Sunday evening and he would drive to wherever she was working, never staying, 'work matters to complete before the morning.' and Tina would happily get a taxi at the end of the evening to take her home.

She enjoyed spending time with him and began, without really trying, came to like him more and more. Love is, a word often used, less often really meant. But within her own conception of this emotion, Tina became convinced that love of some kind was becoming a part of the equation.

Innocence, what ever innocence is, open to debate, had been forfeited after a Christmas Party at the end of first year working in an office. Too much to drink. Silly agreement to a car ride with one of the better looking males. Somewhere on the top moor above the city, she remembered looking at distant street lights fizzing, a ground level star field and galaxy. Other than that she remembered almost nothing. The next day slight soreness, no

pregnancy resulted, no panic, no feeling of guilt, because in mind and even in body she really had not been present. There was no repeat performance. No urgent desire to replicate what had been for her a none experience.

One month after her first rendezvous with Jeff on a sunny Sunday afternoon she started sleeping with him. Though sleeping is not an accurate description. She discovered herself to be there both in mind and body. Manny remarked a few days later how well she was looking.

Relationships can be static, elastic, explosive. Their relationship was gentle. Jeff was caring and attentive. He often discussed how he could become her agent. Apply his business skills to develop her singing career. Use his contacts to wheedle out contracts with recording labels, radio producers, television. They would discuss the possibilities for hours and verbally dream about a future together. The cars, the house with the river running along the bottom of the garden. Talk that excited Tina. She knew the extent of her talent. She knew she could please a bigger and wider audience. But somehow these swooping dreams were never transformed into anything tangible. Jeff would say that it was at the top of his list to start working on it next week. The weeks went on by. 'The job,' he said. 'Pressure of work,' he said. 'Next week,' he said. The weeks arrived, dissolved, and repeated themselves.

One Sunday afternoon some months after they had first met he picked her up in his car at the usual time. The drive was uncharacteristically silent. Jeff looked worried and his face had the recognizable markers of a lack of sleep. Gently caressing the nape of his neck she asked him what was the matter. He pulled the car into a parking spot off the highway and stopping the car and turning off the engine looked into her face.

'I really do not know how to ask you.'

'Try me.' she replied, innocently.

'Money. A friend of mine. Well he asked me to lend him some money. I said no problem. But something has come up. I need him to repay me urgently. But he can't find the wherewithal for a few weeks. I really do need it now.'

'How much do you need ?' Tina asked without questioning.

Jeff hesitated for an instant. Only much later did Tina realize he had been mentally calculating just how much he could ask for with the certainty of getting it 'I need a hundred pounds.'

She pressed her hand over his. It was damp. She remembered the dry firm palm of their first physical contact. 'I will get it for you from the bank in the morning. OK.' Relief visibly rippled down his features. He leaned across and kissed her. 'I will come to collect from your house tomorrow if that is alright with you,' He gave her a warm kiss and added 'Don't say anything to Manny will you.' He started up the engine and they reached his flat about twenty minutes later. He cooked for them as usual. They went to bed about three in the afternoon. The day was not quite same as the week before. In the evening he drove her to *The Sycamores* where she had been booked to appear. He said he could not stay, work to do, not even time enough to say hello to his Father.

We make concessions and excuses for those we care for. Seek explanations that explain nothing. Apply rationale that displays slender affinity with the rational. The request for a loan, explained as being needed because he had made a loan that the friend who was unable to repay immediately, became a marker as their relationship progressed, always hesitant, never pleading, the facial worry dissolving when she assented to his request. Love is not blind. It just prefers not to see. The moment came however when Tina's carefully nurtured savings account could not hand out any further largesse. Hearing this the strain on Jeff's face perceptibly moved from stress to fearfulness.

The following Sunday afternoon was gloomy outside the window of the flat. Rain dripped from the branches of the chestnut tree opposite to the window. The bed sheets remained cold and uncrumpled in the adjoining room.

After a long silence he told her that addictive gambling was his problem. It had started with card playing for money when he was at university. Developed into visits to a casino. Betting on horses. Other unexplained forms of wager. His salary could not meet his obligations. His credit lines with the established bookmakers and casinos and been terminated. Money was however freely available but from less forgiving sources. The courts were not their means of balancing the books. Experience had taught them that more robust methods produced hard cash results. Punitive action applied to him unless he was able to settle, even in part, what was owed.

Tina was not shocked hearing what Jeff had said. It was in not delivered as a humble confession. More just a statement of fact. 'I will have a think about it during the week and see what I can come up with.' Standing up and walking across the room looked out of the window at the tangle of blackened wet branches.

Sunday is gloomy

My hours are slumberless

Dearest the shadows

I live with are numberless

'There is always a song to match the occasion.' she thought to herself unable to suppress a weak inward smile.

'Look. You have an early night. Call me a taxi to take me to work. I will telephone you sometime tomorrow when I have had more time to see what I might be able to do to help you out.' When the taxi came to collect her they did not exchange a kisses.

VIII

Manny called up to her room. 'Tina. Jeff on the phone. He wants to talk to you.'

She came down and answered it. The conversation was brief. No she had not thought of a way out as yet but would get back to him as soon as she had thought of something. The line clicked and went dead.

'What's up ?' asked Manny.

'Oh nothing. Just how to fit in some extra work Jeff is fixing up for me.'

Manny, who had lived long and seen much, seemed unconvinced. He grunted a little and went into the kitchen to make a cup of coffee.

'It's me,' said Jeff when he telephoned on Wednesday morning. 'Everything is

going to be fine. I have found a way to settle up with those blood sucking bastards and I might even have enough over to pay you back too, ' He sounded more relaxed and even elated. 'I will pick you up Sunday evening. I know you are not working. Take you out for supper and then back to the flat. Maybe you could stay over. Must go. Work to do. See you Sunday. Kisses.' He hung up.

Sunday arrived Jeff arrived. Exchanged a friendly word or two with Manny. They drove off into the evening. He was going to take her to a really nice Italian restaurant not far from his flat. The sun hovered and faded in a darkening cloudless sky.

'Can you afford it?' she asked him the car parked and walking towards Il Constanza 'Of course I can. Don't worry. All will be well. This evening is for you.' They went in and were greeted with pizza smiles. Ushered to a nicely situated table. Linen cloth. Fabric napkins. No red paper squares in this establishment. They sat down, the pizza smile assisting Tina with her chair. A small dish of olives and bread sticks were brought to the table by an undelayed waiter. They both nibbled. Jeff looked over the menu with practiced familiarity 'Veal for me I think. And for you? Waiter. A bottle of Bardolino.'

The meal progressed and reassurance seeped into Tina's arteries the road it had to traverse smoothed to greater evenness after several glasses of the wonderful Italian red wine. There was little conversation. The meal was, to utilize that misused word: memorable. Excellent coffee followed by a Cassata When Jeff had paid the bill the pizza smile opened the door and beamed them out of the restaurant and into the night. Walking back to the car Tina turned and raising her head kissed him hard and long on his lips. Moved his face into view and smiled.

IX

His flat was brightly lit when Jeff opened the door and stood aside to let Tina into the small square hallway. Remembering Manny and his slightly resented obsession with always turning out unused lights she offered no remark.

Perhaps it was a good sign, indicative of the actual conclusion to all of Jeff's money troubles. The main room was also brightly lit. The five bulb light fitting hanging from the ceiling, The table lamp standing on a small table beside the sofa. The curtains were all tightly drawn. Tina without guile remarked on the room's resemblance to a well lit stage set. Jeff poured out a couple of glasses of scotch and they sat closely down on the sofa. And so it began.

'Can we turn down the lights?'

'Thought we might leave them on. Tonight I really want to see you as you really are. Beautiful. Desirable. You have no need to be seen in subdued lighting. Not you.'

Sliding a practiced hand inside the back of her blouse he undid the clasp using two fingers. Her unrestrained breasts retained their elevation and relaxed. Things moved on. Tina imperceptibly became aware of an unwanted and unexpected inward anxiety. She felt no recollection of this being in any way alike to their previous lovemaking. It seemed stage managed. Her body. His hands. The unbuttoning before removal and exposure. Had it been scripted in advance? Telling herself not to be idiotic. Loosen up and enjoy. The sensation of being used as a marionette refused to subside.

She pulled away from him sharply 'That noise? What is it?'

'What noise?' Just something outside in the street. Relax.' soothing her with a kiss.

Tina allowed herself to be kissed and then reflex suddenly, stood up her body rigid with that instinct that overtakes normality and invokes the irresistible urge to run. She looked down on him sitting flushed and uncomfortable. She spun a dancer's turn on the sole of her right foot and found herself looking at the door of a walk in cupboard set in the wall. What was it? Just a normal door. Then she saw the aperture. Directly in the middle and shoulder height, a neat round hole that glinted for an instant then in an instant became a dead eye. Four paces, Tina pulled open the door. Inside stood a well built man in his right hand dangling by his side holding an expensive super eight video camera. There was no threat to her implied in his stance or attitude. Perhaps just a hint

of unsaid 'have seen it all before.' amusement.

'His idea darling,' he explained pointing the camera at Jeff. 'Owes us lot of money. Our money. We want it back,' His delivery was in short monotone phrases. 'Blue Movie. For us money in the bank. Gets him off the hook. Maybe a little to spare for services rendered. Know what I mean,' Casually he clicked off the camera power switch. 'Well he is your boyfriend.'

Tina turned 'You filthy bastard!'

Self preservation took over. Grabbed up her handbag with one hand and tried to fasten her gaping blouse with the other. Rushed in jerks to the front door and opened it. She did not look back. A voice from inside the walk in cupboard emphasized 'Well my friend we will get what we are owed. One way or another.'

In the evening it was difficult to find a taxi in this outer district. Eventually a cab that had dropped off a fare took pity and drove her away through the dark wet streets and roads towards her home. Sitting In the dark and slightly damp rear of the cab her rigidity started to subside though not entirely. Taxi drivers who develop an instinct for the woes and troubles of some of their fares indulged in the odd pleasantry, nothing more, and at her request dropped her some distance away from her house. It was too early to go in though she was desperate to reach the comfort of her bedroom. Manny would still be awake watching the television. He would ask questions she would prefer not to answer.

Six weeks later she had been booked into her regular spot at *The Sycamores*, George Mason was there sitting there, with his usual calm smile, at his table by the band stand. Behind the microphone Tina saw George but no Jeff. Later when the entertainment for the evening had finished She accepted his invitation to have a drink with him. It was soon obvious that he knew nothing about her relationship with his son.

Obliquely she inquired 'How is Jeff keeping?'

George Mason replied with unrestrained animation 'Wonderful. He was offered a job abroad. Somewhere in the Middle East. Very well paid. It came

out of the blue. Had to leave almost at once. I had a postcard from him just a week or so ago.'

Tina thought for a moment and decided *why inflict the sins of the son on to the Father.*' Manny would have approved.

Two more years consolidated her status as a appreciated and reliable performer. An offer came from the owner of the *Chez Joey* to join the permanent entertainment staff. The money was generous. No more travelling here and there around the circuit. Reasonably defined working hours. She accepted with no regrets.

She saw George Mason just one more time after the final booking she had agreed to do at *The Sycamores* the week before she was due to start working at the *Chez Joey*. The same old constant George. Jeff was doing well. Remained living and working abroad. Had got married. No children yet. Here was hoping. Some time later Tina heard from another performer that George Mason had suffered from a stroke and immobility confined him to his home and to the care of a widowed sister.

X

Thursday evening at the *Chez Joey* had ended. It was now early Friday. Ralph concluded his last spot and every evening with 'The Party's Over'. She had heard the song hundreds of times. Sung by others and herself. Tina sitting in the dressing room and looking at herself in the mirror listened more intently that she usually did. Muffled but distinct the words of the lyric reaching in assumed a requiem quality

The party's over

The candles flicker and dim

You danced and dreamed

Through the night

It seemed to be right

Just being with him

The resident trio had put on coats and hats and rushed off into the night. The city had many small clubs that continued to operate into the early hours, well beyond the time when the *Chez Joey* had closed its doors. Many featured trios of varied ability. Musicians with a leaning towards jazz regard bed as a place to be avoided unless it included a female occupant. The bar staff were cleaning up. Dave on the street door thinking about going on somewhere for a drink or two. The main lights were all on, awaiting for the arrival of the cleaning ladies. The public had left. Harsh white light. All illusion had departed until it was resurrected again in the evening with the mere flick of a light switch or two.

Tina lit a final cigarette sitting in front of the illuminated mirror. Yes, she continued to be an attractive women. This she could register clearly without affectation. The hem of her dress continued to chaff her ankles. Picking up a pair of scissors, an essential accoutrement in any dressing room, she leaned over in her chair and cut a long Cheongsam Slit through the hem and up along her right leg. Freedom of movement received a grateful welcome. She stubbed the half smoked cigarette on the logo embossed aluminium ashtray.

Dave sensing her presence pulled open the door to allow her access to Back Cannon Street. They exchanged goodnight sentiments, not hollow but meant, and she walked off and along the pavement toward the main street joyfully ambulant 'that dammed hem!' Halfway along the street she hesitated, stood still, plunged her hand into her bag, fumbled for a moment, her finger tips touched the metal, Braille read the inscription, pulled the chromium lighter clear of other entanglements. Tina North gracefully bent her knees and dropped the chromium love token through a an opening slot in cast iron grid that covered a drain. Just a gentle *plop* then it was gone. She stood up to her full height, five foot one in heels, and walked on towards the brighter lights of the main thoroughfare.

In the wee small hours of the morning

While the whole wide world is fast asleep

**You lie awake and think about the boy
And never, ever think of counting sheep
Until now...**

Sheila South



My funny valentine

Sweet comic valentine

You make me smile with my heart

Your looks are laughable

Unphotographable

Yet you're my favorite work of art

I

Should there exist a contemporary Doctor Johnson with a desire to recreate his famous dictionary, on reaching the letter "F" and needing to find a definition that encapsulated the word "Fastidious" he would need to look no further than Doctor. Maurice Wilcock Phd. (Cantab) It was a quality he evinced, almost, if not actually, at the moment he emerged from the womb. This did of course delighted his parents. His mother in particular. Nappies dispensed with far quicker than his peers. Mealtimes rarely left any inadvertent debris around either bowl, spoon, or his mouth. His Mother would in later years insist that it had surely been his own decision to cease feeding at the breast and move rapidly on to the far more hygienic bottle. His Father did from time to time have his own thoughts concerning his son's

behavioural patterns, but in a world, the world he lived in, his wife and most of her acquaintances could only express lavish praise for the enviable progress of this admirable paragon.

His school days and higher education were ink blot free. Crabbed and disillusioned teachers, who's only comfort was the lure of retirement, considered how much more fulfilling their careers would have been if only every child under their tutelage had been even fractionally similar to Maurice Wilcock junior.

He progressed up the academic elevator, solidly, but without disruptive brilliance. Bright stars are admired in principle, but are in truth viewed with a certain self-preserving anxiety by some members of the teaching profession and academia, always keenly aware of the possibility of threat to their own opinions and carefully nurtured status.

Attentive, never skipping a lecture, essays delivered on time. Post graduate thesis presented a solid if stolid "*Ethical Aspects of the Augustan Poets*". A lectureship was offered and accepted. The prospect in some time future of a professorship seemed certain. Now in his mid-forties this had yet to be achieved.

Doctor. Maurice Wilcock Phd. (Cantab) did not care too much for the modern world. Modern literature. Modern poets. The Modern - full stop. Being an intelligent individual he had however realised at the start of his university career that academia is a game and schism was something permissible only to the outstanding. Maurice lived his daily life in a cloud of quotations and metaphor. Could quote *The Moderns* with admirable fluency. Was steeped like a dried green pea in the prose, poetry, and dramatic writings of the twentieth century. Maurice was often called upon to media pundit, though even when he was convincingly pontificating about Pound and Elliot et al. the greater portion of his mind and intellect continued to hover in and around the norms of the seventeenth and eighteenth centuries.

Currently he was attending, as a delegate, not a speaker, an academic conference hosted by The City University. The first day dripped and droned on by, Becket. Joyce and the rest of the crew. He shuddered inwardly during the hour when a paper about Brecht was presented. He had been a delegate at

such conferences many times before, sometimes as a contributor. Literary Pathology Labs where entrails were exposed mulled over.

At eight drinks and canapés were served and the buzz of jostling massed delegates moved up to ever greater levels of decibels. Maurice did not quite know how, even after the events that would follow. He found himself in the midst of a small circle of younger delegates. Their interests were not really his interests, but unexpectedly, he found almost enjoying the volley of conversation. Soon it was after nine in the evening. Robert, who filled a teaching and minor research post, *Rebrick* without question, suggested because they were all getting hungry they might all go to have a meal in the town centre. Maurice would in general have preferred to say no. Nevertheless he joined the party and they called a taxi to take them to a Chinese restaurant someone had recommended. Maurice thought to himself, that he would when the meal had been eaten and paid for, he make his polite excuses about having to prepare for tomorrow's agenda and return to his hotel. Somehow this did not happen.

Dave greeted one member of the party with polite recognition. 'Evenin Sir. Good to see you again. No, no need to be members. You just sign them in. No problem,' Pushing open the door 'Gentlemen.'

So it was that Maurice found himself unexpectedly sitting at a small table near the band stand in the *Chez Joey*. A round of drinks were ordered and Maurice sat, with some reservations, sipping a small dry sherry, fastidiously. Night clubs were not only well beyond his comfort zone, it was an entertainment destination, given a choice, he would have never considered choosing.

The house lights, already dim, dimmed even further, piano chords emanated from behind the now smoothly opening red velvet curtains. A presentable young man sang a song that appeared to hold the attention and meet the approval of the audience. Talk ceased and drinks more quietly imbibed. Another song or two followed. Then following a stagy pause announcing:

'Ladies and Gentlemen,' the red velvet curtain slid shut behind him 'The Chez Joey is proud to present the wonderful - Shelia South.'

There was a burst of clapping. A spot light hit the curtain. They opened again, slowly. The house lights became almost extinguished. The trio played an eight bar introduction. Sitting on a high stool centre stage, holding a microphone in her black, elbow length, gloved hand right hand, Shelia South raised the microphone nearer to her slightly parted lips and hit the first beat of the ninth bar.

