

Nomance

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One: Reflections in a Muddy Eye

Back in the early Noughties, *Romance*, the florist's shop, was closed.

Today was Sunday, and even in this service-hungry part of the world (in the snob hinterland of London between Chiswick and Kew) florists close on Sunday.

The shop itself occupied the front portion of a large, redbrick Victorian house. To the rear, in the spacious and not-clean kitchen, Gwynne – a tall, mean, rawboned creature of nineteen – sat next to the sink and ate cereal from a bowl that he held cupped in the horny palm of one hand. As he masticated, his slack jaw working in slow, circular motion, he stared through the window at the long, dank garden. This was filled by bags of fertilizer, stacked in rows and interspersed by a profusion of purple-headed thistles, nettles in full flower and fleshy, fetid weeds that even the florist herself, Gwynne's sister, could not name.

That very person, Carla, was sitting at the kitchen table behind him. She was in a foul mood. Her disposition was vinegary at the best of times, but just then she was toiling over the accounts. Attempting to balance the books of *Romance* always got her sourness up to full strength.

And because his sister wouldn't stop griping out loud about the shop's stagnant turnover, the shop's stagnant turnover was now extending its demoralising influence over him too.

Why couldn't she understand that he didn't care whether *Romance* went bankrupt or not? All he wanted right now was for her to stop griping. Her griping disturbed the peace, interrupted the baleful quietude of the morning and therefore lowered the quality of his meditations.

Oh, if she would only shut the fuck up, then he could think about something good.

His restless eye fell upon a bumper roll of chicken wire, rusting nicely in the middle of the deteriorated garden path, and striving to ignore the mooing of despair and frustration behind him, he allowed his mind drift back, as so often before, to that joyous moment, four years ago in Hyde Park, when he had found a wallet with fifty quid inside it.

He scowled.

It seemed life had gone downhill ever since.

Residual sensations of resentment flickered up within him, like flames in a combusting compost heap. He was thinking, after a fashion, about the pop group he had played with last year. It was a pop group that the audiences had resolved not to like. In fact, the audiences seemed to hate them. Considering they looked not a whit different from a thousand other rock bands, it had been difficult to pinpoint just where they were going wrong. Unless, of course, it was the music that was wrong. In which case, as the drummer pointed out, they ought to get rid of it. The trouble was, if they *did* get rid of the music, they would have to get off the stage and do something else with their lives.

But what's that going to be then, eh? Gwynne had wanted to know.

No one was sure. So the rest of the band got together and decided to give themselves one last shot at fame, and, instead of getting rid of the music, they got rid of Gwynne instead. He was the obvious choice really, because they all hated him even more than the audience did.

Gwynne burned more feverishly now as he recollected for the hundredth time how the other members of the band had told him to get lost.

Seconds later his fever abated somewhat when he reminded himself for the hundredth time that the band's attempt to make the audience like them still hadn't worked and they had

split up anyway.

So then, he'd had the last laugh after all, hadn't he? And then, too, none of them had ever found a wallet with fifty quid in it down Hyde Park, had they? Eh? Eh?

The muted pleasure he derived from this reflection was interrupted by a moan of despair.

Carla's really convinced she's fucked this time, he mused languidly. But his sister's dire financial position was so familiar to him by now it didn't make him smile anymore.

After flat-lining for a minute, Gwynne's brain revived just enough to reflect upon another painful aspect of the old band he used to play in – Tony the drummer. He'd got the girlfriend he'd always wanted, hadn't he? That is to say, the girlfriend *Gwynne* had always wanted.

What galled him most about that was how Tony hadn't needed to put any effort into getting Elaine. She had fallen in step with his plans straight away, without showing any sign of having to think about it.

Well that (Elaine not showing any sign of thinking) had stung his finer feelings at the time, but a few months later when he heard she and Tony and split, it (Elaine not showing any sign of thinking), had encouraged him believe she was still the girl for him. Now he could offer her the opportunity to fall into step with *his* plans without having to think about it. And so he had duly phoned her next day and asked her out.

She turned him down flat.

And she didn't hesitate for one second, meaning she *still* didn't need to think about it.

But that was mad. *Not* thinking was supposed to be Elaine's best assent. Not thinking was something they both shared. In that respect, they were made for each other. And yet, he had failed where Tony had succeeded. Why?

Come on, *why*?

Well, the answer to that question didn't take much figuring out – fortunately.

The answer was Tony had a car and he didn't. He was a mere pedestrian. And the thick roots of that particular boil ran all the way back to the credit card company who had given him even less time over the phone than Elaine. Though to be fair, the credit card company girl had been a lot more polite. In fact, her impeccable courtesy had quite thrown him at the time and he had only blown his top after he put the phone down and realised he still didn't have any credit.

Elaine hadn't been half as scrupulous about keeping him from blowing his top over the phone.

Having turned him down without having to think about it, she went on to think about it and out of pure youthful exuberance she told him their relationship would never work out because he ate meat and she was a strict vegetarian.

'But it doesn't matter,' he had told her.

'Oh, it does, Gwynne. It does.'

As bad luck would have it, Elaine seemed to read the same magazines his sister did and these had loads of stuff in them about vegetarianism. She pretty well repeated it all now, word for word. Gwynne had to wait ten minutes before he could put his side of the argument again.

'But, it doesn't matter.'

There was a pause here before Elaine tried a different way at getting him exceedingly annoyed.

'You see, Gwynne, it's what I believe in.' She made that sound so pathetic – as if big, strong Gwynne was pulling her snivelling little convictions apart. As if, in fact, she wasn't having a whale of a time. She cranked him up good and proper by adding, in her teeniest, weeniest voice, that she must sound like such a silly little girl, but she had to believe in something, *didn't* she?

Gwynne assumed she was asking for a balanced opinion. 'No. Because it doesn't matter!'

That was the very essence of his argument. He couldn't have stated it more plainly. And yet, there was no answer, apart from what might have been – of all things – a half-stifled yawn at the other end. God, she was thick! He would have to go through the whole thing with her again.

'Don't you get it? It doesn't matter.'

Elaine had sighed, 'You really do have to try harder to express yourself. Men have to nowadays, Gwynne. Try watching more daytime discussions on the telly and you'll get the right idea. As it is, you wouldn't last five minutes on *Trisha's Morning Show*.'

And, going by her tone of voice, it didn't sound like Gwynne was about to last any longer on *Elaine's Mobile Phone*.

'But –'

'No.'

'All right,' Gwynne said, defeated.

Elaine, however, had watched enough soap operas to know that arguments did not have to end quite this equably. 'Listen, Gwynne. Go vegetarian yourself and we'll give it a try.'

Even though Gwynne thought this over with lightening speed and came up with the correct answer – that he would indeed go vegetarian – he didn't come close to articulating it before a squeak of naked panic vibrated the telephone cable and Elaine began talking so fast she gobbled like a turkey. 'Remember though, to be a real vegetarian you have to leave off meat for at least a whole year. That's twelve months.'

Gwynne was choked into a cretinous silence.

And yet, after all, the concept of waiting for a year was not altogether too strange to him. An actual example came to mind. There had been a girl at his school who was famous for promising she would wait a year for her boyfriend to get out of Wormwood Scrubs Prison. And she had too! So, it was humanly possible to wait for a year. Only, where would Elaine be in all this? He would be the one proving his devotion by waiting for her, but he would also be the one expected to live off carrots and peas and not get any sex.

As near as damn it banged up in jail!

Gwynne felt betrayed by the blatant unfairness of Elaine's demand and he voiced a final, desperate plea for justice, 'But, it doesn't matter!'

One year ago, Elaine answered by slamming the phone down on him.

Thinking about it now, Gwynne found to his amazement that he should have promised to wait. The year thing had come and gone almost like it was inevitable. And although Elaine, in a final act of defiance, had later got back together with Tony, surely they must have split a second time by now – no doubt citing irreconcilable differences.

You see, Gwynne could not believe that Tony was a vegetarian. Not with biceps like that. And with her strong beliefs, Elaine must have given up trying to reform him, even if he did have a car. Perhaps, then, there was still a chance for him and her?

The question was, should he try phoning again?

That depended. Could he be so damned sure, after all, that Tony did eat meat?

With a spoonful of milky cereal suspended in front of his open mouth, Gwynne racked his brains to recollect what he could about the finer details of Tony's diet. He had seen Tony stuffing himself with sandwiches at rehearsals often enough, but, somehow or other, he had never once asked him what he had on them.

Idiot!

Well, his one recourse, at this late stage, was to concentrate with all his might and try to conjure up a visualisation of Tony's sandwiches in the hope of catching sight of the filling.

He closed his eyes and strained.

Then he strained harder.

The dense bone around his temples creaked with the tension and . . . and . . . but it was no

good. Gwynne could do no more than glimpse the outer crusts.

In truth there is a mystery at the heart of all things.

Shoving the cereal into his mouth, he sensed that this mystery-of-life thing was responsible for the unaccountable workings of fate.

Gwynne had been taught a hard lesson about the unaccountable workings of fate when he'd had the good fortune to find that wallet down Hyde Park.

The money had enabled him to buy a guitar, and his buying a guitar had led to his joining the band. And his being in the band had led to his getting booted out of the band. But only after it had led to his meeting Elaine. And his meeting Elaine, of course, had led to his getting turned down by Elaine.

In this way his good luck had contrived to do the precise opposite of what good luck was supposed to do – twice over!

Now, that couldn't be mere coincidence, could it?

'How come I get all the shit and nobody else does?' He asked himself, delving once more into the mystery at the heart of all things. As mysteries go, however, it was even tougher to swallow than the meat on Tony's sandwiches. For not only did other people not get the shit, what they did get was the car *and* the girlfriend.

And in Tony's case, the biceps too.

Car, girlfriend and biceps. They might be good for Tony, but they were like cactus spines in Gwynne's hide.

And living at Romance he knew just how that felt.

He dumped his cereal bowl into the sink.

'Hey,' Carla yelled from behind him, reminding him with an unpleasant jolt of his sister's existence, 'swill it out!'

'I'm going to be late,' Gwynne complained. He worked at the *EasyHomes DIY Superstore* in East Acton. He did the Sunday shift for the extra fifty pence per hour.

Still, to keep the semblance of peace, he swilled the dish out. This gave him time to pose a pertinent question.

'Why the fuck don't we get a dishwasher?'

'I don't know – let me guess.'

'They're two hundred quid or so at the warehouse.' He put the bowl on the draining board and turned to stare at her. 'Only a hundred each from us, isn't it?'

'Only a hundred?' But Carla seemed to like the idea of a dishwasher. 'Can't you get a discount, from *EasyHomes*?'

'That is with the discount.'

'What?' Carla pulled her face in disgust.

Gwynne shook his head. 'You can't even get hundred together, can you? This fucking place. Even I make more money than Romance, don't I?'

'You would if you were a pop star instead of a fucking failure,' Carla said, smiling for the first time that day.

'Don't get too cocky. I'm going to be in a new band soon.'

'Yeah. Since when?'

'We've been talking it over, It's with three guys I met at the warehouse.'

'What, them pensioners?'

'No, these guys are young.'

'I thought they were all pensioners who worked there,' Carla said, making it sound like he had let her down. 'You said they all looked horrible and dried up in the company uniform.'

'Most of them do, yeah,' Gwynne assured her. 'But these are young guys who started there about a month ago. They're on this Government scheme for helping ex-offenders.' He

waved her down, as if she was about to get anxious for his safety. ‘Don’t worry, they’re straight up. They all want to kill the management, not me.’

Carla, who hadn’t been worried, took a moment to digest this. ‘That’s something in their favour,’ she allowed. ‘Like I keep telling you – places like *EasyHomes* are driving small traders like us out of the market..’

‘Hm?’ Gwynne was dwelling again on the wallet he’d found down the park. The whole cycle of rumination was about to repeat itself.

‘I said, Romance can’t hope to match their prices for pot-grown flowers. They’re killing us.’

‘Who?’

‘*EasyHomes!*’

‘*EasyHomes?*’ He glanced at his watch. ‘Shit, I’m going to be late.’

Two: *Golden Aphrodite's Nightmare*

Gwynne loped out of the back door, allowing it to slam behind him.

Carla bestowed a rancorous glance on the dish he had left on the draining board and, with a heavy sigh, turned her attention back to the account books. Within microseconds she pinpointed another loss maker.

Her broad shoulders sank a little lower. 'Fucking lobelia,' she muttered.

She hadn't been able to shift a single one and the whole lot had gone and wilted on her. That bitch, Ms Stevens, had brought them every week without fail for the past seven years and it made sense to assume her devoted lobelia customer was merely ill when she didn't turn up one week. Discontinuing the line at that point would have been sheer madness. However, the weeks passed and Ms Stevens still didn't show. By the end of the month, Carla had begun to wonder whether Ms Stevens hadn't in fact died of her illness. But if that were the case, cancelling the order would still be premature. No doubt Ms Stevens would want lots of lobelia at her funeral.

Three more weeks passed before a postcard arrived, and this, in essence, announced that Ms Stevens wasn't dead at all. Instead she was basking in the Maldives for a three-month winter warmer.

What a slap in the face! Nothing rubs it in like somebody else's holiday. And the one thing Carla hated more than somebody else's holiday was . . . one of her own holidays.

Her last holiday (and Carla had vowed it would be the last) was with Sharon. Sharon had been her friend from school and, just as they both always knew, Sharon was the one who broke free from the chains of her past. She left Richmond-Upon-Thames and carved out a career at the Inland Revenue Tax Office in Wolverhampton. To crown it all, she met the love of her life – in the same office by a remarkable coincidence – and married him. The lucky guy was Billy in VAT – a Civil Service high flyer whose spectacular rise through the ranks hit the oak ceiling when he died seven years later.