I've got a crush on you, sweetie pie

All the day and night time give me sigh

I never had the least notion that

I could fall with so much emotion

Maurice sighed and took another taste of his dry sherry. What was he doing here? Later he did wonder if one or other of his companions had slipped something into his drink. The spot light drew in his focus with unfamiliar intensity and attention on to the young woman sitting on her high stool, singing a song with a lyric Maurice would never considered choosing or listening to, even if it had been the only surviving example of recorded music on a dying planet.

Shelia South was, to use apt cliché: a well made young woman. Not slim. Not overweight. Proud contours she was unashamedly proud of. The silver lamé dress, ankle length, enhanced her shape, shimmering artfully, sensually enhancing out each note and phrase. Maurice became perturbed and more than a trifle uncomfortable. The flesh on the inside of his sensibly under-panted thighs began to uncontrollably twitch and tighten. The more Maurice looked at the singer. The greater the reaction. He took a less constrained sip of his dry sherry. This surprising and unexpectedly pleasurable reaction, virus like, continued and increased exponentially during Shelia South's three song set. It became apparent Shelia South had a fan base and warm and appreciative applause ushered the red velvet curtains close. The house lights went up again.

The gentle tingle in his loins subsided, except for an occasional, troubling, reflex twitch. Music from the trio continued. Later in evening pleasant

enough songs where sung by a small dark haired young woman called Tina North. Much later the evening concluded with what Maurice accessed to be a maudlin rendering of 'The Party's Over', his first hearing, It was in reality the closing song of every evening at the *Chez Joey*. He amusedly catalogued it as the Americanized clone of Auld Lang Syne. Fastidiousness and a measure of conceit are often fellow travellers, and what he considered to be and original and apposite comparison, was squirreled away to be used as metaphor during a tutorial sometime in the future. Maurice, in common with the habits of red tailed rodents, found peace and security, knowing he had somewhere, a store of nuts in reserve.

It was one after midnight. The town hall clock rang out confirmation. A late hour for Maurice who usually, with care and precision, slid, his feet beneath the sheets and blankets around ten thirty most evenings. He had rooms in college, but generally lived and slept in the family home. Only his Mother now. Father have passed on several years ago to a much less fastidious beyond.

Pillow hitting oblivion failed to manifest itself and Maurice's wakefulness and unaccustomed pre-sleep discomfort began to create unfamiliar creases and bunching in the bed clothes. Closing his eyes, a voluptuous, silver lamé draped vision hovered indeterminably between brain and eyelids. An unfamiliar, though not wholly disagreeable sensation yet again murmured from the inside of his thighs. The town hall clock marked out three after midnight before the vision started to fade and sleep at last released him.

II

I'm not much to look at

Nothing to see

Just glad I'm living

And lucky to be

I've got a man crazy for me

He's funny that way

Sitting in a taxi looking out at the illuminated shop window displays, Maurice considered his life up until this unplanned journey and its designated destination. Relations, other than aunts and uncles, had never occupied a meaningful sector in his daily life and work. Not a virgin, but the few encounters he had experienced as a university student, he considered to have been messy, both before and after and during the encounters. His experiments with flesh on flesh leaving him with a feeling of mild distaste. Maurice was content with who and what he was and experienced no urge to seek out *Plato The Symposium* set text first year students, his missing other half. Now forty five. Life was interesting and rewarding to an acceptable degree. The clasp of another's warm hand in the night neither desired or missed.

The taxi pulled up at the entrance to Back Cannon Street. 'Can I drop you here Guv? Hard to turn the cab around. It's a narrow street.' Maurice paid his fare and the taxi moved off in search of other paying passengers. Pulling the collar of his overcoat up around his neck, he hesitated, just for an instant, and then walked down the dark and narrow way.

Dave watched him get closer. 'Good Evenin Sir. Nice to see you again so soon. On your own?' Maurice parried with a short explanation. His companions of the previous evening having to be elsewhere. Dave nodded. Doormen follow a profession where discretion is sacrosanct. Pushing open the entrance door of the *Chez Joey*, not a mention of membership, Maurice found himself shepherded to the same table he had previously occupied and politely ordered a whiskey. Somehow the intended request for a sherry transmogrified in the saying.

Ralph, he now knew his name, hearing it mentioned by the people sitting at another table, sang three songs, different than those of the previous evening. The red velvet curtains closed. Then following on from Ralph's customary introduction, the house lights faded, the spot light hit the mark, the curtains opened, Shelia North, sitting on a high stool, clothed in gold lamé, hit the first note, this time without any eight bar introduction. A perfect, vibrato free E flat. In unison Maurice experienced the same tightening flesh in the soft

regions of his torso.

Before the curtains opened impatient anticipation. When they closed a void. The *Chez Joey* was crowded. Voices babbled. He knew the only reason for being there, sitting at this table, drinking a whiskey, unique in itself, was to get another glimpse of, and to hear, Shelia South. Ridiculous. His carefully controlled and delineated life intruded upon by a purveyor of tawdry songs. He would have never believed it of himself. Perhaps he should go and see a doctor. There again he could ask the waiter if Miss, he assumed she would use this title, Miss Shelia South, would be so kind as to permit him to buy her a drink.

Sitting within a noise suppressing bubble of his own construction, he suddenly thought about the film *The Blue Angel*, peering up into the far corner of the club his eyes fixed high above the band, the hazy darkness almost persuaded him that he could see, sitting alone in a private box, the bearded professor spiralling towards inevitable degradation, totally entranced and helpless, looking down at his nemesis, the black stockinged, bowler hatted, Weimar, peroxide blonde, casually pouring out melodic titillation.

'Waiter!'

'Yes Sir. Can I get you something?'

'I was wondering. I enjoyed her performance so much. Would Miss Shelia South allow me to buy her a drink?'

'I regret to say Sir, that it is unlikely. House rule. The artists only accept, hospitality from clients who are know to them personally.'

The rebuff was what he had expected. Paying his bill for the whiskey he left the *Chez Joey*. Nodded in the direction of the doorman 'Early start in the morning.' and then walked rapidly down Back Cannon Street to find a taxi.

The town hall clock struck the hours regularly before sleep eventually prevented the formation of more creases and rills in the bed clothes. His dreams overflowed with a gold and silver lamé tendrils.

III

It's quarter to three

There's no one in the place 'cept you and me

So set 'em' up joe

I got a little story I think you oughtta know

In the morning he would take the train and travel back to that safe familiar environment where he lived and worked. He felt he needed to explained this to Dave The Dorman. Nothing about the safe and familiar, only the destination.

Dave the doorman, because of his occupation, and being not an unintelligent individual, was an acute observer of the genus man. This is an essential item in the tool box of Dave and other members of the same calling. The requirement to judge with a glance and predict the likely behaviour of the clients who passed through his door. Dave was a filter that separated out the predictively disruptive. Maurice however was, for him something of a puzzle. He was presentable enough, Dave did not detect a trace of obsession.

Maurice, impatient at having to sit through the overly long nightly preamble before the appearance of Shelia South, ordered a second glass of whiskey. Recommended by the waiter, his imprimatur influenced by both taste and cost, Maurice sipped the unfamiliar liquid, golden peaty drops rolled on his tongue.

The moment arrived. Shelia South sitting on her customary high stool, this evening dressed in green lamé, blonde hair piled up, extenuated her face and neck. The parted lips, a glint of fine white teeth. Flesh on flesh at that moment for Maurice seemed the most desirable activity he could possibly wish for. Hot and messy. Banishing the hygienic bottle to the cupboard where it belonged.

During the pause between the end of the second song and the start of the third and final rendition the waiter slipped across and whispered confidentially in his ear 'Yesterday evening I mentioned to Miss South your kind invitation to buy her a drink. She will be more than happy to accept one from you this evening. I will come back when she comes off stage.'

Maurice sat ecstatic and entranced, the vision of Miss Shelia South, her voice, her body, her everything, the possibilities, his body transformed into a sponge, soaking up a surfeit of warm perfumed water. The concluding song concluded. The red velvet curtains started to close. There was problem. The curtains twitched and agitated the unseen operative making increasingly futile attempts to make them smoothly close. It was apparent that this was not going to happen. Some malfunction in the hooks and rails. Shelia South looked distinctly uncomfortable and gave the concealed string puller increasingly desperate glances. It became obvious that this evening she would have to exit the stage, not behind the anonymity of the screening red velvet, but in open view of the public. Slowly, hesitantly, Miss Shelia South got down from her high stool. Her green sequined heels touched the floor of the podium. Maurice choked on his whiskey. He saw now the reason of the customary routine of opening and closing of the red velvet curtains at the beginning and end of her act. Miss Shelia South was lame. His obsession fractured and scattered, a precious Wedgewood vase falling to its destruction on a marble floor. His life bounded by literature invoked a vision of Leopold Bloom hiding behind a wall above the beach watching crippled Gerty MacDowell limping off to join her friends.

He stood up. Looked down. Engaged in no eye contact with the waiter, paid his bill, collected his overcoat and rapidly went out, with only a sidelong nod towards Dave, hurried off down Back Cannon Street.

It was late. There were no taxis to be found and hailed. He pointed himself in the direction of the hotel, thrusting his hands deep into his overcoat pockets, and recalled the words written by Franz Kafka in his travel diary describing the aftermath of a visit to a Paris brothel: *lonely, long, absurd walk home.*

Gone with the wind

Just like a leaf that has blown away

Gone with the wind

My romance has flown away

Girl Talk



They like to chat about the dresses they will wear tonight

They chew the fat about their tresses and the neighbours' fight

Inconsequential things that men don't really care to know

Become essential things that women find so apropos

Tina North and Shelia South met every Tuesday lunch time at an Italian restaurant. The *Chez Joey* did not open on a Monday so there was no need to sleep late. The restaurant with its relaxed and friendly atmosphere was enjoyed by both of them. The owner liked what he called - The Show Biz Crowd - and many of the musicians and singers from the various clubs around town went to eat there on a regular basis.

During the meal their talk was inconsequential. Cosmetics. The new dress shop in Fuller Gate. Shoes. Very often about shoes. Minor health issues. Then along with the coffee and the token gesture, a large glass of Grappa, on the house, the more serious gossip and chat would commence.

'I saw you leave again, Saturday, was it Saturday? The young guy who sits at the bar nursing a beer as though he is never going to drink it. Who is he?' The young man, Shelia South had frequently seen, but never spoken to, had appeared on the scene a couple of months before, came most nights, said little or nothing to anyone, always plunged in his own thoughts. Not bad looking.

Probably older than he looked. A kind of sad face. Thick dark hair with a curl to it.

Tina North looked into the distance for a moment and replied "Nothing heavy. I like him. We just got talking. You know how it is.' Shelia South who did know it is asked 'Are you sleeping with him?' Tina North looked slightly amused and said 'No' and sipped her Grappa. 'He is a musician of some sort. I think he plays the trumpet. Came back home North from London. A really nice guy. Nothing like the usual gropers.'

'What does he do?'

'Nothing much so far as I can see. Recovering from some kind of break down.'

"Humph". Shelia South did not take particularly sympathetic view of men and their largely self inflicted problems.

'No. No self pity. Took me a while to get him to tell me much about himself. Seems to lack trust. Especially when it comes to women.'

Shelia South who had many contrary experiences was not inclined to be moved by complaining men and their woes.

'After hours the week before last he told me all about it. He had been working freelance on the London scene. Making a living. Reasonably content. He had been going out with the same girl for almost a year. Small and blonde. Outgoing and sociable. He said to me that it is possible to love someone too much. She was the someone and he the too much. One evening towards Christmas she was over at his place. He had felt for a while, not a stupid guy, that things between them had not been quite the same. She came out with that killer phrase. "Let's just be friends". Well he was hurt. Though it was not unexpected. They kissed and off she went into the night. There was for him a sense of relief. It had been good. It was over. He telephoned some friends who were having a party and started to get washed and dressed. Then the doorbell rang. It was the girl friend, standing on the mat, distraught, with tears stream over her cheeks. Rushed in and clasped her arms around his neck. No party for him. Bed. Two days before Christmas Day she left him

again. This time for good. The first break up he was able to reconcile himself to. The second one left him devastated. Couldn't eat. Started losing weight. Even music was an effort.'

Tina North asked for her coffee cup to be refilled.

'Some weeks later a close friend worked in a business nearby, some kind of factory, by accident or chance discovered the truth about what had really happened with Carl's girl friend. The young guy who props up the bar is called Carl. One of his friend's work mates told him he had been seeing this small blonde for a while now. But she began to get on his nerves. They had arranged to meet. He decided to finish it there and then. The friend told Carl his work mate was amused that basically he had told her to "sod off!" This she did and tearfully had gone straight back to Carl and his welcoming arms having only broken up and left him less than an hour before. Carl left London. Came home. Didn't go out of the house for more than three months. Was introduced into the *Chez Joey* by a friend.'

'Are you going to start sleeping with him?'

'I don't think so.' Tina North was well aware about the consequences of betrayal. The pairing of hurt souls healed nothing.

'What about last week,' said Shelia South the narrative now firmly in her corner. 'There was a group of men in The Club. I only recognized one of them. Dave told me later they were all from universities attending some kind of conference up at The City University. You probably didn't notice them coming in sitting in that hole they like to call a dressing room. Well there on my high stool and I noticed one of them in particular. You know what a lot of the punters are like. Pretend to listen to your singing but are in fact peeling off your bra with their eyes. This chap seemed to be a bit different. Oh yes he was looking. Yes he was looking but in a different way. It sounds really stupid but it was a sort of adoration. Made me feel like some kind of saint.'

'Saint ! That will be the day.'

'The next evening he was there again. Never took his eyes off me. Albert, the one who waits on, the one with the slicked back hair, told me later that this

unknown admirer had asked if could buy me a drink. You now how it is looking into the crowd and semi-darkness, you don't really take all that much in. But I did get a reasonable good look at him. Not young, not old, presentable, a studious looking man. You could see he was some sort of teacher. Well I told Albert of the slicked hair that if the man asked to buy me a drink, that's if he came back again, to say yes. I thought he might make a change from the usual "come back to my place" type".'

'Did he?'

'What?'

'Buy you a drink?'

'There he was again for a third night in a row. On his own. No friends with him. It was the night those bloody red velvet curtains got jammed and refused to close. You know how I hate to get down of the stool in full view of the public.'

Nothing needed to be said to explain this. Tina North nodded sympathetically.

'When I did get down off the stage and up to the bar he was gone. Dave told me that he had almost leapt through the door and rushed off down Back Cannon Street as if he was being chased by demons. Most peculiar. Can you trust any one of them?'

This was a sentiment they both shared, each having their own reasons and fractured memories to remind them why.

Sistas recognize no matter how you try to understand

To understand them

Oh noo you can't trust a man

Ralph



I'm mad about the boy

And I know it's stupid to be mad about the boy

I'm so ashamed of it but must admit the sleepless nights I've had

About the boy

I

Ralph stood naked in front of the long mirror fixed to tiled wall over the wash basin. This he did every morning. Examined his face. No obvious lines of age. Sideways reflection revealed the reasonably flat plexus, not quite so firm as in his twenties, but for a man nearing thirty six, acceptable. Ralph recognized Narcissus in action. This daily close examination of personal desirability, mixing pride with anxiety, is perhaps of greater concern men who prefer men. Men who prefer women, pot bellied individuals, unthinkingly assume their masculine allure remains intact. Not so with men who love men.

Considering the late nights at *The Chez Joey* and early mornings getting to bed, two to three after midnight most days, The House requirement to drink what the clients generously offered. Smokey atmospheres unavoidable hazard for singers. Ralph knew his constitution was robust. Could absorb the stress. A man working in a smelting shop might think his work was hot and tough.

Compared with a singer and Master of Ceremonies in a town centre night club the work involved ladling molten metal could be rated less hazardous.

The decor and fittings in bathroom displayed the hand and eye of his partner. Ralph and Vivien had lived as a couple for just over fifteen years. Vivien had a penchant for the dramatic. Gold taps on bath and wash basin. A bidet. Thick off-white shag pile covered the floor. Ruched curtains Discreet pink shaded central light fitting. Only the bulbs that illuminated the mirror were all revealing and even they were controlled by a dimmer switch. Furnishings in the spacious rooms within their apartment were immaculately fussy, demanding a level of constant attention that would horrify the average housewife. For Vivien this nurture had been particular delight. Unfortunately health concerns, mental and physical, gradually began transforming former delight into the onerous. Vivien would be sixty five on his next birthday. There were some private means and additionally Ralph earned good money working at The *Chez Joey* and this allowed them to hire what Vivien preferred to describe as being a *femme de manage*. The problem was these title enhanced toilers never extended their employ for more than a few months. Vivien was not an unkind man, paid well, but his persistent fussiness was extremely wearing and trustworthy and competent house cleaners were as difficult to find as albino foxes. So they, with kindly reluctance, moved on to care for more amenable employers and unsupervised care of interiors.

Ralph did share to some degree Vivien's desire to live in a environment dust free, ordered, aesthetic. Together they had enjoyed more than fifteen years of contented living. What now agitated Ralph was the gradual but obvious fragmentation of what was once a sharp and witty mind. Advice and examination was sought from their sympathetic and non-judgemental Doctor. Following this he privately explained to Ralph that his partner was starting to show the early symptoms of dementia. No, nothing could be done, no cure, not even much in the way of medication.

They both, without censure, had occasional casual relationships. Open relationships in their world not uncommon. It was necessary to be discrete and careful. The law concerning their orientation both harsh and unfair. Entrapment a regular strategy in a city where The Chief Constable considered it his duty not only to be concerned with enforcing the law as written but a

moral responsibility to a greater wigless judge.

Every city has pubs and clubs where safe and confident relaxation can be found. Their world was in essence no different than others who share a specific passion, hobbies for instance, rather than more interpersonal relations. Niche meeting places where the like minded could gather. Over the past two or three years this pleasurable ricocheting had diminished, particularly so for Vivien, who became more and more reluctant to wander far from the security of his, Belle Époque, rather than be in thirties Weimar surroundings.

II

Tina North sat with Ralph at a quiet table in *The Chez Joey* after the show had ended and the clients had left. The bar staff were tidying and cleaning bar tops and rinsing dirty glasses. Ralph refreshed Tina's gin with another splash of tonic. Ralph was the consummate professional. His leg might have been about to fall off but the audience be totally unaware that anything was amiss. Tina knew better. It requires a practiced ear to detect the slight variation in tone that indicates during a song that something none vocal was troubling the singer.

'Is this about Vivien?' Ralph's personal and domestic arrangements were of no mystery to the staff of the *Chez Joey*. In the past, though not recently, Vivien would settle on an unobtrusive bar stool, usually on a Saturday night, watch the show and then leave with Ralph to go home, or sometimes to take in a late night Indian restaurant, perhaps another club. Everyone liked Vivien, he was polite and amusing and radiated that rare quality of asking about their doings instead giving detailed expositions of his own preoccupations. Recently Vivien had started to do something that had never happened in the past, telephoning several times during the course of an evening and asking, and sometimes even demanding, to talk to Ralph.

Ralph first met Vivien one month after his twenty first birthday. Vivien ran a small but successful commercial art studio. Known around the club scene, his work, his studio was responsible for the design and production of numerous

posters, trade visiting card, and other print and paper necessities. Ralph who was beginning to gain an increasing level of attention as a stylish performer had called in at Vivien's office to arrange the design and printing of business cards whose layout and weight, would reinforce the receivers affirmation of his rising status, both as a singer and MC. Within a month Ralph had moved in to share Vivien's comfortable and individualistic apartment and his bed.

Theirs was a comfortable arrangement. Vivien understood the demands of Ralph's work as a singer with the odd hours going and odd hours coming home again. Ralph admired Vivien's creativity and business acumen. They had many friends, men and some women, who fully understood the pleasures and dangers of their chosen life style. Neurosis was not a factor in their personal lives, both understanding and comfortably accepting their relationship preferences. There was nothing of the outrageous in their appearance or behaviour. Seen walking down the street together even ultra observant passers by would register nothing other than two outwardly unremarkable men on their way to somewhere.

Uncharacteristic incidents were the first indication that the idyll was starting to fracture. Vivien had never been aggressive even during their infrequent arguments. Ralph had made a cup of tea and Vivien looked at the proportion of tea to milk, was displeased, and only just restrained himself from hurling the saucer and cup across the room. An instant of tension melded into a frown of sadness and stress. He had looked up at Ralph and said 'Forgive me.' An assurance that 'There was nothing to forgive.' making him seem to be even more confused. That night at the *Chez Joey* Tina sensed real sadness in Ralph's singing. There was nothing showbiz or superficial in his articulation of the words

Yesterdays

Yesterdays

Days I knew as happy sweet

Sequestered days

Olden days

Golden days

Days of mad romance and love

Then gay youth was mine

And truth was mine

Joyous free and flaming life

Forsooth was mine

Sad am I

Glad am I

For today I'm dreaming of

Of yesterdays

Then gay youth was mine

The truth was mine

Sad am I

Glad am I

For today I'm dreaming of

Of yesterdays

III

The morning was a fine one. The evening before had been difficult. Vivien and telephoned the *Chez Joey* six times and when Ralph was eventually able to answer his seventh call, having just ended his first set of the evening, the

distress in Vivien's voice was palpable.

'Where are you?'

'You know where I am. At work. The Chez Joey.'

'When will you be coming home?'

'The usual time. Around two.'

'Oh. Where are you?'

'At The Chez Joey. Vivien - why don't you have a large scotch and go to bed. I will see you later or in the morning.'

'Who are you with?'

'No one.'

'Where are you?'

'Look. I am have to going to ring off. Shelia North's spot coming up and I need to be on the stage do the announcing. You know she has a particular routine with the high stool and the curtains.'

Vivien seemed just for a fraction of time understand. Then 'Where are you?'

The line went dead as he replaced the telephone receiver.

IV

Vivien woke up around nine thirty, later than usual, usually he was an early riser. Ralph made him a cup of coffee and some toast. The confusion of the previous evening appeared to have evaporated. Ralph suggested they go to town and do some shopping. Nothing specific. Clothes. Jewellery. Fabrics. Not even to buy, just to look and enjoy, buying only if there was something irresistible This was the kind of itinerary Vivien loved. This bright morning

there was no indication of distress or anxiety. Shopping and then lunch. Perfect.

Relaxed and jokingly happy. Just like old times. Vivien animated, critical, and admiring, of the various types of merchandise they eyed over. Going into a particularly large department store with floor upon floor of fashionable goods of every kind they strolled amusedly about.

'Hold on a moment," explained Ralph "I will only be a minute. I need to go to The Gents.'

Vivien smiled back at him ' I will wait here and have a look these silk ties. Might even buy one for you providing you are a good boy.'

Returning less than five minutes later Vivien had gone. 'Must have wandered off to look in another section of the department' inwardly sensing Vivien had done no such thing. An increasingly fraught search of the entire store floor by floor. Nothing. Inquiry at the information desk situated on the ground floor. Nothing. The young woman explained that the public address system was usually reserved to reunite lost children with their mothers, but in this instance she would make an exception 'Please come to the Information Desk. Thank you.' Nothing. Ralph left the department store and walked rapidly around the city streets and squares scanning the crowds. Nothing. Brief visits to some of their favourite bars and restaurants. Nothing.

The Sergeant behind the desk at The Police Station looked quizzical and peered at Ralph with his professionally honed tendency towards suspicion. Ralph and Vivien had lived together for fifteen years but the cohabitation had no status in law. Their loving and committed relationship in eyes of the law a vicious and immoral one.

'You say your friend has disappeared?'

'This afternoon. We were having a look around Curtis and Davenport. You know the department store in Upper Mill Street. I left him on his own for a moment,' He knew it would be very unwise to say he had gone to "The Gents." even though a perfectly innocent necessity.

'What is your relationship to this person. A member of your family?'

'No. A good friend. Known each other for years.'

'Well I must say that its only a few hours ago. A grown independent man. He can go where he wants without having to ask anybody. Right!'

Ralph knew that tone of worming innuendo. A convincing explanation was needed

'Truth is. Well he has bouts of memory loss. The doctor has seen him and warned it's a progressive condition with no available cure.'

'I see.' The sergeant dimly considering this to be a reasonable.

'He has no family. A bachelor.'

'I see.' Repeated The Sergeant visualizing his congenitally disagreeable wife.

'Not a bad way to lead your life. Fancy free,' reading The Sergeant's thoughts and his expression. 'Until of course you find yourself in a situation such as this one.'

The Sergeant considered for a moment. Desk full of paper work to wade through. No point in prolonging the interview. 'You on the telephone? Leave me your number. If we get a report in I will call you.'

Ralph thanked him and left The Police Station, relieved to be out and away from this arena of explanations and potential menace. He took a taxi back the flat and poured himself a large neat scotch. Sat down feeling drained and listless. Nothing to do be wait. The scotch and stress combined to lure him into a troubled doze. Around two in the afternoon the telephone rang. Semi-consciousness jolted into alert.

'Good afternoon Sir.' Central Police Station here 'There might be some news about your missing friend. A report has just arrived about a confused man having been left in the care of St Agnes's Hospital. You no how to get there?'

'Yes. I will take a taxi and get up there to check if it is my friend. Many

thanks for your call and concern.'

V

St Agnes's Hospital was been built in the middle of the nineteenth century. Architects during this period were also commissioned to design workhouses. Workhouses had now been demolished. Their imprint however remains to be seen in the structure of hospital façades. Unwelcoming, neglected brick work. An institution that cared, in general, for the ailing lower echelons. Ralph asked the taxi driver to wait, however long, and getting out of walked through the echoing main entrance. Inside the doors was a Porter's Lodge. A bleak room in actuality. Sitting on a bench inside, hunched and wretched, Vivien. Looking up at Ralph he did not greet or acknowledge him. The Porter sitting at a desk behind a sliding window explained, indicating Vivien, that the duty doctor had prescribed and administered a mild sedative.

Vivien had gone out of the department store and hailed a taxi. The taxi driver explained, to The Porter and the duty doctor, that he seemed excited and said he was on his way to meet his Mother, giving an address and asking the driver to take him there. The taxi driver knew this location to be an area where extensive clearance had taken place in recent years, much of the ground still barren and waiting redevelopment and for the builders to move in and start work. They had driven around for almost half an hour the taxi driver eventually asking at one of the very few small shops still existed about the address he was trying to find, only to be told it had been street had been razed more than five years ago leaving only weeds as an epitaph to the street ever having been there. The taxi driver began to realize his passenger, colloquially, had lost his marbles. Many taxi drivers infuriated at losing time and a fare would have been inclined to dump Vivien out of the taxi and drive off without giving it a moments consideration or regret. Vivien was fortunate to have been picked up by a more compassionate individual who immediately took to him the nearest hospital and having escorted him inside explained the circumstances to The Porter.

'I'm a family friend,' explained Ralph 'We were shopping when he wandered off. Can I take him home?' There was no formalities. No papers to sign. He

refrained from mentioning that Vivien's mother had died twenty years ago. The taxi was awaiting in the roadway outside of the hospital. Ralph helped an uncomprehending Vivien into the back of the cab and they were driven home. Paying the fare 'Hope you mate is feeling better?' thinking well at least he had not been sick on the floor, a regular hazard of a taxi driver's calling, particularly on a late Saturday night. Ralph smiled his thank you and gave the driver a generous tip over and above the fare on the meter.

Once inside Ralph made a pot of tea, Lapsang Souchong, and poured Vivien a cup of this much appreciated infusion. The warm and smoky brew appeared to booster him into a more articulate and conscious state. Vivien appeared to have no recollection of the events department store, taxi, the hospital, and there did not seem to be any sensible reason to question or enlighten him. At this moment Vivien had mentally broken the surface and gulping the air of rationality was behaving as he once was.

In the evening and having to leave for work at the *Chez Joey* Ralph had to suppress rising anxiety about having to leave his partner alone in the flat. Vivien showed no signs of anxiety or stress, cheerful, like all those evenings in the past when it was time for Ralph to leave for work.

"I'm off now. Work calls."

'No rest for the wicked.'

'Should be home around two. Why don't you go to bed with a large gin and a good book.'

'Don't worry about me. I will be fine. Why shouldn't I be?'S

Afterwards Ralph recalled the intense embrace and kiss Vivien had given him before he opened the door and left. Affection wears a changing garb when couples have been together for many years, not diminished, expressed differently. This moment of intimacy invoked a memory their earlier years together. They exchanged a parting smile and the door closed.

The evening at the *Chez Joey* went well. Always a good appreciative crowd on Saturday evenings. Ralph was aware that fundamentally nothing had

altered regarding Vivien's prognosis but had a notion that maybe the ramifications were now better understood, this understanding, making for better means of dealing with the inevitable.

VI

There was a perceptible stillness in the apartment when Ralph opened the door and went in. The lights were out with the exception of a small table lamp in the sitting room which was always left on until he came home. Going into the darkened bedroom, Vivien could never sleep if there was even a trace of light, he undressed quickly and slipped under covers. His hand reached across to squeeze Vivien's hand. It was warm but felt limp and lifeless. Turning on his bedside light he looked at the face on the pillow. Vivien never slept on his back. Always on his right side. His colour looked normal, and yet, something was very wrong. Fearfully he leaned across and placed a forefinger just under the ear. He pressed again. Then again. No pulse. For an instant Ralph became rigid. If Vivien was dead. And of that there seemed to be little doubt. Tears must be postponed. Essential reputation saving matters needed done and arranged. He got out of bed and walked around to the other side and switched on the Vivien's bedside lamp, illuminated by the pink shade, a bottle for sleeping pills, empty. Two envelopes, one was addressed to himself marked personal penned on its face with Vivien's enviable penmanship. The script did not show the customary firmness of line, there was a hesitancy in the strokes. On the front of the other letter: To Whom it May Concern.

My Darling Boy

All will be over when you read this. What happened today is never going to occur again. My own dignity. Your sanity. Sooner or later we both know what the end will be. I have no intention of spending my final years uncomprehending in an uncomprehending world.

You are still a young man and need space to move on. For me it's over. Sharing my days with you has been the happiest period of my life, your love

and caring sustaining me and for all of those years. Thank you.

Try not to be too sad. I know this to be the best course of action for both of us.

Your ever loving,

Vivien.

PS.

I have been hoarding my sleeping pills for months against this inevitable day. What a naughty boy I am. xxx.

Ralph took a dressing gown from a chair at the foot of the bed and put it on. He pushed the opened and read letter into the right pocket. Took the second unsealed letter from the bedside table.

To Whom It May Concern,

Increasing distress caused by a medical condition for which there is no cure available. I decided to end my life with fortitude and dignity. This is wholly my own decision. My affairs are all in good order. I apologize in advance of the work and inconvenience I may have caused.

Vivien Davidson

Half joking half serious Ralph and Vivien had in the past discussed a possible scenario such as the one Ralph was now in, formulating the course of action he must follow if one or the other had become seriously and suddenly ill. Between a man and wife an obvious tragedy. When the couple where two men a tragedy could rapidly become sinister escalation when questions would be asked. They had a number of years ago made will and testaments in favour

of the other. The flat had no mortgage to burden it.

Ralph put - To Whom It May Concern - back on the bedside table, taking care not to touch anything, particularly the sleeping pills bottle. What followed was reasonably easy. They kept all of their clothes in a small room that had been fitted with built in cupboards. Within the bedroom very few personal belongings. Emptying the small draw in his own bedside table and picking up the book he had been reading he quickly took them into the spare bedroom. Made the room look convincingly occupied. Went back to their bedroom and checked again to make sure it looked as if where Vivien's personal and private domain. He did not switch on off he bedside light. Reverently he bent over Vivien's face and kissed him on his brow, switched off the light on his own beside table and went to telephone the police.

The police constable who rang the door accompanied by a police surgeon was a very different example of an upholder of the law than the sergeant at the desk at the police station. A young man with a fresh complexion only asking what questions were necessary with nothing to indicate that he was on a digging expedition. The doctor examined Vivien, the sleeping pill bottle, and both the doctor and police constable read the - To Whom It May Concern - letter. Ralph had no intention of showing them the letter address to himself.

"Can I make a cup of tea?" suggested Ralph.

Thee police constable and the doctor assented. They all sat down in the sitting room. Looked at the decor with interest but made no comment. Ralph judged them to be intelligent and perceptive, they knew exactly what type of ménage they were sitting in. Nothing was said. The routine was explained. 'Took his own life when the balance,' said the doctor. 'There will have to be an inquest. It will be an open and shut proceedings. There are no doubts or questions that need to be examined concerning the circumstances.' He sought the approval of the constable. This was proffered.

An ambulance came half an hour later. Laid Vivien on a stretcher. Covered him with a blanket and carried him out of the apartment. The policeman and the doctor left but not before shaking Ralph's hand and expressing their condolences. The door closed and Ralph was alone.

There seemed little point in staying away from work. He quietly and privately explained to The Boss, to Tina and Shelia , the bar staff, what had happened. Some of the world would also know soon enough when a police report reached the new desk at the local newspaper. Also the report of the inquest. Then all would by soon forgotten except perhaps a few friends and acquaintances. Ralph ever the trouper directed the evening at the *Chez Joey* with is customary aplomb. Tina North sitting in the dressing room and hearing the first few bars came to the door and listen to Ralph singing.

The very thought of you makes my heart sing

Like an April breeze on the wings of spring,

And you appear in all your splendor,

My one and only love.

The shadows fall and spread their mystic charms

In the hush of night while you're in my arms.

I feel your lips, so warm and tender,

My one and only love.

Noreen Katz



You're not the girl I once knew

No need to tell me, I know we're through

It's all over now

You've changed

It was late at the Chez Joey. Carl, who always seemed reluctant to leave and go home, was sitting knee to knee with Tina North, an type of intimacy and can only be shared by those who are in no meaningful sense, intimate. Carl asked suddenly "do you find you have regrets about something you should have said or done?"

Tina North replied with needing to think about the question "Often".

"When I was living in London I often used to hang out in a basement coffee bar near by Charring Cross Station. The place was a well know dive for musicians, fringe people, the occasional druggie. You could doze the night away there if you needed to and no one would be in the least bothered. Very often there would be a jam session. Jazz, folk, not pop or rock. R&B now and then. Folk was the sound most evenings. Guitar strumming beardies doing over Woody Guthrie, Bill Broonzy, Blind Lemon Jefferson. Others obsessed with indigenous folk music, foot stamping declamations of what had happened during a cotton mill riot for bread in the early nineteenth century.

The kind of stuff that later developed into " Knees Up Mother Brown " for the middle classes. Another beer? That would be nice. Thank you".

Tina knew the scenario he was describing. Candles in Chianti bottles their slopping shoulders covered over with thick multi-coloured wax. Coffee served in transparent cups, on transparent saucers, mainly a milky froth, little actual coffee. Blue smoke from roll ups. Leg to leg along uncomfortable benches fixed to the walls.

"Among the folksy crowd was a girl called Noreen Katz. Jewish girl from outer London. I was introduced to her by another friend of mine also Jewish who had reservations about his origins which later were transformed into certainties. Well Noreen was a nice enough girl, but nondescript, downright dowdy. She was able to play a few chords, had a weak, if not unpleasant singing voice. Not the kind of girl most men and boys would go for even in a drought. Over a period of a few weeks I noticed her absence. I asked our mutual friend I happened to her? And got back a somewhat, eye arching, non-committal reply".

Carl drank a tablespoon mouthful of his beer.

"That year it was a beautiful summer. So hot. The fish in the ponds in St James Park were dying because of the lack of oxygen in the water. I can remember standing on the bridge over the lake, hand in hand, with my small blonde, and looking down at them. Poor gasping things.

On Saturday afternoon and I was alone, walking across Leicester Square on my way to a rehearsal in Soho when I noticed this immaculate young man walking a few paces in front of me, also going in the same direction as myself. Italian pants. Italian shoes. Beautiful shirt. Hair groomed by someone who was a wizard with scissors and comb. Alongside and finding it hard to keep up with the long firm strides of her companion a very neat little red head.

I was a bit late and overtook the pair. My God. I saw it was Noreen. Transformed from a dowdy and timid little girl into an convincing impression of a self confident young man. Noreen looked at me. I looked at her. I made as if to be unsurprised by this radical change in her appearance. We

exchanged a few words. The pretty red head looked demure and said nothing. I walked on and that was the last time I saw her".

"And the regrets? " Asked Tina "What are they?"

"I should have said, Noreen, you look wonderful, you look great. I'm so pleased that you have discovered who you are. I should have told her."