After a mourning period of three months, and just in time for the med holiday season, Sharon called Carla and told her she wanted to start living again. She suggested they went away together.

How did two, lovely sun-filled weeks in glorious Cyprus sound?

Against her instinct, to be honest, Carla said they sounded pretty fantastic.

'Great! In that case, Carla, I'll make the arrangements. Leave everything to me.'

Carla was surprised when they got out there to find that Sharon had booked separate rooms. But two days later she was thanking her lucky stars about that. Sharon had met a Cypriot man and they were spending an awful lot of time in her room together. Carla was only glad she could maintain her privacy.

On the other hand, Carla did begin to feel she was having a holiday on her own.

For this reason, Carla couldn't help resenting Yogi – as Sharon's new man friend seemed to be called. So when Sharon invited her out to a restaurant with Yogi, Carla took the opportunity, during the meal, to fire off some petty sarcasms at him. Sad to say, she found her ammunition was wasted. Her petty sarcasms got lost in translation, even when she underlined each riposte with a stab at her calamari like it was still alive. She saw then that trying to understand English was a dreadful strain for Yogi. And he looked dreadfully tired anyway.

Carla had to wonder why he didn't just run his bar himself. Why wear himself to the bone trying to get a foreign woman to marry him and run it instead? She even began to feel a little sorry for him by the time they said goodnight and he went arm-in-arm with Sharon into her room.

By his grim expression, you could see his work had yet to begin.

But when Carla went to her own room and lay down to sleep, little did she realise that for once she was not quite alone. In the early hours, the calamari she had stabbed to underline her sarcastic remarks to Yogi woke her up with its own sarcastic reply – the fun-filled med-holiday tummy-bug.

Now, if she had learned anything on her previous fun-filled med holidays, it was that prompt treatment was essential. And so, she left her room and padded down to the reception desk.

Here, an unblemished young man, fashioned according to the dictates of Golden Apollo, sat watching basketball on satellite television. He looked at her from across the faux mahogany counter and smiled with the unthinking affability of youth. The stare which Carla returned had nothing affable about it. Med men – even the deluxe versions – had become objects of keen resentment. She described her symptoms like they were the boy's fault. In return, he paid close attention to every word, and then, knotting his brows, he performed what seemed to be a long-division sum in his head.

He was translating.

All of a sudden, he sat bolt upright in his chair.

'Are you bad?'

But this was not so much a question as an exclamation of blind panic. A stomach upset is as economically damaging for the med hotelier as foot-and-mouth disease is for the Brit farmer. The damage is caused not so much by the human suffering itself – people die all the time – rather it was the sound of suffering. The hoteliers didn't need the wisdom of Socrates to understand that if their guests heard someone wringing their guts out in the next room then they wouldn't be back next year. And this Carla here, she was big and strong and would make one hell of a racket before she died.

With that alacrity of mind which distinguished the population of the area – three thousand years ago, the lad figured out a way to get the woman off his back and ring-fence the plague all at a single stroke.

He explained to Carla now, in cursive English, that a Brit doctor was also a guest at the hotel and he might be able to help.

Carla was not impressed. She might be in keen physical pain and at the mercy of a handsome cretin, but that didn't mean she wasn't going to sue Cyprus for every last damned penny if she died out here.

Her voice was rising.

The lad leapt to his feet and made soothing sounds, or at least soothing in Demotic Greek, and slipped from round the counter before disappearing down a corridor.

Less than a minute later he was back.

'Doctor says great. Just great! Follow me, please.'

Carla followed the boy to another hotel room, where they found a man in his early thirties, with a pleasant but inexpressive face, waiting for them while slouched in a whicker chair. He wore a white tee shirt and shorts, and held a glass of orange juice in one hand.

'Good evening,' he gave them a smile and the boy smiled back before he waved and left.

'Carla, isn't it? I'm Gerald. Take a seat.' He motioned at the bed while he took a chair.

'Now I expect George did not explain the situation in full, but the Hotel nurse is not available this week, she's off sick.' The doctor spoke in a smooth, supple voice that slithered through the air and Carla's brain, without leaving a trace behind. 'However, I am a doctor and

although I'm on holiday I have a personal stock of medicine for the usual ailments. If you tell me what the problem is I'll treat you, if I am able. Or at least I'll try to make you more comfortable.'

'What?' Carla asked, in too much discomfort to concentrate.

Gerald took a measured sip of orange juice. 'Just tell me how it hurts.'

Carla did so and Gerald listened with an eerie lack of expression. He continued to stare at her for a moment after she had finished speaking. Then he roused himself and went to the bathroom where he put a couple of tablets in a tumbler and added some bottled water. He came back and handed her the cloudy mixture.

'Drink this, please. And I'd like you to sit here awhile. You should remain upright for at least fifteen minutes. A little chat will take your mind off things. The upset may have been exacerbated by nervous tension.'

Carla felt Gerald was straying a bit far from her upset stomach by talking about her nerves. But on second thoughts, if by nerves he meant the mental distress caused to her by being abandoned on holiday, then that was spot on, wasn't it?

'Thank you, I will then.'

Gerald took another sip of his juice and gave her a pleasant smile.

'So, you're a doctor?' Carla asked. That she already knew the answer made asking the question easier.

'I'm a specialist. I run a small private clinic.'

'You're on holiday?' Another easy question.

'Definitely. And truth be told, I shouldn't mind an extra fortnight off. I need it.'

'Well, we could all say that, couldn't we?'

'Oh, for sure. Except I might lose some of my patients if I did.'

'Me though,' she countered bitterly, 'I couldn't stay an extra fortnight without going bankrupt. See, I run a florist shop and plants need constant attention, or they die. Like your patients, I suppose . . . but then, I bet you still get paid if your patients die, don't you? Me, I don't get a penny. I'm on a knife's edge. And do you know why I'm on a knife's edge?'

Gerald shook his head.

'Because the sodding Inland Revenue taxes me up to the eyeballs, that's why.'

He gave her a long, thoughtful look. 'You know what?'

'What?'

'You should consider the benefit of having a baby.'

The room went very quiet. Even Carla's intestines held their breath. Far off in the night a med man honked his horn. 'Eh?'

'A baby,' Gerald said with an urbane smile. 'Having a baby with me could solve all these problems –'

Carla's head span. Well, alright, she didn't think much of his overture – gauche to put it mildly – but on the other hand, he was a doctor, and that made jiggling with him a golden opportunity to get more even with Sharon than she could have ever dared hope.

'The woman in question,' Gerald was saying, Carla had missed a bit, 'was paid ten thousand pounds for bearing the couple's child. You can believe me when I say she didn't pay a penny of tax on the amount. And what I say is, why should she? To me, the services of a surrogate mother can never be gauged merely in terms of a financial transaction. That ten thousand pounds was less a payment, more a gift, given in gratitude for something which will bring pleasure and happiness for years and years to come. Like a tree or a hardy shrub from your shop might.'

Several seconds later Carla said, 'What the hell are you talking about?'