"She might have thought it patronizing." .

"I realize that" said Carl "The regret is not hers but mine".

Just what I wanted, just what I wanted

Just what I wanted, oh, my, my

Look around, Just what I wanted

Just what I wanted

Just what I wanted, I'm alright

I'm alright

Oh my, my

I'm alright, I'm alright

Kate de Vos



**Round and round like a horse on a carousel, we go,
Will I catch up to love? I could never tell, I know,
Chasing after you is like a fairytale, but I,
Feel like I'm glued on tight to this carousel**

I

When you marry at eighteen a time can arrive, post thirty, when you can begin to wonder if you have been missing something. You have two children. A boy and a girl. A king's wish. Caring husband, polite, considerate, pliant, but invisible. Not in a literal sense, but Kate, when they were out together, often had the feeling that other people had to make an effort to notice he was there. Their more intimate moments reminded Kate of an especially polite hat raising ritual. Not of course she had any experience that would provide a means of comparison. It was perhaps like most marriages, a few years in, routine, familiar, without there ever being anything much to cause even a mild register on the Richter Scale. Passing thirty somehow caused a twitch in Kate's psyche.

Kate was a presentable and intelligent young women. Working as a PA for a senior executive she was efficiency personified. Bright in brain and appearance and proactive. The work was interesting and the salary generous.

There were perks. Personal parking space for her small economical car in the sub-basement parking bays under the recently constructed commercial development. A significant voucher enabled lunch allowance.

Kate was liked by her boss, her colleagues and particularly so by Alice and Roberta who occupied the office next to her own. They profiled Kate as being a rather dynamic young women, almost glamorous, and fantasized about her leading both in and out of the office, the kind of life they would have wished to aspire too themselves, even though they where more than aware this was for themselves an unattainable fantasy.

Alice was tall and thin, rather than slender. Roberta small, round, and somewhat two dimensional. An enterprising conceptual artist, if given the opportunity to do so, might have placed Roberta on the head of Alice and in doing so produced a convincing representation of an old fashioned lollipop.

Kate encouraged their imaginings concerning the life they thought she was leading even though it was in reality a delusion. Kate's life was in general, in the domestic arena, as dull as an unpolished silver teapot. The springs of the conjugal bed never remotely in danger of suffering even minor metal fatigue.

II

It was The Annual Conference that laid down the piste where she was destined to, at first hesitantly, snow plough, and then parallel turn down with ever increasing velocity.

The Annual Conference was an event where all of the more senior staff from the regional offices were bunched into the conference room in the well appointed hotel and prestigious town centre hotel. It provided the opportunity senior employees, mostly male, to have an agreeable few days unhooked from the domestic leash.

The events of the year were solemnly reviewed and suitably applauded. Pecking orders adjusted if and where required. Very senior management, who occupied suites rather than single bedded rooms, and applied that time proven

melange of encouragement and understated threat gleaned from experience and MBA text books.

And then the dinners in the evening. Always worth attending. The hotel was recommended within the pages of various guides to good beds and good cheer. The entire exercise designed to propel the attendees back to their regional locations filled with a steadfast desire to do everything they were able to move forward and upward the aims and objectives of The Company, that not only provided them with employment, but lavish annual hospitality.

Kate was always in attendance at this annual jamboree. One of the very few trouserless delegates. The company had an unspoken, nowhere written, dress code preference for skirts. Kate enjoyed The Annual Conference, sharing with the male delegates a welcome freedom from her own constraints of domesticity. Arthur, that was the first name of her husband, never objected to her absence for the two days and nights. He rather enjoyed the prospect, for two nights, of being able to drift into sleep lying diagonally across the bed's under sheet.

All conference delegates were expected to occupy pre-booked hotel rooms for the duration of the event. This included locally based personal. Bonding, another concept beloved of higher management, was the ultimate purpose of this strategy. And so it was at about ten on this mid-week evening Kate was not displeased to find herself sitting a table, ankle deep in carpet, sipping a gin and tonic, accompanied by several men of steeply varying gradations of desirability.

Go to any good hotel medium to late evening and inevitably you will observe a bevy of seated males looking diffident and hoping for the kind of adventure that will in except in rare instances never occur. Side glances at the very few unaccompanied females who might also be enjoying a night cap. The very fact they were sitting alone, late evening, marked their unapproachability as effectively as any chaperone. hovering about such late evening public rooms is an atmosphere of unrequited lust.

Kate however was not suffused with unrequited lust or diffidence. She was enjoying her gin and tonic, interested attention from the circle of men around the table, though what they might here and there had in mind, a specific type

of adventure, it was unlikely to be one she shared.

Around ten o'clock, Ronald, a middle manager, fortyish, presentable, amusing, and without that layer of male ego that automatically presumes his personal attraction greater than that of a powerful and liberally sprayed pheromone, asked If anyone knew if there was a jazz club somewhere in the city?

There was a silence. Jazz? Jazz and jazz clubs are to most people something that is never if ever given a smidgin of thought. You could just as well inquire of the average gathering of individuals where the nearest BSM club was located, though such an outlandish inquiry might perhaps arouse a greater degree of interest, it would produce no usable information.

'You like jazz?' responded a slightly obese senior manager dressed in a blue two piece suite with a dark blue thread running through the fabric. The word - Jazz - spluttered rather than rolled off his tongue, then sucking a molar as if trying to dislodge an irritating remnant of the recently consumed dinner.

Ronald smiled recognizing the scarcely hidden undertow 'Love it. Always have done. My late Father often took me to the local jazz club. Happy days,' He retired into his own thoughts for a moment 'Anyone one know if there is one hereabouts?' The response of the company was negative. Early to bed. Last drink and then up the stairs. Quick look around the Axminstered room. No chance of the unexpected this night.

A waiter hovered past their table. Slight but perceptible scruffiness in the manner he wore the red mess jacket embossed with the name and logo of the hotel. Not a person with a natural aptitude for servitude. Roland picked up the markers in an instant much as animals can profile another of his species with just a nostril sniff of a calling card left on a rock or tree stump.

'Excuse me. Can you tell me if there is a jazz club in the vicinity?' The waiter stopped in an instant and looked quizzically at Ronald. He was usually asked, discretely of course, about the possibility of a good Lap Dancing club, preferably some kilometres distant from the hotel. 'A jazz club. Yes of course. You like jazz?' pausing 'I happen to know that there is a really good New Orleans band performing there this evening. I was going to go myself

but have had to stand in for someone who is off sick.'

Off he went behind the bar and returned placing in Ronald's hand a yellow Post-It-Note with a biro scribble giving the address of New Orleans Hall. The waiter swiftly surveyed the company. His eye elevated the lid a millimetre. Ronald saw this and understood. Nobody else did. With the exception of Kate, her professional duties by necessity requiring a sharp perception of the unsaid and understated.

Ronald happy to have discovered one person working in the hotel who shared his own preference in music asked 'Can you get me a Taxi?' The waiter strode away to fulfil this mission 'Certainly Sir.' with a purposeful tread indicating satisfaction in having discovered one guest with taste amongst a gathering of barbarians.

'Anyone coming with me?' proposed Ronald without expectation.

'Jazz?' Mused an under manager from the North East Branch of the company. 'Jazz clubs.' Repeating the alien nature of the two words. He a more senior person, anxious to hive off up to his room and take in an hour or two of the X-rated television channel thoughtfully provided by the hotel cable service.

'I think not.' A family man, missing familiar domesticity, drained his glass, apologetically said 'Not for me,' and added, he was a polite individual 'Thank you all the same.'

'Bed for me if you don't mind.' The owner of volumes one to thirty six of The Best of Easy Listening, indicating verbally and with potent gestures that jazz was not really his thing.

Kate without hesitation replied 'Yes. I will come with you. It could be fun. I have never been to a jazz club before.'

III

Do you know what it means to miss New Orleans

And miss her each night and day

I know I'm not wrong because the feeling's

Getting stronger the longer I stay away

New Orleans Hall was situated at number twenty four in a narrow street about ten minutes from the hotel. Nearer in reality, the taxi driver using the geographical ignorance of his passengers to inflate the money on the meter five or nearer ten percent. The taxi set them down in front of the door. Took their money. Wished them a 'Good evening.'

Ronald pushed open a large and ill-used door. The entrance appeared to be bricked up with bodies. The back of bodies that is. Warm air, hot, not warm, hit Ronald's and Kate's faces. The sounds of three horns playing in unison blasted out over the heads of the people blocking their way in, contrapuntal sharps and flats bearing with them a mixture of pungent but not unpleasant aromas. People smells of course. Hot but happy. Beer drawn from beer pumps. Tobacco smoke various kinds drifting, mixing, embracing and parting. Cigarettes. Rollups. Pipes. A cigar or two. A blue haze hovering over the crowd much like an incipient morning mist but deficient both in light and dew.

Ronald who was obviously experienced at dividing and passing through a morass of jazz club patrons cleaved a way through to the bar. Kate not used to this unfamiliar body contact discovered the path he was forging to be not an unpleasant one. It occurred to her later that the transit from door to bar involved more intimate bodily contact with strangers then she had ever experienced in all of her previously, mostly, none tactile life.

Arms waved around the bar seeking attention and ordering resembling brokers on a stock exchange trading floor. Ronald secured two beers, if not instantly, without measurable delay, being one of those fortunate people who, as if by some magnetism, attract the immediate attention of this bar staff, to the annoyance of other thirsty less noticeable individuals.

Somehow he secured two seats directly opposite to the bandstand. This platform constructed from unpainted boards was raised up about a hands span

from the floor level. An upright piano with the front removed to reveal the hammers and innards stood with its back to the wall. A bass player. A banjo player. A drummer sitting behind a minimalist set of drums, the oversized bass drum membrane painted with the declaration that this band was called The Down Town Stompers. In a linear row the cornet, clarinet, and trombone players all sat on hard wooden chairs. Kate was to learn later that this mode of performing expressed the degree to which the band were wanting to recreate, as they saw it, the purity of the music. Standing up to play was something only done by Dixielanders.

The energy and enthusiasm of the band and its musicians became Kate's first plunge into a world about which she had, until this moment, known nothing. To say that she was excited by what was around her, the people, such people, the band, the musicians, the tobacco smoke, would to understate her reaction. To use the word orgasmic would be an exaggeration, more in the nature of particularly vigorous foreplay might perhaps be a more accurate description.

One hour or so after they had arrived, secured seats, had drunk several more glasses of beer, a dumpy women of uncertain age stepped up onto the podium. There was a moment of attenuated chatter from the crowd. The cornet player smiled up from his chair at this lady in an over tight dress patterned with florid magnolia blossoms. In one hand she held a glass of beer, half empty, and in the other a half smoked cheroot. Her fingers ringed on both hands. Finger nails painted bright green. Bending down, not with her knees, but her back, the cheroot was stubbed out, the beer glass placed without care next to the ashtray. She stood up on the three inch heels and the cornet player announced 'Miss Caroline Grey' before handing her the microphone. Anticipation rippled about the club and transformed itself into a wave hitting the dyke. Miss Caroline Grey was performer they knew, awaited, and acclaimed with hoots of approval and applause

The cornet player in the tradition manner beloved of all New Orleans band leaders, slow, beat, blues, stomped his foot hard four times on the boards beneath his chair.

I woke up this morning with a awful aching head

I woke up this morning with a awful aching head

**My new man had left me, just a room and a empty bed
Bought me a coffee grinder that's the best one I could find
Bought me a coffee grinder that's the best one I could find
Oh he could grind my coffee, cause he had a brand new grind
He's a deep sea diver with a stroke that can't go wrong
He's a deep sea diver with a stroke that can't go wrong
He can stay at the bottom and his wind holds out so long
He knows how to thrill me and he thrills me night and day
Oh he knows how to thrill me, he thrills me night and day
He's got a new way of loving, almost takes my breath away**

In the back of the taxi as they returned to the hotel Kate had a very specific vision " the dumpy lady on the bandstand " the words of the song. Kate's only thought "I want to do that !".

Ronald and Kate parted in the hotel lobby. He asked her if she had enjoyed the evening before they went up to their respective rooms. 'Enjoyed. Yes I did.' Ronald smiled, always happy to have found a new disciple and got into the lift, his room was on the fifth floor. Kate walked up the stairs, her room was on the first floor. 'Enjoyed!' she said to herself "Enjoyed! Its changed my life.'

IV

Two days later the conference over Kate returned to her PA duties at the office. Roberta and Alice swooped in through her open office door, two birds of prey not looking for flesh, but the infinitely more appetising gobbets of gossip about the doings at the town centre venue. Kate dramatically kept the

saga of the jazz clubs until the end of her preamble.

Two sets of eyes widened like an additional lane added to the ring road. 'A jazz club.' They insisted upon knowing all. Their own perception of jazz confined to some vague recollection of a brand of exotic perfume.

Kate gave them detailed and compelling sales pitch about the entire evening. Hotel to the jazz clubs. What happened at the jazz club. Jazz Club to the hotel. It was if Kate was an explorer having returned after an arduous expedition deep into unknown territory was now addressing the members of a society for the improvement of something or other. When asked who had taken her she explained all about Ronald.

'Did he try it on?' They asked in hopeful, breathless, unison.

Kate replied Ronald had behaved like the perfect gentleman.

Alice and Roberta greatly enjoyed the pre-owned thrill of It all and it reinforced their admiration for the life they imagined Kate enjoyed and the suggestion of melancholy that it was a slope they themselves would never climb.

'What an experience," they on-beat chorused. 'A jazz club.'

'Yes,' replied Kate 'and I am going to go there again. On my own.'

Two sets of eyes widened as if yet another lane had been suddenly added to the ring road.

'On your own!'

V

Arthur was in American parlance a homebody. He had a good job. Had risen in assigned responsibilities. Though he was essentially not really ambitious. He was content. Earned enough money. Lived in nice detached house situated in a good area. The house was well furnished with solid and well made

furniture. He shared what had to be done. More than shared. The cleaning. Care of the children. Less of a chore now they were in their early teens. Cooking a competent if unadventurous skill.

He adored Kate. Arthur was not lacking insight into his own personality. He regretted that he was somehow unable to display his adoration for Kate with a more compelling physical manifestation. Passion was a quality he was unable to invoke. The rougher aspects of love he was unable to express either mentally or physically. Arthur in every other department of the marital relationship, when measured against accepted bench marks, was a very good father and husband.

Kate kept a diary and on the pages of this well concealed document she poured out her thoughts. Not that the diary have need to be concealed. Arthur was the type of husband who would never read a private jottings without first asking permission to do so. Nevertheless Kate kept it hidden from him. She was an intelligent women. A wife. The mother of two children. A surreptitious reader the lines in her diary would soon realize these private thoughts and longings could have been written by a fifteen year old and read again when sixteen or seventeen with a perceptible degree of embarrassment.

Uncomfortable with her body. She had a strikingly beautiful face. Certainly not overweight. Her genetic disposition shaping a firm but far from slim torso. Good skin. Bright and attentive eyes. Skilled with make up Kate dressed well and knew how to focus attention on her outstanding features. She was admired. She turned heads.

The visit to the jazz club synapsed a path towards previously unknown possibilities. Writing vibrant lines in her diary about standing front of a band, the focus of the whole room, the admiration of the men, the envy of the women, and the possibility of other undefined desires being fulfilled.

Saturday afternoon Kate went into town and going into a record shop bought a vinyl of the blues singer Bessie Smith. The lyrics including those of Empty Bed Blues were printed in full in the sleeve notes. Getting home early she took the album up to the comfortable room they had converted under the roof and started to learn the words of and try to sing the song Careless Love, having already decided she would go, alone to the jazz club. Arthur would

not make any objections, he never did, and once there would ask if she could sing a song with the band.

VI

Jazz musicians are card carrying objectors. Disputed chord sequences. Bad beer. Loud drummers. If they are New Orleans fanatics, Charlie Parker and his kind are disliked in particular. The list too long to delineate. However there is one thing you can predict in advance. A good looking women will in general arouse interest and anticipation and concessions will conditionally be made. When Kate pushed her way to the bandstand and asked the cornet player if she could sing a number with the band he looked at her with that particularly cynical air much cultivated by the jazz fraternity. Scanned the body, the clothes, then the face and hair. Thought to himself 'possibilities,' without defining at that moment 'what possibilities,' might be included, and asked 'What song do you want to do?'

Kate who had never lacked inherent self-confidence replied without hesitation 'Careless Love.'

'When we have done the next tune. Climb on up.' stomping the band into Beale Street Blues.

Ten minutes later Kate was on the band stand, centre stage, mike in hand looking down on a nudging mass of jazz humanity.

'Who is she?'

' don't know.'

'Not bad looking.'

'Nice face.'

'I wonder where she has come from?'

Leaning on the wall at the back of the band the bass player bent over to get

nearer to the ear of the drummer and quietly remarked 'Big arse. But appealing.'

Stomp in . One. Two. Three. Four.

Love, oh love, oh careless love

You've fly through my head like wine

You've wrecked the life of a many poor girl

And you nearly spoiled this life of mine

To say that Kate had a good voice would be untrue. There are people, who though not natural vocalists, have the ability to sell a song. Dissimilar to the attention gained by young women with a large and temptingly exposed cleavages the display of which is guaranteed to deaden meaningful perception of the unintended pitch bent notes. Kate had a declaiming voice, not particularly in tune or tuneful but with a quality that somehow made it acceptable. She sang the last verse of Careless Love and the band stretched out the final chord. There were no hoots of approval from the crowd, but a level applause that was by no means miserly. Kate gave the band members her most empathetic smile and quickly got down from the bandstand. It was the only song she had learned and knew. Going over to the bar *The Patron* smiled and pushed a complimentary beer across the zinc.

Audiences are always eager to meet and mingle with performers. Really artful performers making individuals in an audience feel that the song, the music, the declamation, is focussed upon themselves alone. The spotlight hitting and reflecting back on to them is a synergy that in some circumstances can take on an aura of the mystical. Kate's rendering of Careless Love ha not reached such a level of sublime communication but nevertheless she was happy and enchanted to discover people in the crowd wanted to talk, congratulate, and probe. Even Miss Caroline Grey who did her usual spot at the microphone glanced over at her with a small teaspoon of friendly acidity in her acknowledging smile. Miss Caroline Grey's final song segued into the customary fifteen minute break. Kate holding court at the bar encircled with hopeful admirers, mostly male, each one nursing his fantasy of choice.

A strong warm hand squeezed her shoulder. Turning her head she looked into the smiling face of the drummer. Without any four beat stomp in he introduced himself. The circle of admirers broke and dissolved back in the general anonymity recognizing at once the hierarchical status of an actual member of The Band.

'I'm Rod,' grasping her hand 'and yours?'

'Kate.'

'Well Kate. I was really impressed by what you did up there, and that includes the other members of The Band too. How long have you been singing? Never seen you here before.'

Kate gave Rod a brief resume of the unplanned first visit to New Orleans Hall. How much she had been surprised and delighted by what she had discovered there. Particularly the vocalist and how she had decided that she too would like to find a place for herself centre stage. She admitted this was her first public performance but omitted to add that Careless Love was the only song she knew.

Rod who knew all about audience and performer focus sipped his beer, swallowed, and remarked 'Well Kate. You really do surprise me. How well you put it over. Good stage presence. Come on, you are a good looking lady.'

Personally I have always thought of the jazz musician fraternity as a quasi combination of The Masons and The Mafia, difficult to be accepted into and even more difficult to leave without boiler plate reasons. A brotherhood that could and did include a small number of chosen sisters. Kate, working in a large organization, was more than familiar with the mechanisms of inclusion and exclusion. Rod it seemed to her had opened the door to inclusion just wide enough to put her fashionable high heeled shoe through the gap.

The break was almost over and he had to get back behind the drum kit to kick off the last set of the evening. 'Look Kate. I, that is we, might have something for you. Caroline has been booked to do a short season working at The Club Atlantic, so we need someone to replace her for a few weeks. Would you be interested? Stay on afterwards and we can talk about it. OK.'

New Orleans Hall emptied fast after the band and played the last number of the evening. Kate found herself sitting alone at a corner table. The bar staff busy washing glasses and wiping the bar tops, anxious to finish and get home as soon as possible once all the clients had exited through the door. Kate noticed one of them, a young women with long dark hair and bright red lips, looking at her over the top of the beer pumps with a glance that was not easy to quantify, perhaps someone who had sat through the same play several times and therefore knew exactly how the plot was going to move along and resolve. All the members of the band had also gone leaving Rod alone on the bandstand fiddling with his snare drum. He smiled at Kate and strolled across the cratered lino and sat down beside her.

'I am leaving the drums here tonight. We are playing again tomorrow. Another band had doubled booked so we are filling in for them. One packing up job I don't need to do tonight.'

'Are they heavy?' asked Kate innocently.

'The drums? I should say so. Fortunately I'm a strong boy. We have had a quick talk and all the guys are more than happy for you stand in for Caroline while she is away working at the Club Atlantic. That would be Tuesday nights for the next four weeks. Would this be OK for you?'

'I should say so.' Kate smiled and Rod thought this was a beautiful face. Kate thought to herself 'I need to learn some more songs and quickly.' Money was going to be the next item to be discussed but Rod's next sentence was interrupted in mid-noun by Steven the owner of New Orleans Hall.

'Rod. We need to closed. Everyone wants to get on home.'

Rod turned to Kate and hunched his shoulders in a gesture of mock irritation. 'We can sit in my car and talk? Its parked out the back. Sort out what needs to be sorted.'

There was a very small and dark parking space at the back of New Orleans Hall. The space usually reserved for drummers or any musician playing one of the more cumbersome band instruments. Tubas. Sousaphones. Rod's was parked alone in this convenient unloading location. It was a big car.

Drummers need big cars. Not a recent model with smallish windows. Rod opened the rear door and Kate could smell the leather of the bench seat as she slid in. The transition from the corner table to this dark interior achieved as if on lubricated wheels. Rod slid in beside her. The late Spring evening was warm. Kate felt relaxed and comfortable a hard length of thigh gently but firmly pressing against her own.

Choreography kicked in. A hand firm, warm, and urgent here and there. No words. unaccommodating undergarments loosened and removed. Jeans pulled roughly down to lodge at the back of bent legs. Kate put one leg over, her knees pressing into the worn leather, and lowered herself down like an experienced horse woman saddling.

Driving home Kate felt herself glowing like a meteorite, burnished, almost wholly intact, and feeling content after rushing through the upper atmosphere to come to rest, violently, then quietly, down on some verdant place on the surface. In near silence she parked her car. Opened the front door and went in. Arthur was a sound sleeper. Up the stairs into the bedroom and undressed, draping her garments over a chair with uncharacteristic abandon. Gently but firmly she coaxed the diagonal Arthur into the parallel and slipped in beside him.

VII

Roberta and Alice remarked that she was looking very well indeed. Blooming. A laughingly oblique suggestion that she might be perhaps pregnant dismissed at once by the pill taking Kate. The jazz club. The first performance. The reaction of the onlookers. She explained that for four weeks, she, Kate, would be the resident vocalist with The Band. Kate who could never resist when talking to Roberta and Alice, embroidering a garment here and there, a harmless subterfuge that rewarded the both the speaker and listeners with an enhanced degree of pleasure. She did not however add any embroidery stitches that would have illustrated the happenings in rear of the car. This was reserved for the composition of several breathless paragraphs written in her diary just after Arthur had left to go to work and the children had bicycled off to school.

'Does he love me. Rod that is not Arthur?'

'Perhaps he would want me to go and live with him?'

'Even marry me when possible?'

'Must learn some more songs. Now.'

'Can't wait for next Tuesday to come around.'

On her way home from work that evening Kate kept an appointment at her usual hairdresser. Going in mousy. Coming out blonde. Arthur did not seem to notice this radical alteration. The children neither. But children, who tend to have their own preoccupations, do not generally notice any fashion statement their Mother might be making.

VIII

I know for certain

The one I love

I'm through with flirtin'

It's just you I'm thinkin' of

Ain't misbehavin'

I'm savin' my love for you

Tuesday evening and Kate cruised in through the door of New Orleans Hall like a duchess. The crowd parted with recognition and smiles *en route* to the bar. The customary free beer was placed in front of her by one of the bar staff, the young women with the long hair and the bright red lipstick. If Kate had not been considering about how she would turn around, without pretence, on one toe and look over at Rod, she might have noticed just a suggestion of a knowing smile.

Rod acknowledge her gaze and unspoken salutation but it was not the connection Kate of hoped for and expected to receive. The Band went through the now familiar repertoire and Kate was called up to do her vocal spot, introduced as Kate, no surname mentioned. The two numbers she sang were well received and responded to. Firstly, Ain't Misbehavin and then 'Careless Love.' Back at the bar the circle of admirers chatting and asking when it was once again interrupted, just like the week before, by a hand squeezing her shoulder. It was the break before the last set. Kate turned. Not Rod but Alan the clarinet player. In a low voice 'Can you hang on a bit after we finish so I can sort out the money with you?'

The car door opened and the now familiar smell of old leather infused the air in the rear compartment. There had been something about having to pay her discretely. Not much said. Kate found herself not unwillingly positioned, not as a trotting and then galloping horsewomen, but on her knees looking out through the rear window of the car, Alan half crouched standing, bucking, and writhing behind her. It was she thought a position she rarely found herself in within the confines of the marital bedroom, Arthur though not conventionally religious, habitually employed the posture, the one, if we are to believe it, utilized by missionaries during their leisure moments.

Driving home in her small economical car Kate began to realize there were significant differences between the world of jazz music, jazz musicians, and that of a company PA, wife, and mother. Rod had only acknowledged her presence with a smile and a wave. Not an actual word.

Arthur was in his customary territorial occupation of the mattress, diagonally on the bed, head pointing to the right corner, his feet to the far left. Moving him produced nothing other than a small grunt in response, Kate lay down and placed her head on her pillow. She looked at the back of his head. They generally slept back to back with a double glazed gap separating them. Twice she had been unfaithful. Twice within two weeks. Strange. There was no feeling of guilt or remorse.

I need a little sugar in my bowl

I need a little hot dog on my roll

I can stand a bit of lovin', oh so bad

I feel so funny, I feel so sad

Kate's list of songs expanded exponentially in tandem with intimate experience. The third week of her singing engagement with The Down Town Stompers, The third Tuesday, a pump action encounter with Charlie the trombonist spilling over into areas where tailgate glissando had never been envisaged to play any part in.

XI

Roberta and Alice on each succeeding Wednesday morning anxiety was palpable. Let her arrive at the office on time. They needed to know the subsequent revelations to fill their days, otherwise week of dreary boredom.

'Next week. My final night with he Band.'

'Then what?'

'Not really sure. Miss Caroline Grey - stressing the word Miss - comes back from the Club Atlantic on the Friday. They, and perhaps she, might let me sing a song or two, Who knows?'

For Roberta and Alice's pleasantly humid appreciation, Kate dissected the events of the past three Tuesday evenings. New friends and admiration. What it was really like to be the melodic fulcrum for the space of two performed lyrics. How welcoming and supportive the members of The Band had been. Free beers. How when driving home afterwards a feeling of drowsy satisfaction, not of course mentioning the A Cappella activities that essentially were the main contributor to the level of personal fulfilment.

XII

There ain't nothing I can do or nothing I can say

That folks don't criticize me

But I'm going to do just as I want to anyway

And don't care if they all despise me

If I should take a notion

To jump into the ocean

'T ain't nobody's business if I do, do, do, do

If I go to church on Sunday

Sing the shimmy down on Tuesday

Ain't nobody's business if I do, if I do

Tuesday evening. The evening of her ultimate paid appearance at New Orleans Hall. Kate drove her car unhurriedly where she would normally have zigzagged and darted through the traffic. Somehow this moment reminded her of sucking a particularly hard and long lasting boiled sweet. The first roll on the tongue a compelling mixture of sugar and acid. The dimensions of the hard round lump decreasing in circumference midway. Towards the time when it would dissolve in the mouth to a nothingness, a certain degree of boredom and dissatisfaction. Kate recalled the height of her excitement when for the first time when Ronald pushed his way through the crowd and she followed. It would be her fifth time in The Club. The flower of promise, because of time and familiarity, had faded, the moment and its aroma. She parked her car as near to New Orleans Hall as she was able to do so, confident possessor of the two newly learned song, got out of and locked the car, strode across the narrow street and in through the door of receiving on entry the anticipated gestures of recognition from the already packed room.

Her two new songs rendition was applauded with a degree of vigour. The

band smiled at her and she smiled back at them, the smiling unaccompanied by any discernible eye contact. Kate got down from the podium and went over to the bar. In the time between sipping the proffered beer and the assembling of the usual circle of admirers, an amorphous sensation of something having reached near completion circled in the region beneath the artificially blonde hair. A slim hand gently pressed her shoulder.

'We need to talk about what you might do now that Miss Caroline Grey is coming back from her booking at The Club Atlantic.'

Kate even without looking knew the squeezer and speaker would be Tony the cornet player and leader of The Down Town Stompers.

The long haired, red lipped girl serving behind the bar smiled to herself and pulled full another glass of amber liquid from the beer pump.

All the bar staff had left, Steven still working behind the bar for some business of his own did not appear to find any urgent reason to join their recent departure. Kate sat at the usual table in the corner sipping a final glass of beer. Tony sat opposite to her, mildly agitated, looking at Steven sidelong, waiting for him to up and leave.'

'Its been a real pleasure to have you singing with the band. None of the guys could believe that you had never sang in public before.'

Kate smiled her thank you.

'Miss Caroline Grey has been singing with The Band for a long time, so you will appreciate she has first call.'

Kate nodded her understanding of the situation.

'I might be able to get you some gigs with other bands working on the scene.'

Kate murmured "Umm.'

'Have you no home to go home to?' Calling over to Steven.

Steven explained he was doing the monthly VAT papers. A couple of hours

work minimum.

Tony took in this unwelcome information and turned his glance back to Kate 'You know that car of Rod's parked out the back? Old but very comfortable. He hasn't been able to move it for weeks. Some engine fault. Waiting for the spare part to arrive. Old car. Difficult to get spares. Using his van in the meantime. Loves that old car. So comfortable.'

Kate drained her glass. 'Look Tony. I really have enjoyed the past few weeks and being a part of this life,' With a curved gesture of her hand and arm scanning the room. 'But I realized this evening that though it has been fun and something different - well I've done it'.

'Done what?' he asked.

'The singing. I've done it.'

Tony looked at Kate not with contempt but pity at her incomprehension 'You've done it. The singing. There are women and men who devote all of their lives and would never even think of saying 'I've done it.'

Kate thought this to be vaguely stupid. 'Their whole lives!'

Getting up from her chair Kate said a quick 'Must go.' to Tony and then to Steven. Went out through the door of New Orleans Hall. It groaned shut and closed imperfectly after her. Walked across to her car and getting in and starting the engine moved off driving towards home at an even and thoughtful pace.

Parking her car in the drive and looking up at the inwardly silent house not for the first time she took pleasure in the pleasing façade and the well maintained exterior. Here was her real life. She went in and in the dining room stroked a hand over the smooth well polished surfaces. Admired her choice in plates and dishes stacked in full view through glazed doors. Six stylish chairs around the dining room table. She had during the past five weeks had side stepped reality. But they were now over. Going up the stairs to the bedroom Kate undressed, arranged her discarded clothes neatly over a chair, and went over to the bed. Arthur was asleep in a horizontal position

making a perfect right angle with the head board. Pulling the duvet over herself, gently adjusting her front to Arthur's back placed an arm over and across his unconscious chest.

'I will shred the diary in the morning. And then to the hairdresser to get my hair colour back to normality.' Sleep enfolded her.

Tell me a story

Where we all change

And we'd live our lives together

And not estranged

I didn't lose my mind it was

Mine to give away

Couldn't stay to watch me cry

You didn't have the time

So I softly slip away

No regrets they don't work

No regrets they only hurt

Sing me a love song

Drop me a line

Suppose it's just a point of view

But they tell me I'm doing fine

Polly Dunn



The First Time ever I saw your face

I Thought the sun rose in your eyes

And the moon and stars were the gifts you gave

To the dark and the endless sky, my love.

There was a time when you would often see lank young women, long straight hair, faces cosmetic free, walking committedly along London pavements, carrying a musical instrument case. If you had been curious enough to ask one of these singular individuals to stop for a moment, open the case, and show you the instrument within, you would almost certainly discovered it to be a banjo with five strings. Polly Dunn was one such young women who collectively shared a devotion to Folk Music.

Certain London Coffee House's provided a space to graze. Five String Banjo owners and a few competent players would gather like geese on most evenings. The girls generally having hair styled just like Polly's, styled is an incorrect description, rather allowed to have its own lightly brushed way. The men, to quote a notice fixed on the wall behind the stage of a notable Folk Club *Clothes optional. Beards compulsory.* They all shared a deep interest in the musical traditions of *The People*. Hand Loom Weavers breaking the hated factory machines and some having their own necks judicially broken in turn.

The Cotton Riots of the eighteen twenties. The sad plight of Quarry Men and dust scarred lungs. Far away and never to be visited places in the Americas: Ballads of the Dust Bowl. The Stock Yards. Life in the Appalachian Mountains deftly recreated with song and rapid five string finger picking.

Two mosquito facts pierced Polly's soft and slightly pallid skin, colouring not indicating ill health, but a malarial diffusion of shame and regret. The first, a circumstance that would in time future be regarded as insignificant and commonplace. Her parent's lived together, had done so for decades, but they were not married for reasons that had never been fully explained. She had unintentionally become aware of this when a primary school teacher, class four, had inquired,, not without a degree of amused malice, why her Father and Mother has different surnames, awful reality inscribed at the foot of some official document that had been submitted to the school.

The second burden her loss of Robby. They met during their first week at University. Jolly is an old fashioned word, but when describing Robby an apt one. Soul Mates is also overused and overuse has decimated the impact original meaning into a mere cliché, nevertheless; Soul Mates when applied to Polly and Robby revived the original inference of the phrase. They were, to use yet another cliché - inseparable. Three years of fulfilment and bliss, physical and musical, Robby wending his way along Woody Guthrie road. During the course of scramble across the heath of higher education they shared an unsaid pact that at its conclusion their relationship would be converted and confirmed as a permanent state of mutual commitment.

Those who do not venture far beyond the neighbourhood they grew up in, or wander far across the village boundary, are less inclined to suffer much in the way of mind changes, opinions, and expectations. Higher education, in fact a central purpose, is that of making students aware of the wider world and its possibilities. Robby had been an over cared for child and University his his first time free of matriarchal influence. His announcement to Polly, on the afternoon of their graduation, he was going off around the world, alone, wrought devastation from which, Polly, had not and was convinced she might never recover from. The five string banjo, singing with her not unpleasant but reedy voice, about the travails of historic others provided a degree of balm and solace.

It was a cold and miserable March day and Polly, around eight in the evening, pushed open the door of the Kentucky Breakdown coffee bar. The chrome monster Gaggia hissed, steamed, and bubbled, filling the air with an aromatic mixture of super heated milk and coffee. It was early. Only a few aficionados lounged about on the shiny red plastic upholstery covered bench seats circled against the bare brick walls. Mild greetings were exchanged. Enthusiastic personal responses were not encouraged because of the fundamentally dour nature of musical preferences they shared. More than just song with instrumental accompaniment in essence a means of dissecting the world past and present. Smiles surely must have been rare in the workers back to back dwellings clustered around the belching factory chimneys and rarer still inside and outside of wooden shacks bordering dirt track roads of the American South.

A session got under-way an hour or so later Polly intent on rounding off a difficult lick that had been the practice aim of the past few days, the fifth string snapped and was silent. 'Dammit' said Polly the sudden fracture of the thin strand of metal uncomfortably invoking memories another unexpected parting.

'Here. Take this.' A rotund and smiling man, frizzy hair, wearing health service round framed glasses, handed Polly a new fifth string still in the original paper packet. 'I'm Max. My first time here.'

Polly took the fifth string packet from Max and smiled a smile that had almost become redundant because of a lack of use. Removing the broken string from off her five string banjo, threading, fixing, and tuning with slim fingered delicacy, the new one, gazed at Max, who in response moved a little closer to her along the red plastic.

'My name is Polly.' and considered for a moment the not particular original thought that relationships where much like banjo strings, they snapped when it was least expected, but could be tunefully replaced.