Gerald jumped to his feet, opened the built-in wardrobe, in which his jacket hung, and pulled something from the breast pocket. He handed it to her.

Carla had been half expecting medicine of some sort, but it was his business card.

‘If I understood you correctly,’ Gerald went on, ‘your shop is on a knife edge and in need of a cash injection.’ He sat down again. ‘You see, I’m always on the lookout for a good birth surrogate and I’d like to invite you for a preliminary examination. If you are interested, all you have to do is give me a call. And remember what I told you.’

She searched his face closely. ‘What was that?’

‘You get ten thousand pounds, on average. And remember, there’s no tax.’ Gerald smiled. ‘On top of which, there is all the wonder and mystery of conceiving a child. As a doctor I can assure you it’s an emotional and educational experience rolled into one.’

Carla shook her head. ‘Am I dreaming?’

Gerald seemed to like this idea. ‘Well, you are on Cyprus, the birthplace of Golden Aphrodite.’

‘Who?’

‘The Goddess of Love.’

Poetic allusion was just the thing to give Carla the willies. ‘I think I’ll get back to my room now.’

‘Feeling better?’

‘Better?’

‘Your stomach?’

She scowled. ‘Oh yes, that’s better.’

‘It’s just the tax now, eh?’ They stood up. ‘Well, like I say, just remember I’m a doctor and I’m here to help.’

Eight months later, sitting in her large, cold kitchen and staring at the shop’s accounts, Carla heaved her heavy sigh once more. A remortgage was out of the question and she was already paying off an extortionate business loan (sodding banks!). If she wanted to keep *Romance* viable then artificial insemination seemed almost inevitable. The notion appalled her – almost as much as it amazed her.

But what else could she do when lobelia, geraniums and lilies added up to such a heap of heart ache?

Three: *The Vultures of Romance*

Monday morning.

Carla moved restlessly behind the foliage of *Romance*. The waiting around was the hardest. She longed to start opening at midday, but there was a tiny contingent of mad bats who only dropped by at the crack of dawn. In terms of profitability she could afford to lose them. The trouble was, she sensed they exerted a hidden but powerful influence throughout the affluent streets all around. If she thwarted them, she might find her other customers slipping away without apparent explanation.

And here was one of her other customers, right now.

‘Oh Carla, *the blossom!*’

It was Serena – the princess of bitty shoppers and the human equivalent of a pointed stick with which life poked at the ulcer of Carla’s resentment.

Every year, the same exquisite torture!

By now Carla almost admired Serena’s dogged persistence in believing that the seasonal changes of the natural world held any interest for her, just because she happened to run a florist’s shop. That said, the way in which Serena used the same weary stock phrases, delivered in a creaky pitch of delight (one which hadn’t altered a jot over the past decade) suggested that Serena’s interest in the blossom was even feebler than her own.

Unlike the blossom, Serena’s true enthusiasms surrounded her at all times of the year – outrageously expensive clothes.

Carla was very, very careful to avoid the whole subject of clothing. She refrained from openly noticing that Serena never seemed to wear the same garment twice, and that what she did wear wasn’t on sale in any of the shops she went to. But to give Serena her due, she didn’t need to be told that fashion was a complete nonstarter for Carla, and she was considerate enough to return the favour of not openly noticing what her favourite florist wore.

It was supremely ironic therefore, considering how much more she had to lose by breaking their tacit agreement not to learn anything personal about each other, that it was Carla and not Serena who went and spoiled it all by opening her big fat mouth.

Thus one unforgettable day, in a fit of temporary insanity, Carla had once casually mentioned that she was going to the hair dressers.

Straight away this throwaway little remark blew up in her face when Serena said she wished she could go to a hair dressers just like that, but her hair was so difficult that she was obliged to visit a special woman. In fact, she had seen her just last week.

This information came as a huge surprise to Carla, not least because Serena’s hair hadn’t changed one iota in the last ten years – fringe at front, shoulder length everywhere else.

In fact, she had always assumed it was a wig.

‘Well, I never.’

Carla was confident that this note of mild wonder would be enough to draw a line under the whole topic. But wait! Serena hadn’t finished the story of her hair. Having agreed with whatever it was Carla was talking about, she went on to add how lucky she was to have her special woman, because not only did her special woman understand her hair as no one else ever would, but she also did it on the cheap. To wit – fifty quid per trim.

Fifty quid!

Carla reeled. She always felt ripped off paying a tenner. And that was for a perm that took ages and really hurt. Carla's hairdresser didn't ponce about like Serena's. She made damn sure that Carla, and everybody else too, knew that her hair had been done, and done proper too.

The blossom, the clothes, and now the hair, the more Carla knew about Serena the more she ached afterwards.

Not that Serena stopped at making Carla ache at what she knew. She also made her ache at what she didn't. For there was a niggling riddle about Serena. An enigma born of a contradiction. First up, the facts were these:

One, Serena was a freelance designer.

Two, her clothes were from Paris.

Three, she spent fifty nicker on her hair.

Now, could they come more rarefied than that? No, of course not. Everything about Serena screamed posy.

So then, the big question was, Why the *hell* didn't she buy more flowers?

By rights she should have been ordering them in by the cartload. Well okay . . . it was just possible she was too rarefied even for flowers. However, Carla could not bring herself to believe such a level of snobbery was possible, not even in Kew. And in any case, this mystery ran far deeper than a poseur not buying flowers. Oh no, there was so much more to Serena than a designer lifestyle, clothes from Paris and an eternal fringe. Even if between them they did absorb more money than Carla saw in a month of Sundays.

Oh no, above and beyond all these ingredients there was . . . the nose.

Serena had this giant hooter. A whopping monster of gristle and bone with well buttressed and capacious nostrils that looked like they could suspend a bowling ball by vacuum suction alone. Carla had almost dropped to her knees in gratitude the first time Serena had stepped into Romance, a decade or so ago.

But it was a joy all too soon to be supplanted by bitter disappointment.

Her new customer had quickly failed to realise any of her vast potential. Serena might run her eyes appreciatively over the wide selection of blooms for sale at Romance, but her purchases never went further than a packet of slug pellets and a can of fly spray. Furthermore, not once had she ever referred to the fragrances that filled the shop. She was even reluctant to keep up her end of the conversation when Carla apologised for the reek of the new fertiliser. In her darker moments, Carla sometimes believed the solution to the mystery was the precise one which offered Romance least hope for the future – that the biggest nose on the block was a dud.

'Oh Carla, *the blossom!*'

In reply, Carla smiled ever so faintly. It was best to humour them. Like any other customer, Serena could get right under your skin if you let her and Carla had learned the lesson of the fifty-pound-fringe-trim well. It stood to reason she was never going to actually ask Serena why she didn't buy any flowers. Carla would just as rather assume the nose was stuffed on a permanent basis. Anything was better than hearing that the nose wasn't a dud after all, and that in fact Serena spent thousands of pounds a week at a florist's on the Champs Elysees.