I met my love by the gas works wall

Dreamed a dream by the old canal

Kissed a boy by the factory wall

Dirty old town

Dirty old town

Clouds a drifting across the moon

Cats a prowling on their beat

Spring's a boy in the street at night

Dirty old town

Dirty old town

Verena



Gone with the wind

Just like a leaf that has blown away

Gone with the wind

My romance has flown away

Yesterday's kisses are still on my lips

I've had a lifetime of heaven at my fingertips

But now all is gone

Gone is the rapture that thrilled my heart

Gone with the wind

The gladness that filled my heart

I

"Good morning Mrs Cornell. Please come in and sit down" The senior cashier ushered Verena and Solly into the bank manager's office and carefully closed the door behind them. They both sat down stiffly on their

leather upholstered chairs and faced Mr.A.J Briggs.

Verena had talents that were eminently bankable. Perfect pitch. Sight reader. A comprehensive knowledge of harmony. Good to look at. A sound business brain. She would be thirty two years of age in August and could scan a progressive, still developing, lucrative career. Her particular skills were always in the demand. Backing vocals in recording studios providing highly professional support to singers who might be admired for reasons other than the quality of their voices. Verena was also the fourth member of a very successful and vocal group. The four young women had musical abilities stratospheric when compared to a good many of the current, centre stage, song grinders. Television dates. Some touring, though not too much.

Her personal life was less ordered. Married at twenty to a Mr Cornell, a charming bit part actor with ambition, who showered her with compliments, flowers and perfectly modulated promises and deceits. The marriage did not last long Verena belatedly realizing Mr. Cornell had type cast her as the provider of his worldly needs until such time as his ambition developed into a success. This a forlorn hope. He drank. Was abusive. Incapable of keeping his trousers on. Verena retained from this marital error no memories worth cherishing.

S W Rubens ACCA. had been recommended to her after the divorce from Mr Cornell was finalized. A wise individual told her quietly over a drink in the Green Room after a show 'Telephone Solly. Believe me this business is full of sharks. Call him. You'll never regret it.' Verena always took advice seriously telephoned on the following day to arrange a meeting. S W Rubens ACCA. Solly to his clients and friends, was a specialist accountant to show biz people, singers, actors, cabaret artists, every kind of performer ranging those with highly flexible backbones to the favoured few who where blessed with highly flexible vocal chords.

Verena was industrious and careful. She did not deny herself some luxuries. Why not? But this never spilled over into profligacy. Solly provided careful guidance on how best to minimize taxation, the most productive channels where to invest surplus revenues. She drove a good mid-range car. Had a mortgage free house. Owned three flats located in a good areas of the city, each one of them occupied by trouble free tenants. For Solly she was the

ideal client, diligently filing all her receipts and every other key financial documents in date order before sending them to the bookkeeper in his office. Unlike a significant proportion of other clients whose notion of filing papers was to dump them into a supermarket plastic carrier bag. Additional charges were imposed to cover the cost of sorting such disorder. Nevertheless it was both tedious and unproductive work keeping a junior member of the staff from doing more value added tasks.

A month earlier, the bookkeeper having prepared the figures for the previous month and placing them on Solly's desk for a final check before signing them off, saw his boss frown slightly. 'Something wrong?' he asked. 'Not with your work,' Solly reassured him 'Leave them with me. I need to look at these figures in detail.' Even at a glance something was not right. There were gaps and omissions. In ten years of working for Verena he was fully conversant with her normal patterns of income and expenditure. Something was amiss. The more he checked and totalled the more he became convinced there were irregularities.

Mr.A.J Briggs of The City Bank and he had a long client business relationship. The City Bank as his first recommendation to his clients. Mr.A.J.Briggs was to some extent prepared to accept the vagaries of entertainment business account holders and had an implicit trust in Solly's professional skills and judgement.

'Mr. Ruben calling. Could you put me through to Mr. Brigs? Yes I will hold.'

'Solly. I was on the point of calling you.'

'Verena Cornell. Am I right?'

'Yes.'

'I'm looking at the figures right now.'

'Did you know there has been a series of over the past few weeks of cheques endorsed for cash being drawn on her account. Large amounts. Its not moved her into the red. But there is certainly a hole in her current account.'

'I agree with you There is something very wrong. I'm sure of that.'

"She hasn't started to lead some wild kind of life has she? Normally such an orderly young women.'

'Much the same has always so far as I am aware. We need to set up a meeting. All three of us. Soon.'

Mr.A.J.Briggs secretary on the intercom and a meeting was arranged.

II

"Perhaps" said A J Briggs directing his words towards Solly " Perhaps you could outline the results of your analysis of Mrs Cornell"s accounts".

Solly laid his neatly columned and typed single sheet on the desk and pushed it across the red leather gold tooled deck top for examination. 'Looking at the figures when compared with earlier months there are significant differences in what is normally listed receipts and invoices for reoccurring expenditure. Mrs. Cornell assures me the documents were in correct and in good order when she had prepared them prior to posting them to my office.'

'I see,' said the bank manager. 'Did you post the package yourself?' he asked Verena. 'No.' There was no other reply she could have made. 'My current partner, he offered to take them to the post office for me.'

'I see,' said Mr.A.J.Briggs pressing the intercom button 'Miss Scales. Could we have some coffee. Three cups please.'

Verena had wondered at the time why Tony had wanted to post her monthly packet to her accountant. It was uncharacteristic. It had not seemed to be important at the time. Maybe he was wanting show he was more caring. That would be nice. It was another of those relationships where the bather slips unwittingly into the deep end of the pool.

Tony ran a small antiques shop in The High Street. Verena had a weakness for decorative nick knacks, passing by the window, saw something

interesting and went in to view and inquire. From then on it was familiar path. The hello. The smile. Dinner. Flowers. Her bed. Not his. Moving her clothes hangers along the rail to make room for his. Six months since the day he had moved in. Their time together, nothing special, but affectionate. Verena had moved beyond wanting an odyssey of passion. There had in the past already been too many male sirens luring her on to the rocks.

The coffee was brought in and they took a quiet moment to drink the acceptable, hot liquid.

Mr.A.J.Briggs opened a desk draw and took out a sheaf of used cheques and fanned them out in front of himself on the desk like a black jack dealer spreading the pack.

'There are seventeen cheques in all Mrs.Cornell all drawn to pay cash. The amounts on each cheque are far from being unsubstantial.' He handed one of the cheques to Verena. 'Did you issue this cheque yourself Mrs Cornell?' There was now real need to look at it. Verena retained one cheque book in a draw in her dressing table. It was only used for significant expenditure. New and expensive dresses. Replacing her car. This kept convenient record of these larger sums apart from smaller, routine, daily, and weekly expenditure. The last occasion she had written a cheque and carefully recorded the amount on the counterfoil had been several weeks ago. This was to pay a plumber to replace and install a new boiler in one of the apartments she rented out.

'Do you have any knowledge of who might have filled in and signed these cheques?'

There was no possibility of denying it. She knew exactly who.

'This is a serious matter. Not only for yourself because of the substantial loss of your legitimate funds. We must also examine the legal aspects.' He allowed the two points he was making to be fully realized. This was an unnecessary interlude. Her mind had grasped the implications the moment he had retrieved the cheques from his desk draw. 'Banks,' he continued "Are inclined to view such incidents aberrant. There are just two courses of action. You can confirm the fact that these cheques are in point of fact forgeries, illegal instruments. In which case we are duty bound to call in the police to

investigate the matter further and in due course they will prosecute the offender. The second choice is yours to consider and decide upon. Endorse the cheques on their reverse transforming them into legal demands upon the monies held in you current account.'

Verena turned the cheques over one by one and signed their reverse sides using the gold fountain pen taken from her handbag. This being done A.J.Briggs retrieved the endorsed cheques and bundling them put them to one side awaiting further processing. He seem relieved. Such irregularities always reflect back to the bank and its reputation how ever unfair this might be.

Verena and Solly said goodbye and thanked the interlocutor and were taken to the door by a senior member of staff. They stood for a moment in a chill breeze that curled around them and the porticoed entrance to the bank.

'Choose better next time.' remarked Solly as they parted. Not castigation but advice from a man who had seen too much during his years in the profession.

Verena drove home. The front door was open. Tony, suit case and holdall in his hands was loading his car boot with the remainder of his personal property. The instant she had told him about the appointment at the bank with her accountant he knew a denouement was immanent. If she shopped him. God knows. The courts. Conviction. Prison. Somehow however he knew should would do no such thing.

He got into the driving seat of the car and started the engine. Before closing the door he murmured 'Sorry Hon.'

Verena was scheduled to work in an important recording studio on the day following. Ever the professional she arrived early. The backing group's role to add interest and depth to a seventeen year old who deluded herself and had been encouraged by her backers to be convinced she, a cosseted middle class white girl, could do it better than Bessie Smith. It was going to be yet another best selling album. The hype machine would make sure of that.

Verena who always gave her professional best, though amusedly contemptuous of this never ending line up of the individuals where the concept of self-criticism never had even a remote possibility of being applied

to their own slender abilities.

The first track to be laid down did seem to encapsulate her feelings, warm in the studio, but raining and gloomy the street outside.

My heart is sad and I'm all alone

My man treats me mean

I regret the day that I was born

And that man I ever seen

My happiness is less today

My heart is broke that's why I say

Lord, a good man is hard to find

You always get another kind

Bella



Summertime and the livin' is easy

Fish are jumpin' and the cotton is high

Oh, your daddy's rich and your ma is good-lookin'

So hush, little baby; don't you cry

One of these mornings you're gonna rise up singing

And you'll spread your wings and you'll take to the sky

But till that morning, there ain't nothin' can harm you

With daddy and mammy standin' by

I

Bella sat at the piano in her studio and sixteen bars into the Gershwin Lullaby mouthed under her breath 'I have to hear and listen to another murdering this beautiful melody I will murder one of them.'

Bella was singing teacher. Not a classical music teacher. Popular song. Once she had worked, studied, planned, hoped, and hustled to establish her own place in the world of popular music. Time went by. Yes there was work.

Restaurants with trios. Big bands. Various other assorted vocal projects. Time ambled by and Bella had to accept that passing through the membrane that separated the average jobbing vocalist from a grander auditorium was never going to happen.

She had an excellent, though not a great or distinctive voice. Good stage presence. An attractive body and clothes looked good on her. So it was for a thousand others. What makes a singer appeal to a mass ticket buying public? There was of course luck. A talent that just could not be ignored. The right agent. There are very average singers with so much self confidence and a complete absence of self doubt who convince the listening public of their vocal prowess. Do the public in general really listen with their ears? Or their eyes? Debatable. One person's admired diva is another's ear ache. Tiring of what had become a grind rather than a pleasure Bella decided to start up as a singing teacher. She was alone. She needed to earn money. Of potential students there seem to be no lack. It was a living.

A succession of ladies, and a few men, trooped in through the studio door for five or six one hour sessions each weekday. Bella continued to exercise her professional voice doing weddings and suchlike during the weekends. Her students ranged in age from early twenties to a couple of ladies over sixty. They had, with a few exceptions, not the remotest possibility of becoming professionally paid singers. When it came to music Bella had good taste and good ears, was fully conversant with the enormous gulf that separates amateur vocalists from the talented vocalists. The sounds that struggled over reluctant vocal chords in daily procession dismayed and wearied her. It was a living.

Melodies that sound simple are deceptive. It is in reality easier to perform an up beat song with many chord changes than a slow one. Countless singers can sing fast tempo songs. Those who can sing a slow ballad a much more exclusive fraternity. Wavering and out of tune notes at two hundred and fifty beats a minute heterodyne into a drone that only the practiced ear can detect. Ballad tempos reveal all the faults. The inability to sustain a note, pure, clean, without any deviation in pitch.

So we return to this beautiful lullaby Summertime, Bella sitting at the piano fingering the chords. Such melodies require much practice and experience to

project the essence of what they have to say. Most of her students imagined Summertime was easy-peasy. Undemanding of their limited vocal skills. The tempo slow. Thus an excellent melodic platform for them to pour out their hearts. It was a notion that appeared to infect ninety five percent of her students, seized upon as their first choice of repertoire. On this particular day this the fourth variably excruciating rendering Bella had had to endure.

In her quieter moments ensconced up in the flat she lived in over the singing studio Bella would wonder what motivated the majority of her students. For the more mature, it was pastime, fun without pretence or delusions. Some were rather sad mannered wives and mothers seeking to live a dream for one hour weekly. Others genuinely imagined they possessed genuine talent. The mere handful, who did have some ability ameliorated the other sad hours that sandwiched them. It was a living. Bella knew that. What else could she do? Work in an office? In a hotel on reception? Not possible. Her personality would never tolerate such constraints upon her personal freedom. A sense of self that was of key importance to her well-being. She would play an album recorded by Ella, Billie Holiday, Sarah Vaughan and for some moments dream her own dreams.

Well developed aural perception can be a joy. It can also be a curse. going down the narrow staircase to start the first teaching session of the day Bella sometimes wished it possible that she could be fitted with some kind of organic volume control. It was a living.

II

Bella had a mutually beneficial arrangement with a competent trio who had a weekly gig in a local bar. For a reasonably moderate financial agreement the trio allowed Bella, every sixth week, to wheel her students *en masse* into the bar where in turn they could join the trio to sing a song or perhaps two. Harry the pianist did not particularly look forward to these musical encounters but money was money. They arrived, Bella and ten or so aspiring vocalists. There they sat, in a row, Bella in their middle, a line of part budgerigars, part greyhounds, straining at the leash to stand behind the microphone in front of the band. There was a listening public, coming most weeks to listen to the

trio, they did not seem to find this acceptably time spaced invasion intrusive. And so up they stood, one by one, beaming behind the microphone, unknowingly dismembering wonderful melodies.

It is a truism that instrumentalists in the majority of instances have a reasonably accurate insight concerning their own level of competence, not so with a great many - wannabe - singers. Everybody, if they are able to speak, can sing. Trotting about the house, echo enhanced and flattered acoustically in tiled bathrooms or showers. Bella knew exactly what her students wanted. To stand up there, even though for a few minutes, to be the centre of attention the empowering polite applause. This was the reason that made karaoke popular. Standing up and mouthing with variable lip sync, imagining for a possibly mildly inebriated moment that you were, Sinatra, Jackson, Ella, or perhaps the current drum machine and automatic voice tuner enhanced warbler.

The evening commenced the trio trying not to show their feeling that the grim reaper of melody was about to pay them a visit. Summertime and who was going to sing it had been agreed in advance. The remainder of doable songs having also been, agreed. My Funny Valentine. All of Me. Fly Me To The Moon. On particular student combining ignorance with harmonic ambition to stumble through The Saga of Harrison Crab Feathers. The listening public, one or two sharing the band's understated discomfiture, applauded each of the singers each in turn without restraint as if joining a conspiracy. The singers were content. They had their moment in the spotlight. Heard the clapping of hands. And why not? Bella beamed at them each one in turn, she was not in the business of fracturing delusions. It was a living.

Simple isn't easy it's the hardest thing

Truthfulness is just a mess unless you swing

If you're simple people think you crazy

If you're truthful people think you're crazy

There are things there can't be too much of

Simple things like honesty and love

Bruce



Come fly with me, let's fly, let's fly away

If you can use some exotic booze

There's a bar in far Bombay

Come fly with me, let's fly, let's fly away

Come fly with me, let's float down to Peru

In llama-land there's a one-man band

And he'll toot his flute for you

Come fly with me, let's take off in the blue

I

Bruce started his exclusive car hire company in his early twenties. The idea was simple. Hiring exclusive automobiles to exclusive people. Those who had the money to afford for a day or more to drive about in a Porsche, Aston Martin, at the very top end a Bentley. Clients ranged through from the occasional fantasist, those wanting to impress for whatever reason, and individuals whose personal wealth made hiring the marque of car they also

owned and drove and easy choice when ensconced on a business trip to the city where Bruce offered his services.

Money was to be made. Plenty of money. Well run high end enterprises do so. He never married. Not an unattractive man. There had been a significant number of relationships. None expanded into the permanent. A large, listed, detached house with ample gardens situated in a rural area some twenty miles out of town was the proof of prosperity. Mrs. Davis, who lived nearby in the village, acted as a live-out house keeper, taking care of all the things a wife, willingly or unwillingly would be responsible. Bruce was content.

At fifty he decided to put a trustworthy, carefully vetted, and responsibly monitored manager in charge of his business and promptly retired. Bruce had a secret. The dream of standing up centre stage and sing just like the great performers who delving into The Great American Song Book. His collection of recorded music was extensive. Representing exclusively the acclaimed male vocalists of the twentieth century.

There was one room in the house Mrs. Davis was never allowed to enter. A small private cinema. It was furnished with three rows of comfortable chairs, ten in each row. Their function was purely symbolic, the pristine red velvet seats never ever having been sullied by the buttocks of male or female guests. There were no guests. This was Bruce's private domain. A projector. Sound system capable of playing every available type of recorded media. Heaven was entered not through a set of pearly gates but solid oak double doors secured with expensive security locks. Bruce spent a good deal of his endless leisure time sitting in the front row centre watching films from a carefully chosen film library that went back even so far as the cinematic work of Al Jolson. Wrapped in song and dance the masters swaddled him in contentment and yearning.

II

Bruce was not an unknown face on the local music scene, attending gigs that featured big bands, small groups, any combo that included appearances by the most talented regionally based vocalists. It was at the conclusion of such

an evening he asked the piano player for his card. Business plans had made up an integral part of commercial success. The technique was going to be applied to musical fulfilment.

Contacts made over the years car hire to the affluent provided all he needed to commence the action, though sadly minus a clapper board, scene one, first take, action!. Room to be hired on the first floor of a well appointed and discriminating blue tinged political club where the click of double scotch filled glasses were more apparent than polemical debate. It was an ideal room. Sound proof to a degree and space for a potential audience of fifty. Next he bought quality microphones. Technically advanced radio mikes. Top of the brand camcorder and robust tripod. Stage lighting with sufficient reach to illuminate a trio and singer. All was then ready.

Telephone call to the pianist and leader of a very accomplished trio. The day, the starting date, and fee arrived at with some negotiation. This settled, the following day a drive over to the company who handled all the car hire firms printed requirements. The boss, a stolid gentlemen of advancing years, was slightly surprised at the nature of the commission, but business is in fact business. The posters arrived a week later. Bruce booked and paid for a semi-display advert in the local evening paper. The posters distributed and the advertisements published.

Tuesday evening, the opening night, Bruce arrived early. The motor trade is a mechanical and increasingly electrical and electronic so he encountered no difficulties setting up the sound system, the lights, the camcorder fixed and pointed on its tripod like an all seeing eye. The room also sported a good quality, well tuned piano, Hal discovered to his approval, arriving half an hour before the announced commencement of the evening and playing a few exploratory chords and arpeggios. The drummer and the bass player breezed in and set up. Bruce and Hal conferred about The Charts. This was not going to present any problems. Standard melodies, for jobbing musicians, are hard wired in the brains and hands. of experienced players. The order of tunes to was agreed and listed.

Around fifteen minutes to eight a clutch of the curious drifted in and took their seats clutching glasses of beer, large with handles for the men, smaller without handles for the women. Pint glasses with handles for women were

not encouraged by the management. Husbands and wives of a certain age ever seeking to blunt the grey boredom of their daily lives. Interested in music. Of course. knowledgeable fanatics? No. Grey dust of ennui clouding any evidence of animation.

Bruce stood behind the camcorder, already sent to record the entire evening without further adjustment, made sure the band and himself would be in focus and clicked on the start button. The new suite, expensive and casual. The new shirt with a knotted tie that would be loosened and may even be discarded as the evenings entertainment progressed.

'Good evening Ladies and Gentlemen.' holding the acoustically balanced microphone just below and near to his bottom lip in homage to the technique he had watched so often within the privacy of his screen room. 'Welcome from myself and the Hal Davis trio.' The ten couples scattered about the room in tandem with three or four middle aged singles clapped more out of expected convention than anticipation. Hal Robinson played a four bar intro.

A foggy day in London Town

Had me low and had me down

I viewed the morning with alarm

The British Museum had lost its charm

How long, I wondered, could this thing last?

But the age of miracles hadn't passed,

For, suddenly, I saw you there

And through foggy London Town

The sun was shining everywhere.

Nobody left before the last song of the evening. Just the odd foray to replenish hopped beverages at the bar on the ground floor. The Hal Robinson Trio did their stuff to a professional standard. Perhaps better not ask some

musicians their opinions concerning vocalists. It was paid. The piano a good one and regularly tuned. Running through familiar Standards. It could and often was much less agreeable. Bruce and The Trio began to pack the gear at the end of the evening. The audience drifted out into the night and home.

'Same time next week guys.' Bruce confirmed readjusting his stage managed tie

III

Weeks ran into months. Months into a couple of years. An evening with Bruce and the Hal Robinson Trio. Mainly the same faces. Not young. An audience never greater than twenty five persons.

The bass player asked Hal one evening when they were in the car park. 'How can he afford it?' Hal who knew something about Bruce's car hire enterprise replied 'He can. Believe me. A bit of a drag I must admit. But undemanding. And he pays well. If it makes him happy. Who are we?'

Indeed it did make Bruce happy. Every Sunday afternoon following on from the Tuesday he would take his seat in his private cinema room and project the entire performance on to the screen, sitting alone, contented, single malt in his hand, in the warm semi-darkness. This routine went on uninterrupted month in month out until a slight niggle suggested to him the Sunday afternoon reprise could be in some way enhanced.

IV

The Wednesday following. The day Mrs.Davis took off from her domestic duties to go into the next valley to visit her sister, a medium sized removal van drove around the circular gravel drive and halted outside of the front porch. Bruce had been expecting it. 'Just unload the boxes into the hallway and I will take care of them from there.' The house was an old one dating from the eighteenth century and there was a large rectangular entrance hall with

doors leading off and an enviable patinated oak staircase leading up the first floor. The driver was more than happy to comply. Easy offload. Back at the depot in time for lunch. He dutifully stacked the boxes, cardboard, coffin sized, onto the indicated space place on a large tasselled edged oriental carpet. The driver was fully aware of what the boxes contained and did wonder. Not to be discussed by you or anyone had been his instruction when loading up at the depot 'Understood!' The twenty nine rectangular boxes were piled up in a loose block. Bruce thrust a high denomination bank note into the hand of the driver and hastily ushered him out through the front door.

When the door was securely closed and pulled at several time to make sure, Bruce felt into the right hand pocket of his jacket and pulled out a box cutting knife and with a deft movement of his thumb exposed the blade. He opened the box nearest to him. 'Yes.' he intoned with satisfaction. Prone within the box a full sized articulated widow dresser's mannequin stared blue eyed up at him. Female, fully and fashionably dressed. Bending down Bruce carefully raised her up from the box and almost reverently carried her across the hall in through the already opened door through into the well lit interior of his private cinema. 'I'll start here.' sitting the avatar down in a seat in the front row of the array of chairs and then returned to the hall to open the remainder of the cardboard boxes. It took less than an hour to unpack and then randomly seat the fully and fashionably attired mannequins, almost but not exactly equal numbers of male and female. Bruce, his back to the open door dimmed the room lights and gazed over the heads to towards the faintly illuminated screen 'Most satisfactory.' In less than another hour the boxes had been flattened and stacked at the back of the double garage, an area of the house Mrs.Davis never ventured into.

Bruce found it difficult to have to wait until the following Sunday afternoon. When it did at last arrive the pleasure of watching on screen his entire Tuesday evening performance was one of added pleasure, twenty nine unseeing bright eyes, male and female, joining his own in rapt attention.

V

Television in general bored him. Sport perhaps. A quiz show now and then.

One afternoon idly pressing the remote buttons an American comedy show popped up. About to change channels when a moment of supreme inspiration overwhelmed him. Converting this flash into usable reality was not particularly easy. However, connections, this time with people in the entertainment industry, bemused but unquestioning, gave him a telephone number here and a name there. The packing case containing the solution and means arrived by courier service directly from the USA during the middle of the month following. Assembling and fitting presented Bruce with no major problems.

Bruce sat in his private screening room immured from the Sunday grey and rainy day outside. Remotely started the video of his Tuesday appearance. Bruce looked up approvingly at his high definition image projected in full colour on to the screen 'Good evening ladies and gentlemen. Let me welcome you to another evening of song. Myself and the Hal Robinson Trio.' Hal kicked in the first tune of the evening. Four bars in F major. Gently pressing a button fixed to arm of his chair, Bruce, with a smile, activated a burst from the applause machine.

Once I had a secret love

That lived within the heart of me

All too soon my secret love

Became impatient to be free

So I told a friendly star

The way that dreamers often do

Just how wonderful you are

And why I'm so in love with you

Monica



Wie konnt' mich ein Mann nur so berauschen

Wie beging ich nur den Wahn

Meinen guten Peter einzutauschen

Der mir niemals was getan?

Weckte man ihn nachts aus seinem Bette

Kalt und roh per Telephon:

"Peter, ich hab' keine Zigaretten!"

Was sprach Peter? "Bring' sie schon!"

How could a man enthrall me so

How could I be so crazy

As to give up my good Peter

Who never did anything to harm me

**If you got him out of bed at night
And shouted at him down the phone
"Peter" I have run out of cigarettes
Then Peter answered "I will bring you some".**

I

Monica adored Marlene Dietrich. The silk top hat. The short tailored jacket. The bow tie. The hot pants barely and tightly covering sheer tights. A high stool to sit on. A manic compare, white faced, red lipped, mascaraed eyes. The entire louche Weimar vibe. To have been young at that time. To have lived then. She had as they say - lived the dream - for several years doing the night club circuit with some success. Eventually, the club circuit for various reasons diminishing, she founded an artists agency. On its books, singers, dancers, performers various, also graphic designers and other disciplines of the creative arts. The agency gained an excellent reputation for efficiency and honesty and it thrived. For one month of each year she took a break performing her Marlene Dietrich repertoire, invited by Harry a pianist who worked regularly at various global locations owned and run by The Club Atlantic.

She had married. Robert was a presentable individual. Charming. Good looking. Fond of women. He was the managing director of a medium sized company that developed residential and commercial properties. Drove a top of the range car. Dressed well. Was generous. Made money. Lots of it. They had no children. Lived in a large detached house prime positioned near to a large area of parkland. Viewed by any outsider, arguably viewed from within, Robert and Monica lived a prosperous life, compatible and comfortable. Physical expression of their relationships had diminished gradually. They had been married more than ten years. It was to be expected. Monica was a warm person and this did give her some cause for regret but no perceptible anxiety.

Over the past two years Robert's working day and work routines had changed. The rationale that having attended a three day course about Time Management. Invaluable, and bottom line enhancing suggestions had be

made. Core changes involved starting for work at an earlier hour than in the past to take advantage of statistically proven peak activity hours, leaving home for the office at seven in the morning following a simple breakfast of coffee and toast. Monica was an early riser and this presented her with no problems. In fact for her it was advantageous providing space so she could get a few things done around the house before motoring to her own office. One discernible effect of this, new, daily pattern was an even greater diminution of what was their already infrequent intimacy. Monica, who was caring and considerate, explained this to herself as the need for Robert to get out of bed much earlier in the mornings than he had done in the past.

Monica had a very good personal assistant working in her office. The archetypal Girl Friday. Fiona started work for her and the agency just two months after Monica had started the business. She was invaluable. Could handle without fault any issues that might arise. Monica and Fiona focussed on work during working hours and when the day was concluded shared a rapport that could and did embrace shared joys and concerns about their lives outside of business and the office. Usually it was Fiona who experienced issues of variability, when contrasted with Monica's almost humdrum stability.

Fiona lived on her own in a smart duplex on the other side of town. A good looking young woman. Auburn hair. Grey green eyes. Fashion conscious. Intelligent. Her love life did at times resemble an arduous scramble up and over the seven mountain peaks. Much later Monica remembered when she had casually mentioned, talking together over a glass of red in a wine bar near to the office, the business efficiency course Robert attended and the proscribed radical change to his working day, how Fiona's lips pursed a fraction. Fiona had zero knowledge concerning the degenerate days of Weimar, but she did know all about men. Then some time later, over yet another glass of wine, in this instance white, she slipped in an oblique but targeted 'Are you sure?' towards Monica during a conversation about Fiona's most recent foray into interpersonal relationships and the duplicity of the male sex in general.

Monica was both blessed or cursed with a trusting personality. There was no reason to assume Robert's new daily routine was anything to be suspicious

about. Fiona's catalogue of masculine unreliability must have over time, created imperceptible hairline fissures somewhere in Monica's unquestioning acceptance. Doubt resembles a leak of water from the tank in the attic, drip, drip, then a sudden and expanding patch of damp on the ceiling.

'No harm in making sure.' she had guiltily and eventually convinced herself, just to confirm that there was no agenda other than the business efficiency imperative Robert described. Stupid. How could there be?'

It was a Tuesday morning. Robert and Monica shared their customary coffee and toast neither one of them much inclined towards volubility at seven in the morning. Robert, checked his watch, wiped his mouth on the linen napkin, kissed the top of her head, and went off open the garage to get into his car.

'Leave the garage open Robert. I need to go and do some shopping?' Monica called after him.

When she heard Robert's tires grumble down the gravel drive Monica put on a coat, already hanging there in readiness behind the hall door and rapidly trod her own path, with only a troubled instant of hesitation, to the garage, got into her own car, started the engine and driving out through the gate turned left into the road. Monica knew the traffic was heavy at this time of day and Robert could not have driven too far along the usual route he took towards his office. There he was. His car that is. The personalised number plate making easier to separate and isolate his vehicle the from other traffic. She stopped and started with the traffic flow five cars behind him. Robert was not an obsessive user of his rear view mirror. She felt reasonably safe from detection. Ten minutes toward his usual destination his car made a precise and sharp turn left. Monica followed at a safe distance. He took then took a right. Then another sharp left, braked and parked his car in a leafy road lined with substantial detached houses. Monica slowed down and halted.

Robert had an eagerness in his step when he got out of his car, going up the four steps, two steps at a time, to reach the front door of the house adjacent to where his car was parked. Robert showed little interest in looking around himself, felt in his pocket, took out a key, opened the panelled door, embellished with stylish brass fittings, went in and closed the door behind himself. Monica pressed gently on the accelerator, quietly parking her own

car alongside the pavement on the other side of the road and opposite to the house Robert had with proprietorial gait entered.

A pebble dashed garden wall, on the garden side, was fringed with a hedge. Not an evergreen, a cultivar that lacks a screen of leaves at that time of year, only a tangle of slender twigs and branches. It screened Monica but provided a crystal view, of the front of the house, like peering through a drape of organic net curtain. The through a bay window the interior of the basement kitchen could be seen clearly. Sitting down at an already laid breakfast table a youngish blonde wearing a house coat, joined a moment or two later by Robert who fondly kissed her and then sat down at the table presumably to consume what would be his second breakfast of that day.

The breakfast duo appeared to engage in animated conversation and mastication for about fifteen minutes. Robert, checked his watch, emptied his coffee cup, wiped his lips on a napkin, pushed his chair back, stood up, walked around the table and stood behind his second breakfast companion, settled his front against her thinly clad back, snaked his arms to the right and left of her neck, slipped both hands into the loose garment she was wearing and on to her breasts. Looking up at him she smiled. Nodded her head towards the window. Monica lowered her head below the line of site The curtains closed. It was apparent that coffee was not the only intended digestive of this breakfast tête-à-tête.

Monica reversed her car some way back along the avenue and waited. Almost an hour later Robert emerged though the front door with a less energetic tread, without looking in any direction, got into his car and drove off, presumably in the direction of his office. Monica remained where she was parked for five minutes, started her car and drove towards home, not angrily but thoughtfully. 'Everyday for two years? Surely not?'

Where have all the flowers gone, long time passing?

Where have all the flowers gone, long time ago?

Where have all the flowers gone?

Young girls picked them, every one!

When will they ever learn, when will they ever learn?

Where have all the young girls gone, long time passing?

Where have all the young girls gone, long time ago?

Where have all the young girls gone?

Gone to young men, every one!

When will they ever learn, when will they ever learn?

II

Monica had no family of her own. Both of her parents had died when she was in her twenties. There were no siblings. She had implicit trust in Fiona and sitting together in a quiet wine bar they shared a bottle of Chateau Couloumey, Graves Blanc, and related every detail about what she had discovered, even though she felt guilty at have done so. Fiona showed very little surprise on being told about what had been seen. Within her own experience any marked change in the behaviour of the average male, regardless of plausible explanation, was to be viewed with a degree of suspicion.

'Do you really think he has been doing this for two years?'

Fiona replied that nothing about the behaviour of men surprised her.'

'I can't follow him every day just to make sure. Sooner or later he would see me. I really do need to know.'

'Why?'

'I'm not really sure why.'

Fiona suggested without a trace of conspiracy 'Give me the address. Let me get into work an hour later and I will check it out, over a period of a few

days.' So it was agreed. Fiona would make start on the case next Monday and. At the end of the week tell Monica exactly what she could or not confirm.

There were moments in the week when Monica had reservations about the enterprise, Guy Fawkes potting to lay explosives under the marital bed. Saturday following arrived and Fiona and Monica met in wine bar some distance from the office. There was no possible doubt. Robert visited the exact same house every morning Monday to Friday. Presumably ate breakfast. The curtains were drawn. One hour later emerged and then drove on to his office.

When Monica confronted him on Friday evening he did not try to deny it or excuse his behaviour.

III

Two weeks passed. Monica moved into the guest room. Robert continued his daily routine as if nothing whatsoever had occurred. Breakfast every morning, coffee, toast, there had never been much breakfast conversation, now there was even less. Robert quite obviously regarded the discovery of his parallel life as just a minor inconvenience. He offered no explanation or any plea for forgiveness and as the days moved on by it was apparent he had no intention of doing so.

Monica's Marlene Dietrich persona was one quite separate from her actual personality, one the high heeled dominatrix, the other passive and uncomplaining. Monica continued to go her own office. Did her work as scheduled. Came home in the evening. Cooked a meal for both of them. Robert's attitude and behaviour did not deviate a fraction from what was the time honed familiarity of more than ten years of marriage. Slowly Dietrich began to infiltrate and replace Monica.

It was a Saturday and on a Saturday Robert did not leave to go to his office. Monica prepared and served a light salad lunch. Robert a portrait of domestic normality read the morning newspaper.

'This cannot continue.'

Bemused he asked her 'What cannot continue?'

'Your mistress. Your intolerable behaviour.'

'I really do not see why not.'

This was not the response Monica had expected.

'Look,' he smiled a not unfriendly smile "We have been married for more than ten years. We have a comfortable life together. I mean to say its not as if our bedroom has been the venue for much in the way athletic performances in recent years. In essence we are compatible, don't argue, in general enjoy each others company. There are not too many couples who can claim the same. Yes I have a mistress. So what. It really doesn't mean anything. Physical nothing more. Safe unemotional sex. Why should you want to fracture something that works for the both of us?'

Speechlessness as an observable phenomenon could at that moment provided a verifiable case study. Robert's behaviour and response, normal modulation in tone, no attempt to defend, did not provided Monica with a sling shot to let off a projectile in his direction. He made it all sound so reasonable and any objections she might want to make, unreasonable.

Finally able to separate her dry tongue from the dry roof of her mouth 'I want a divorce.'

'Whatever for. Why?'

"Isn't obvious?'

,

'Not really.'

IV

Want to buy some illusions,

**Slightly used, second hand?
They were lovely illusions,
Reaching high, built on sand
They had a touch of paradise
A spell you can't explain:
For in this crazy paradise
You are in love with pain
Want to buy some illusions,
Slightly used, just like new?
Such romantic illusions
And they're all about you
I'll sell them all for a penny
They make pretty souvenirs
Take my lovely illusions
Some for laughs, some for tears**

Robert did not want a divorce. Could see no sensible reason why they should divorce. With an undertone of irritation explained to Monica that if she insisted on a divorce he would make sure that she would get the absolute minimum settlement. Monica knew Robert well enough to know that he possessed a strata of vengeance in his character and it was a threat he would apply to the full. She had seen it happen several times when he had been crossed in business. He suggested, by the way of a compromise they divide the house, not any physical barriers, but a notional division and effectively continue to live in continued harmony without malice.