Yes by God, Carla was certainly grateful to Serena for never volunteering information like that. Other customers who, like Serena, floated more often than they walked, were far too free and easy with the sparkling details of their scintillating lives. Indeed, they were so expert at making Carla feel dowdy and dull that even the reverses and disappointments they complained about were more textured and vibrant than all of Carla's birthdays and Christmases rolled into one. What had never occurred to Carla, as yet, was that if these uppity women had to make some pathetic little florist feel bad in order to make themselves feel

better, then they must hate their own lives even more than Carla hated hers . . .

. . . Serena was gone.

She had bought a can of flyspray. Apart from the rare pack of slug pellets, she only ever bought flyspray – the cheap *Pine Fresh* variety.

Oh, if it were up to Serena and her likes, Carla would be dead on her feet here.

However, as luck would have it, *Romance* was just about kept afloat by customers who were themselves pretty well dead on their feet. I.e. the really, really *old* ones.

There were about eight or nine of them at any one time and, unlike Serena's, their every visit was a delight and a joy – in that they were always a little bit more frail and decrepit than before. Carla was amazed at just how frail and decrepit old people could get before they popped off. They had her dangling on tenterhooks for months on end. After all, a funeral for her and *Romance* could spell the difference between survival and bankruptcy. That's why Carla was forever on the lookout for new ways to support the elderly. She did great discounts for pensioners and always made sure they got the special price list, the one with the fancy black border and the discreet little advertisement for *Rupert Nodes: Undertakers since 1884*.

Carla had a lucrative agreement with Rupert, and a good funeral jacked up the profits no end. If this makes Carla seem insensitive then one must recall that *Romance* had only just about scraped through the last financial year. That put death into some kind of perspective. She wasn't being morbid. She didn't want them *all* to die. Just two, or three every twelve months. Any more than that and she would have to cough up more tax. Besides, she wasn't 100 per cent immune to grief. These bereavements took time to recover from. But recover she did, because in time other customers became old and decrepit in their turn, replacing those who had gone before. Why, one day even Serena would be old enough to need a funeral.

So then, who said Carla didn't have anything nice to look forward to?

And Carla was such an optimist in respect to death in all its many guises. Reading about fatal car crashes, heart attacks and tragic suicides in the local newspaper invariably provided her with a certain thrill of anticipation.

And here was a delicious daydream for you – a fatal car crash, a lethal heart attack and a case of tragic suicide all within a fortnight (assuming the relatives chose Rupert Nodes and his excellent service) and she wouldn't have to get pregnant!

The door banged open and Kitty, the young assistant, clumped in.

Carla started from her reverie and found herself back in the mundane, everyday world where three Rupert Nodes funerals within a fortnight was just another wild and crazy dream.

She eyed Kitty, a great big tall, thickset girl of eighteen, and said, 'Fill all the buckets, like I showed you. I'm going to talk to Gwynne. He's stopped off work to help you out. Come through if you need me for anything.'

Kitty leaned towards Carla as she spoke and stared hard at her lips, as if she were trying to read them. There was an interval before she nodded in comprehension, or what passed for it.

Kitty was built on an almost gross scale. One of the latest generations of kids, so pumped up by the chemical nutrients in fast food that they were almost deformed. There was no chance of Kitty getting lots of flowers from lovesick gentlemen. A pound of beefsteak, possibly . . . and no doubt she'd appreciate it more, too. The pity was, no gentlemen were waiting in the wings. The girl could already lug bags of peat around with ease, so who knew what she'd be capable of on a diet of beefsteak?

Carla went out back into the large and chilly livingroom where she found Gwynne playing on his *Gameboy*. He had it up on full volume.

'Don't get playing that thing in the shop,' Carla yelled. 'You'll frighten the customers!' Gwynne paused the programme, but continued to glare down at the machine. She added, 'Mrs Wanless hates loud noises. She almost died when that shelf fell down.'

‘Yeah?’ Gwynne looked up with interest.

‘Just help Kitty out, will you? You know how she loses track.’

Carla’s voice lost all its harshness when she recalled how stupid Kitty was. There was something so comforting about it. Her own policy for hiring staff was to avoid anyone with qualifications. The ones with certificates could never do the job at all, which made them far worse than those without any certificates, who were merely incompetent. And apart from not being able to do the job, those with qualifications always suckered some other employer into taking them on and left her in the lurch. Carla could sleep at night knowing Kitty wasn’t going to get another job in a million years. That made having to repeat the same instructions every day, like it was for the very first time, so much easier to bear. Then too, once she was set in motion, Kitty was a methodical beast. Carla believed the shop could burn down around her and she would carry on spraying the spider plants. Yes, she would stick at it regardless till the firemen came to haul her away. Two at each end.

‘Turn it off!’ Carla yelled.

Gwynne had begun playing his Gameboy again and the room was filled by the groans of alien warriors dying in battle.

‘It’s all right now,’ Gwynne assured her, sounding as cheerful as he ever did. ‘The Neckroids have won.’ He beamed down at the screen and its frozen picture.

Carla waited, knowing her presence would soon become too annoying to ignore. And so, soon enough, Gwynne gave her his attention – as much as he could muster – and Carla explained what had to be done in the shop today and how he must slow down when he spoke to Kitty and not expect her to remember anything he had ever told her before. If Kitty was to do something again, then he must explain it again.

Gwynne frowned at her. ‘Why do you have to go to the doctor?’

For a second Carla considered telling him and perhaps obtaining a little sympathy for what she was trying to do for them. But then she changed her mind – Gwynne’s sympathy would not be worth the effort.

Four: *Treading on the Scales of a Cold Fish*

As the receptionist guided Carla into the surgery, Gerald stepped from round from behind his desk and shook hands with her.

‘Hello again,’ he said with a crisp informality. His tan, she noted, looked like it had been topped up since they had last met. ‘Please.’ He indicated that she should sit next to him in one of the two patients’ chairs. There was a large file on his desk and pointing to this, he said, ‘Those are the case notes of the couple you may be able to help.’

‘I don’t have to read any of that, do I?’

‘Good heavens, no. I happened to be reading them before you arrived.’ He leaned over and opened the file, from which he took a form, blank except for two names and an address. ‘These are the prospective parents, though. If we go ahead, you can meet them any time you like. Juliet and Philip Westthrop,’ he read, ‘of Ladbroke Grove.’

‘No thanks.’

‘Oh? Well, yes, some people prefer to maintain a distance, for emotional reasons.’

‘That’s right,’ Carla said drily. These Westthrops sounded just like the snooty types who bought flowers from *Romance*. Not a lot of flowers, mind, just enough to keep her hanging by her fingertips from the poverty line. And while she hung from the poverty line, she flapped around, didn’t she? Like an old, sorry, wet blanket at the mercy of the icy gusts of economic decline . . . suddenly, Gerald’s smooth, plausible voice interrupted her bulletin-sized reverie. ‘Pardon?’

‘I said, Carla, that I imagine you’d like to hear about the standard arrangements.’

‘Yes, all right then.’

Gerald went on to give her a outline of the service he offered to both parents and surrogates, and what was expected of her if she got involved. What must have been five long minutes later, he concluded, ‘Well then, I think I have told you everything you need to know.’

Carla was quick to disagree. ‘I’ve been here fifteen minutes and you haven’t told me anything.’

Gerald looked baffled for a second. ‘Oh, of course, I forgot! How could I? Yes, the fee will be five thousand pounds.’

‘Five thousand!’

Gerald sympathised. ‘I’m every bit as disappointed about this as you are, Carla. Yes, I do think nine months of backbreaking work deserves so much more than five thousand pounds. Especially if you consider a plumber, for instance, will earn as much in three months just for draining boilers and tightening nuts. And here you are, bestowing the gift of life. Still, the fact is, people nowadays are far more willing to shell out on a properly flushing loo than the gift of life. It doesn’t seem right, does it? What can I say? That’s the open market for you. As I explained over the phone, the full ten thousand was already looking optimistic. But what’s happened since then is that another surrogate has come along and offered to bear the child for six.’

‘Oh, for crying out loud!’

‘I couldn’t have put it any better myself. You see, I’m in a sort of halfway house here and I understand how both sides feel. If you look at it the way I have to sometimes, from the point

of view of the prospective parents, you can see that for them it's like any large investment. Like buying a new car, for example. If they hear they can get the same model, a Ford Escort maybe, for a thousand less, what are they going to do? They are going to buy at a thousand less, aren't they? Be fair now.'

'Why should I always have to be fair when the system isn't fair?'

'Very good question. The best answer I can give is that if you accept the five thousand, then I promise I shan't go back to surrogate number one. I shan't preside over a Dutch auction.'

'Oh, I bet they'd love a Dutch auction.'

'I take ten per cent, of course.'

'What the hell for?' Carla cried.

'As your agent. My time costs something, you know, and there are the phone calls to cover, stationary, insurance etcetera. It all mounts up.'

'Oh, right.' Carla pouted fearsomely.

'Look, if you want to go it alone I can give you the name of a charity. They'd put you in contact with parents and you can negotiate for yourself.'

'No, no.' Carla submitted to her fate with a scowl. She assumed Gerald would put the word out and no one in the surrogacy business would deal with her. She was stuffed – the story of her life. 'You did tell me to expect less over the phone, I suppose.' She sighed. 'So, when do I start?'

'Will today do?'

'Might I get more if I waited a bit?'

'This is not a light undertaking, Carla. Yes, we could wait until a wealthier couple came along. But I can't say when that might be. What I would say is – gather ye your rosebuds while ye may.'

'Okay, okay, I've already said I'll do it.'

'Good. We will then.'

'It's just that you should have given me a more realistic figure on Cyprus.'

'Oh, I realise that. But you know how it is when you're on holiday, you get carried away.'

Carla felt a tightening in the pit of her stomach. 'Anyway, I have a business to run. So I'll sign up now, shall I?'

'Carla,' Gerald smiled, 'there's so much more to surrogacy and child bearing than signing a form. Yes, there is a form to sign, but that's not nearly so important at this stage as a complete physical examination. I'd like to do that now, just to keep the process moving along.'

'I don't think –'

Gerald stood up and began pulling rubber gloves on. Carla fell silent, while paradoxically letting her mouth drop open. For his part, Gerald kept talking, almost as if the two of them were still chatting away on a day-to-day level. Except now, Carla was no longer in the conversation, as such, because Gerald was doing no more than describing what was happening as it happened.

'We are checking your weight in the first instance. Here are the scales and now you step onto them. Hm, a trifle overweight –'

Carla interjected a whinge. 'Well, we both know who's to blame for that.'

Gerald stopped describing what was happening as it happened. 'Who is to blame, Carla?'

'The Government, of course.'

'The *Government*?'

'That's right. They're taxing me out of existence. I don't drink or smoke and the only way I can tackle the stress is to eat.'

'That reminds me,' Gerald said, after a moment. 'There'll be a diet I'd like you to follow.'

I'll get the sheets printed up before you go.'

'These diets don't work. I've tried them before,' Carla said with disdain.

'No, this isn't about losing weight, this diet is to improve the health of the child. And yours, of course. Nothing strange. Plenty of fresh fruit, nuts and pulses. And no pills. Just a cod liver oil capsule every Saturday night.' He chuckled as he said this. 'Just the one, mind.'

Carla chuckled too, thinking, *You know where you can stick your cod liver oil capsule, don't you?*

Five: Complaining for Two

Six months later *Romance* was taking a delivery of potting compost.

The compost came every year about now and signified that summer had reached its apogee. After compost-day, the nights started drawing in again. Carla watched as the van driver and his mate made a neat pile of bags in the middle of the shop. When they had finished, she signed the delivery note and they left.

In ways such as these Carla marked the progress of the seasons. And how monotonous the routine had become! The years accumulating like vacant lots in a decaying city.

Oh, but for *this* year, at least, midsummer was going to be a little bit different.

For a start, she was expecting somebody else's baby and Gerald, the doctor, had said she must be careful about lifting heavy things. That meant Gwynne would have to carry the compost bags for once.

As soon as she had seen the van men off she went up to his room, where he was sprawled on his bed.

'I'm pregnant and I'm not allowed to lift bags of compost, and Kitty's got a strain, so come and shift them out the shop now. Otherwise the customers will go flying over them.'

Gwynne stared up at her in blank amazement. Carla smiled back. Only dropping a brick on his head could have brought her more satisfaction. Not that Gwynne was the sort to start complaining straight away, even when a brick was dropped on his head. For now, he just-about murmured, 'Okay.'

Somewhat later, though, having lugged the bags of compost out back and finding that he was late for work, he let off what might be interpreted as an expression of righteous disapproval about the fact that Carla was pregnant all of a sudden.

'Don't expect me to look after it.'

But no, he wasn't giving vent to righteous disapproval at all. Carla knew him better than that. Gwynne simply meant what he said – he wasn't going to look after it.

As he turned away and skulked away down the hall, Carla laughed out loud at his retreating back. Little did the sucker know that she wasn't going to have to look after it either!

All in all, she couldn't care less what Gwynne thought. But the opinion her customers was another matter.

Her main anxiety till recently had been about what her customers might say when they noticed she was pregnant. See, there was a chance they would put her on the spot with a hideously awkward question. Or so it had seemed for a few weeks of fretful tossing and turning by night. However, her morbid fears had faded away as her bump became visible and yet was never remarked on. She came to understand that while her customers might ask her how much a Busy Lizzie cost, they were never going to put themselves out so far as to enquire about the bun in her oven. In the great scheme of things, the bun in Carla's oven was always going to be a piddling irrelevance compared to their Busy Lizzie.

Sublime indifference – for that she could count on her customers 200 per cent. There was a good chance they wouldn't even spot the difference between her and the temp she would hire when she needed to take a week off work for the birth.