There were complications if she refused to cooperate. Both their enterprises had prospered. Both generated a substantial amount of hard cash. It had been agreed on an eminently sensible strategy to squirrel these excess funds into an off shore account. Monica quickly realized that money that should not exist could not be claimed by herself or by any lawyer she instructed. The fiscal authorities would pounce without hesitation if they heard even a whisper about the existence of these offshore assets. Tax evasion was a serious matter. Her fifty percent claim on these funds could not be applied and Robert knew this. The deeds to the house they lived in was also in Robert's name.

Matters simmered on for several more weeks. Monica and Robert maintained, though not approaching absolute zero, a civilized permafrost attitude to each other. It was clear that Robert considered her rigidity totally unreasonable. He occasionally, briefly and randomly flashed the inward smirk businessmen allow themselves in self congratulation when they have pulled off a particularly advantageous deal. Robert continued to leave the house at seven every weekday morning.

Sunday morning. Six o'clock. Monica asleep on the guest room's not uncomfortable single bed, sat up sharply, involuntarily awake. The duvet gathered around her thighs. Dietrich had started to assert herself. 'My God. Why didn't I think of this before now?' leaning over and taking a sip of water from a glass on the bedside table, swallowed hard, elation flooding in 'Melsham Knoll. Why the hell didn't I think of it before now?'

Five years ago both of Robert's and Monica's business activities during that year had been exceptionally lucrative. They both considered it unwise to try to syphon off these substantial funds offshore. Instead they had bought, for cash, Melsham Knoll.

Melsham Knoll had originally been a vicarage in an age when vicars were firmly located within the pecking order of The Gentry. Dating from the late eighteenth century with additions during the nineteenth the large detached house stood at the centre of approximately two acres of gardens. Two small cottages had been built well away from the main house, perhaps to house servants, or maybe aged and dependent relatives. In the twentieth century, middling churchmen no longer holding an elevated place in the ranks of

anachronistic social order, their congregation a few ancient ladies, had become peripatetic, looking after, and serving the needs of several parishes, their work profile resembling spiritual breakdown repair men minus the motor bike and side-car. For both convenience and economy, most now lived with their families in modern red brick built detached houses. The church authorities put Malsham Knoll up on the market. There were few takers. The buildings were in a state of expensive to put right disrepair. Robert was in the property development business. The price was moderate. He bought it, that is they bought it, to put on a notional back burner to develop sometime in the future. Robert for reasons related to taxation, and on good advice, made the deeds of ownership in Monica's name. Melsham Knoll was her property. To those who have only one house it might seem inconceivable that individual who have two might overlook the fact. Robert was constantly buying properties in the course of every day business, so what might seem to others amnesia, was in fact understandable.

A week later 'I will be away for a couple of days. I need a break to think things out.' Monica informed him without hinting at the real purpose of her absence.

Robert seemed to be pleased 'Good idea.' looking at Monica and thinking that a few days away might be exactly what was needed to bring her to her senses and realize his current arrangements where no real reason for separation and divorce.

V

It was, to employ an apposite observation, a perfect Spring morning. Monica unhurriedly left the main arterial road and meandered along the high hedged narrow route towards Melsham. Inexplicably there continue to exist and thrive small enclaves of rural life with a force field that keeps urbanization at a distance. Melsham a one hour drive from the city retained a bucolic mantle that would, make much of it still recognizable to a significant number of the occupants of ancient graves randomly scattered about the church yard. It was a setting that might inspire genteel detective fiction. Melsham had largely escaped the ravages of weekenders, there were some, but most of the

inhabitants could count back their lineage several generations.

Monica pulled her car into the yard of The Bell Inn, its thatched roof overhanging white washed stone walls, small windows, historically small to retain heat and minimize the imposition of widow taxes. It was too early for the window boxes to have a topping of red geraniums but their promise was self evident. Carrying a small overnight bag Monica pushed the brass rail across the pub door and went into the low ceilinged bar. A log fire burned in the inglenook. Cosy. No other word to describe it but cosy. It was early and a couple of ancient gentlemen sat on a high backed settle in the far corner of the bar. Behind the oak and bottled bar, the landlord's wife, cheerful in hip width and smile.

'Good morning Madam. You must be the lady from town who booked a room for tonight?'

The two old men sitting in the corner, fingering the handles of pewter pots, the row of tankards hanging above the bar indicated the personal vessels of privileged regulars, looked towards Monica and The Landlady and nudged each other.

Taking a bedroom key from a board hanging behind the bar 'I will show you up. I think you will find it to be comfortable. You will be here to look of Melsham Knoll no doubt?' It was an observation and not a question. Monica thought but did respond 'How the hell would she know that?' other than with a nod of assent. Country areas have a news intelligence channels that make talking drums or smoke signals archaically inefficient in comparison.

The Bell Inn provided good beds. Good food. Ale from the cask. Citizens advice. Trades and professions contact information. Village pubs invented the concept of the - one stop information centre. After a good plain evening meal, excellent glass of ale, sound sleep in a bed that embraced rather than being reposed upon, the following day Monica took advantage of this information cornucopia and mid-morning telephoned a recommended local builder and made an appointment to meet him at Malsham Knoll that afternoon.

Dour might have been conceived as the word to precisely describe Thomas Oldchild, Builder. Stub of a pencil behind the left ear. Cigarette, half lit and

smouldering between the corner of his lips the ash undecided if it should fall. Scant tufts of iron grey hair thrusting out like steel wool from under an ancient trilby hat. Monica realized here was someone she could trust. Not because of a character reference. He was a local builder and therefore had nowhere to hide. Thomas Oldchild, Builder, shrewd, rapidly assessed that here was not some town Missy who would accept just any old estimate of cost or shoddy workmanship. They liked each other not in any overt sense but a knowing that they could do business.

Malsham Knoll was structurally sound. The fabric of the principal building and the cottages constructed at a time when standards and expectations were high particularly so for those who occupied a higher niche in society. Wood seasoned not in drying kilns but in wood-yards a time long ago before accountants started to calculate the potential storage cost per square metre. There was electric wiring, potentially lethal. Bathrooms and lavatory fittings that might attract a bid from a museum of Victorian interior decoration. Monica followed Thomas Oldchild, Builder, around and through all the rooms, he making notes on a lined pad and tutting, a form of exclamation peculiar to builders wishing to convey to the potential customer the enormity of the proposed task. Monica explained she wanted to move in within six months. The cottages could then be worked on with the eventual intention of offering summer rentals to holiday makers who preferred the English countryside and uncertain weather to the sunny certainties of Mediterranean beaches. Thomas Oldchild, Builder, responded with customary professional doubt, said he would post off an estimate within the week. It was a done deal, though no such a contemporary phrase would ever have been utilized within the leafy denizens of Malsham.

Later Fiona remarked with admiration. 'Good on you.'

VI

Let's call it a day

Let us say

It was just meant to be

Sweet memory

Let"s call it a day

Monica opened her wardrobe and took out one of the robust cardboard boxes she used to store her Marlene Dietrich costume and accessories. Here were the black patent leather high heeled shoes. Slipping her feet into them and lacing tightly. Robert would be home soon. Ten minutes later she sat waiting his arrival sitting crossed legged on a breakfast bar high stool, legs, sheer in black stockings, crossed.

She heard his car enter the garage and a moment later he came in though the door into the kitchen, to be confronted by his wife sitting proudly upright, sheer black stocking, high heels, legs crossed, defiant

"I'm leaving you. I have already been to see a lawyer and he will be filing divorce papers of my behalf.'

'Really. And where are you going to live?'

Malsham Knoll. The renovations will be complete in a few months and then I will be gone".

Malsham Knoll. It had been his intention to get the deeds of ownership transferred to himself. To late 'Bitch.' under his breath.

"You can keep all the cash in the offshore and stuff it wherever you want to, then directly into his face with uncharacteristic vulgarity. 'Give me any reason and I will shop you to the tax people even it means problems for me too.'. For a moment Monica felt as if she was talking part in a theatrical improvisation, out of body, looking in.

Robert leaned against the jamb of the door. 'I knew something was fermenting in that stupid head of yours. Well I have a surprise for you,' he turned defiantly on one toe, left the room and a few minutes later came back carrying an already packed suitcase. "I'm going to move in with Christine.

Now. This instant.' waiting for a moment as if he expected her to relent. Opening the kitchen door he shouted "You never were much good in bed.' the door slammed behind him. Moments later his car started with oil burning revs, ripped down the gravel, accelerated into the traffic.

The next morning a registered letter arrived from Robert's lawyer. She had six months in which pack her belongings and leave.

VII

How peaceful the house was without him. Monica moved back into the master bed room and comfort of the king sized bed. News at regular intervals arrived by mail from Thomas Oldchild, Builder, keeping her up to date with the progress of the renovations. The man was as good as his word. All would be completed well within the scheduled time.

She took Fiona to look over the property about one month later. Fiona said she thought it was brilliant. Loved how Monica had bested and trashed a male ego. In a quiet corner of The Bell Inn work issues were settled. Fiona was offered the opportunity to become the MD of Monica's agency. There was no reason why not. Competent and able and as familiar with all its aspects as Monica. The arrangement would involve direct reporting weekly. Monica going into the office two days a week. There was also going to be more regular sabbaticals. Harry, the pianist, telephoned. The Club Atlantic was offering him three one monthly stints a year. Would she be interesting in joining him to do her Marlene Dietrich routine?

Other than a regular flow of papers from the lawyers to be read and signed the months drifted on by. Of direct contact with Robert there was none. A few days into the month when Monica was preparing to move out and into Melsham Knoll one afternoon just before three the telephone rang.

'Hello. Can I help you?'

There was a brief pause 'You don't know me. This is Christine.'

'Really. What can I do for you? This something of a surprise," concern, the reflex imprint of years together 'Everything is OK with Robert? He"s not ill is he?'

If spittle could travel over telephone wires Monica would have had to wipe and eye 'No. I want you stay where you are. Cancel the divorce proceedings and take him back.'

'Could you repeat that again.

'I want you stop everything. It was ideal before. You had him in your home. He came to me. No harm done. We were all happy.'

"And you are suggesting to me that we return to that happy state? This is what you are saying?"

'Exactly.'

'I assume you are serious?'

'Robert two months ago told me that a management consultancy company had recommended he modify his working day. Since then he has been leaving for work at seven in the morning.'

'Well?'

'Well. I'm not stupid like you. I let it go on for a couple of weeks and then got a friend to follow him. He has been trotting off every morning to have a second breakfast with some red headed floozy he's screwing. I'm asking you. Take him back. Everything was good until you forced him to come and live with me.'

"Monica smiled into the telephone and lapsed yet again into pleasurable vulgarity 'You stupid cow!' slamming down receiver.

Stairs a stairway to heaven, floating over the treads, high on triumph. Going into the master bedroom she unpacked and dressed herself in the Marlene Dietrich attire. The was cheval mirror in the corner of the room. How good she looked, full length, top silk hat to high heeled patent leather shoes.

Looking herself full in the eye softly she sang to herself words of self respect and affirmation.

Falling in love again

Never wanted to

What am I to do?

Can't help it

Love's always been my game

Play it how I may

I was made that way

Can't help it

The Old Crowd



**Where has the time all gone to
Haven't done half the things we want to
Oh well, we'll catch up some other time
This day was just a token
Too many words are still unspoken
Oh well, we'll catch up some other time
Just when the fun is starting
Comes the time for parting
But, let's just be glad for what we had
And what's to come**

Ralph walked by the chromium and glass clad head office of something and company. Twenty floors high gleaming in the afternoon sunshine. Hardly a trace of grime. In the past such a building would have become rapidly layered

with sooty particles that floated freely. Not so now with the cleaner air of a city where coal was no longer burned by industry or the domestic hearth. Somewhere, perhaps beneath the floor of a sub, sub, basement of this edifice to enterprise was whatever trace, if any still remained, of the *Chez Joey*. Back Cannon street now just a memory.

In the *Chez Joey* days there still existed some buildings with defiant Tudor architecture. Ralph would when wandering about the narrower streets of the city with other night people, sometimes attempted to reconstruct in his mind a scenario of interiors of ancient ale houses and the musicians and singers might have performed within them. Live music is will-o'-the-wisp. It disappears in real time. Ralph had a notion that nothing is ever really annihilated and with a machine of some kind you might be able to tune in and listen to Lutes, Bagpipes, Crum Horns, Ballad singers, against a raucous background of pewter and earthenware ale pots being filled and emptied.

Streets had changed too. Where cars and buses crawled by. Pedestrians only. Litter continued to tumble weed over the pavements. Building rise, streets change, but the unthinking habits of some individuals are more difficult to alter. The city which once had an untidy intimacy had become and exercise in the imposition of planning and uniformity. 'Or maybe its my age?' This thought made him feel a trifle sad. But misery in any manifestation was not for him an natural state and lengthening his stride he traversed the main street towards his intended destination. It was a couple of years since their last meeting. An unexpected phone call had summoned him.

Surprisingly the frontage of the Italian restaurant had remained exactly as it had been in the old days. Pushing open the double entrance doors the interior was clean and bright but essentially the same, the passing of time only marked by the man behind the bar counter, the son of the original owner, his Father had retired leaving him to run the business. He nodded at Ralph and smiled with an unknowing greeting, Ralph's period as an habitu e having long since passed.

A dual shriek exploded from a corner table 'Its him. Over here my darling!'

Tina North and Sheila South from a distance much the same. One small and slim the other remained proudly curvaceous. Close too, not too bad

considering. Older of course but years of public appearance grooming firmly intact. Hugs and kisses. Fractured conversation with each one wanting to have their say. Food arrived and the interchange of words settled down into a more measured rhythm.

All three of them had met at well spaced irregular intervals over the years. The most recent call from Tina unexpected. Sheila was coming to town, some business with a solicitor, could they meet at the usual place. Why not. It was a pleasure to get together with The Old Crowd, though not too often.

After Vivien's suicide Ralph experienced a period of loss and abandonment. Work helped. Public view at the *Chez Joey*, the singing, friends, more effective than any bottle of anti-depressants. Vivien's estate was more significant than Ralph had expected it to be. The design business was sold as a going concern. Bank accounts with substantial savings and investments. He could have stopped work and lived comfortably on the benefits of these assets. Of course he didn't stop working. Singing was his life.

Change precipitates change without input. The multifarious small clubs that had defined the night life of the city closing due to bad management. a change in the public taste, who knows why. More significantly the actions of a Chief of Police, the type of self-righteous individual who attempts to resolve his own *bête noire* by restricting the preferences of others. *Chez Joey* had remained open for another ten years and then closed. Much longer than most of its competitors. Recognisably the Ralph of the old days he still performed at engagements of his own choosing. Receptions, weddings, sometimes a corporate event, private functions. His agent pushed them his way. Not an overwhelming schedule but enough to allow the spark to glow from time to time. Four years after Vivien's death he had met and began a relationship with David. They lived together comfortably and affectionately.

Looking around the table, the coffee having been served, Ralph, Tina, and Sheila, the conversation now less urgent, silently beamed at each other, old soldiers, now far distant from conflict, sharing a companionship that had sustained them through the best and the worst.

Tina had never married. Lived in the house she had been born in. Manny, much loved, had died many years ago. She too still sang. She had become

something of a celebrity on the jazz club scene. The small back rooms of pubs often reminded her of the club days. She had also stopped smoking and therefore didn't need a cigarette lighter, chromium or otherwise.

Shelia's relationships with men had always been difficult. They were attracted to her physical opulence. When she got up to walk less so. She now lived with Joyce. A neat house in neat village in the south. No, she rarely sang. Joyce had established a small but successful fabric business and they contentedly worked in it together.

It had been a long but pleasurable afternoon. Good food, good wine. Reminiscence unearthing the occasional regret. The television contract that never materialized. The duplicity of agents. Broken promises. Relationships. A plethora of small incidents recalled and laughed over. Leaving the restaurant together Ralph sensed it would be a long time before the met up again, if ever. The old bonds were loosening. More hugs an kisses and they walked off in the still sunny late afternoon their own three separate ways.

The Songsmiths



Song	Composer	Lyrics
My Foolish Heart	Victor Young	Ned Washington
Everything Happens To Me	Matt Dennis	Tom Adair
The Lady Is A Tramp	Richard Rodgers	Lorenz Hart
Gloomy Sunday	Rezso Seress	Sam M. Lewis (English Lyrics)
The Party's Over	Jule Styne	Betty Comden & Adolph Green
In The Wee Small Hours of the Morning	David Mann	Bob Hilliard
My Funny Valentine	Richard Rodgers	Lorenz Hart
I've Got A Crush On You	George Gershwin	Ira Gershwin
He's Funny That Way	Neil Moret	Richard Whiting
One For My Babyd	Harold Arlen	Johnny Mercer
Gone With The Wind	Allie Wrubel	Herb Magidson
Girl Talk	Neal Hefti	Bobby Troup
Mad About The Boy	Noël	Noël Coward

	Coward	
Yesterdays	Jerome Kern	Otto Harbach
The Very Thought Of You	Ray Noble	Ray Noble
You've Changed	Carl Fischer	Bill Carey
Carousel	Jeremy Dussoliet	Melanie Martinez & Timothy Sommers
Do You Know What It Means To Miss New Orleans	Louis Alter	Eddie DeLange
Empty Bed Blues	J C Johnson	Bessie Smith
Careless Love	W.C. Handy	Spencer Williams
Ain't Misbehavin	Thomas "Fats" Waller	Harry Brooks
Need A Little Sugar In My Bowl	Clarence Williams	Tim Brymn & Dally Small
Ain't Nobody's Business	Porter Grainger	Everett Robbins
No Regrets	Gordon Chambers	Barry Eastmond & Elisabeth Withers
The First Time I Saw Your Face	Ewan MacColl	Ewan MacColl
Dirty Old Town	Ewan MacColl	Ewan MacColl
Summertime	George Gershwin	DuBose Heyward
Simple Isn't Easy It's The Hardest Thing	Red Mitchell	Red Mitchell
Come Fly With Me	Jimmy Van Heusen	Sammy Cahn

A Foggy Day In London Town	George Gershwin	Ira Gershwin
Once I Had A Secret Love	Sammy Fain	Paul Francis Webster
Peter, Peter, Komm Zu Mir Zurück	Rudolf Nelson	Marlene Dietrich
Where Have All The Flowers Gone	Pete Seeger	Pete Seeger
Illusions	Friedrich Hollaender	Friedrich Hollaender
Some Other Time	Leonard Bernstein	Betty Comden & Adolph Green