Having to hire a temp – now that was something worth Carla's time and effort to fret

over. It was yet another of those extra expenses she hadn't seen coming until it was too late, like all the jars of chillie pickle she'd had to buy recently in order to feed her craving. This pregnancy was getting to be less a money spinner by the day. No doubt that was why she had started getting these weepy spells. From time to time a near unbearable frustration would well up within her and reduce her to tears.

If pregnancy always stuffed you up like this then she could well understand why fewer women were having children these days. Actually, it was sobering to realise how much better off she was compared to most pregnant women – at least she going to get a cash lump sum at the end of her term instead of a baby.

It just goes to show, she told herself, there's always someone worse off than you.

And this very formula, as applied to Gwynne, was her most tried and trusted source of comfort.

Six: *Love's in Superstore*

At work, later that day, Gwynne was glassy-eyed and bad mannered, rather than plain bad mannered.

The way that his whole life had been turned upside down this morning was preoccupying him. In the past he had always banked on Carla being a failed lesbian. It comforted him to believe there was no chance she would ever bring a bloke home who might try and turf him out of the house. However, after Carla's shocking revelation, this had begun to look like a distinct possibility. See, it stood to reason that someone who had already gone to the trouble of getting Carla pregnant would also go to the trouble of turfing him out the house.

Gwynne frowned.

Then he frowned harder.

He was still frowning by lunch time, when he sat down in the staff canteen.

His frown looked much like his usual scowl, but it was, in fact, a different animal. This frown betokened deliberative thought, rather than any other pain in his head. He was trying recollect all the blokes who had ever come into the shop. That wasn't so difficult. Romance didn't have many male customers. And anyway, could any man who bought flowers be up to the job of getting Carla pregnant?

No, the more likely propositions were the van drivers who delivered the stock – bog peat and the like. The salesmen were a bit too flash for Carla, but the van drivers looked like right psychos. And psychos, Gwynne had always felt, had a distinct advantage when it came to the wooing and winning of a woman. That said, it was also true that psychos never failed to display good taste. Somehow he couldn't picture one taking Carla to bed. To the back of a garage, maybe . . .

That's when the answer hit him!

She's been raped!

At that, a great weight was lifted from his mind. The last thing a rapist would do was move in with his victim. Gwynne heaved a hearty sigh of relief and slouched back in his chair with a rare smile.

Charmaine, the office trainee, who had walked into the canteen just a moment before, smiled back. Then, without warning, like she had acted before she could think about it, she sat opposite him and said, 'You ought to crack your face more often, mate, you'd be less ugly.'

And Gwynne picked it up from there.

Over the days to come, this harshness of tone would lessen until they spoke to each other without any particular inflection whatsoever.

Yes, Gwynne was on the way to true love. It made him feel sort of protective and warm. Chivalrous even. In which case he had to ask himself what would Charmaine say if ever she found out his sister had got raped and he hadn't done anything about it? No doubt she would demand to know whether he didn't have any balls or something. After all, wasn't Carla getting raped as near as damn it a personal insult to him as well?

God damn it, Charmaine was right! He couldn't take that sort of shit off another guy. He had to do something. Him and his mates had to go out there and round the fucker up. Then they'd teach the bastard to think twice before he raped his sister again.

But to round anyone up, even a fucker, one needs a description. Well, that should be easy to get hold of – or so he thought. But whenever he got back home and found himself face to face with Carla, his usual masterful way with words deserted him. He couldn't understand it. The question couldn't be simpler, could it?

You know that guy who raped you? What did he look like?

And yet he found himself hesitating in a way he had never hesitated before. The problem was him and Carla had never talked about anything for years, apart from stuff like housekeeping and taking deliveries of bog peat. And conversations like that did not lead straight up her skirt the way rape did.

The more he vacillated, the more speechless he became. And we must recall he was so very accustomed to maintain a certain pig-ignorant taciturnity.

However, they were watching television in the lounge one evening and Gwynne had already having given up, telling himself that he was never going to spit that shit out, when he heard this voice say, 'Carla, you know you're pregnant and all that shit?'

Gwynne couldn't believe his luck. It was *his* voice. He'd blurted the question out without having to think. Once again he had to tell himself that in life you could *never* think too little. He didn't let himself think now as Carla fixed him with a stony stare. 'What did he look like then, the man?'

'Never set eyes on him.'

'What? Bastard! What did he do? Use drugs?'

'Yes, a sedative and local anaesthetic.'

'Jesus Christ. If I catch the fucker . . .'

'Aw, relax will you. It's all over and done with now.' Carla turned back to the TV.

Gwynne found himself mulling over his sister's reluctance to discuss the situation. Something told him, maybe a film he had seen once, that there were some women who preferred to try and forget rather than exact revenge. It was a baffling reaction and he could scarcely credit Carla with not wanting to break the swine's neck.

But hey! Perhaps – just perhaps – she didn't think her little brother was up to the job of breaking a swine's neck. Maybe she already thought he had no balls or something.

And worse still, it looked like she wasn't going to give him the chance to prove otherwise.

Well, God damn . . .

Slowly but surely, Gwynne's simmering resentment against the man who had raped his sister turned instead to a simmering resentment against his sister.

He was back to his normal self.

In actual fact, before the next two weeks were up, Gwynne was better than ever. His friendship with Charmaine developed into a new relationship, and with a new relationship came a new social circle. He was soon too busy to fret one way or another about his sister getting raped. There were other problems to sort out. Like this Friday, when everyone in his new circle had the afternoon off from work because they'd planned for a night of clubbing in South London. They were in the pub, trying to kill the afternoon, and Jake (Charmaine's ex), was waving these tablets around and Gwynne was struck by how these tablets looked like the tablets he had seen Carla taking in the kitchen.

Being reminded in this way of his home life Gwynne conceived of a better way to kill the afternoon, and he exclaimed, 'Lets go back to mine, chill and get something to eat.'

Everyone agreed straight away, and they headed for Jake's wheels.

At some point during the journey West, Gwynne gave Jake a long penetrating look.

He saw that Jake's most constant companion was a broad, chimpanzoid grin. It sort of worried Gwynne. Jake was such a joker. Might he, by any chance, drop one of those pills in amongst his sister's while no one was looking?

Wasn't that exactly the sort of monkeying around he would do, just for a laugh?

Nar. Jake was sound! He wouldn't even be tempted to play a dirty trick like that, even though he'd already exclaimed at the top of his voice in the pub that the pills looked the same as his sister's and that the bottle was on the window sil in the kitchen. Jake was bigger than that.

Hadn't he even said that he was glad it was Gwynne who'd nicked Charmaine off him, and not some other bastard instead?

Seven: *Spac Attack!*

Before Gwynne and the crew arrived, Carla was busy serving in *Romance*.

Mrs Shelly Hedley had just stepped into the shop and Carla's heart missed a beat. Shelly hadn't been around for months and, as her No. 1 customer most likely to die, Carla had grown pessimistic and assumed *Romance* had missed out on her funeral. Oh, how cruel! Shelly gave many indications of having a wealthy husband and Carla felt confident he would be able to afford to put the cemetery knee-deep in flowers on the big day.

On the other hand, as desirable as Shelly's death was financially, Shelly was still one of the few customers Carla had a sneaking admiration for.

Why?

Because Shelly had a smoldering black core of evil, encrusted by a thick, silky saccharine coating – like she was the child Satan had begot upon the Sugar Plum Fairy.

That's why.

And hence Carla's delight on seeing her again.

'Good afternoon!'

'Good afternoon, dear,' Shelly's thin, cut-glass accent sliced through the lush air of *Romance* and Carla shivered with anticipation. 'I'd like to order – ' She was abruptly silent. Her eyes – as clear and colourless as ice – had alighted upon Carla's stomach. Her fixed stare gave was akin to that of a monestrous, ancient and dilapidated owl about to swoop for the very last time. Carla felt the child kick within her, as if in trepidation. 'Well, I say!' Shelly trilled with joy. 'When's the happy day?'

Carla really didn't like to think about that, let alone discuss it. However, she had to consider all those deluxe wreaths just over the horizon, not to mention Shelly's regular order of dahlias, tulips and daffs.

There was no way round it, Carla must give an answer that pleased.

'When's the happy day?' She mused aloud.

Oh, but she so wanted to tell her! Carla would willingly tell Shelly anything she wanted to hear, if that's what it took to win the funeral for *Romance*. And for that reason wasn't it brilliant that she could provide an answer based upon Gerald "The Inseminator" Lytton's expert opinion?

'Three weeks, two days, four hours,' she laughed girlishly, 'and counting.'

Shelly greeted this frippery with a hollow gibber and remarked, 'If only doctors could be so accurate. I myself don't rate them above weather forecasters. And of course, the daughter of a friend of mine relied on her doctor's prediction and took it for granted that she wouldn't be inconvenienced during her honeymoon in Sri Lanka. But of course she ended up giving birth on the aeroplane. And so there you are, she joined the mile-high club the day after her wedding.'

It was on the tip of Carla's tongue to correct Shelly about the meaning of the *Mile-High Club*. But something told her that any reference to sex would only send Shelly into howling shrieks of laughter.

But there was no time for laughter anymore, was there? The proper subject of conversation was now age, death, decay and funerals.

'How about you, Shelly? Do you clock up many air miles?'

‘No darling, I like to keep both feet on the ground these days.’

‘But a lot of people – I mean retired people – travel more than ever,’ Carla said artlessly, thinking of Rupert Node’s remark that exotic holidays and long-haul flights did his undertaking business a world of good. She giggled. ‘It’s called skiing.’

‘Darling, these days standing’s hard enough.’

‘No, no, ski. S. K. I. It stands for *spending the kids’ inheritance*. See?’

‘I don’t have to travel to do that, dear,’ Shelly smiled.

‘That’s good,’ Carla said, trusting this meant Shelly would SKI on her funeral.

‘Of course, I loved to ski when I was younger,’ Shelly reminisced, ‘only then, of course, I was fighting fit.’

‘But you still are,’ Carla tinselled.

Shelly fixed her with a reptilian stare. ‘Not since I carried my two boys I’m not. I don’t know about you, but pregnancy played merry hell with my spine.’

‘I do get a slight twinge now and then.’

‘Oh dear.’

Carla gave her a dimpled smile. ‘But I don’t complain. I always think how lucky I am. I mean,’ she gushed, ‘it’s not like any little fall might crack my hip or anything. I’m always awed by the very, very old people. They are the real heroes, aren’t they? Those who risk six months in hospital just for the right to stand on their own two feet.’

Shelly scraped the air with joyless laughter. ‘But then, dear, they’ve always had to. My generation, you see, never got benefits off the state. Life was tough for women back then. On the other hand, though, if you did get pregnant there was at least a fifty-fifty chance your husband would stick around . . . and then, maternity leave was unknown. How about you, darling, are you going on maternity leave?’

‘Oh no, Shelly, dear,’ Carla cooed, ‘I have to support myself in my hour of need. As you can see, I run the business on my own and I can’t afford *not* to work. I expect I’ll still be at it even when *I’m* very, very old.’ She gave Shelly a meaningful look. ‘Not that I ever want to retire. No, not me. If you don’t work then what else is there to do, apart from sit round all day drinking coffee and eating thin little biscuits? If ever I ended up like that I’d probably want to top myself. But of course, only after I had arranged the very best send-off I could afford.’

‘But it is terribly hard for single parents to hold a job down, isn’t it?’ Shelly cooed back. ‘I’m not saying *you’ll* have to quit work, but many do, don’t they? And that’s such a shame, I think. Especially if they feel really worthless about themselves and end up,’ she smiled at the quaintness of Carla’s term, ‘*topping* themselves.’ She paused here and they both observed 0.2 of a minute’s silence in remembrance of the topped. ‘But never mind,’ Shelly continued breezily, ‘it’s not all bad nowadays. The Government has, at long last, started to force the men pay up, haven’t they? So I reckon – even if the worse came to the worse – you’d be able to afford a pretty good send-off.’

‘I only wish the Government could force my man to pay up,’ Carla said, recalling that, like every one of her other customers, Shelly had never stooped to find out whether she had a partner or not. Well, it was time for a little white lie – just in case Shelly got away with the idea she was a loose woman. That might be bad for business. ‘But they won’t get a penny out of him, because you see, my husband’s dead. Yes, and he was a great big strapping erector too. You know, he put those . . . rods up. Never had a day’s illness in his life. Fit as a fiddle, he was – right up to the second he hit the concrete.’

‘I’m . . . terribly sorry to hear that,’ Shelly said, looking amazed.

‘Oh, I’m tougher than I look,’ Carla reassured her, ‘and anyway, I see it all the time in my line of business.’

Shelly was momentarily confounded. ‘Why? Are you a . . . erector too?’ Her eyes roamed over Carla’s meaty shoulders. ‘In your spare time?’

‘No, just a humble florist. What I mean to say is, I do a lot of funerals.’

‘Ah.’

‘It goes without saying that I really went to town when they buried my husband. People came from all over to see my displays. I very much doubt whether there will be a funeral like it for a good few years to come. Not, anyhow, till I bury Gwynne, my brother. I’ll do something special for him. Though I always hope someone else might come along first, someone who can afford to stand out from the crowd. Someone with the vision thing. That’s where *Romance* can offer you more. See, with us, you can order in advance and die feeling completely confident about the future.’

Shelly nodded throughout this speech, while her hands, acting, as it seemed, of their own accord, brought out a carton of fancy cigarettes from her handbag, a handbag which no doubt cost more than what Carla earned in a month – a year even. ‘Oh, what am I doing?’ She upbraided herself, and put the carton back.

‘No, no, please, carry on,’ Carla urged.

‘You see, it’s an immemorial habit with me. I caught myself taking them out in *Fortnam and Mason’s* last week. There’d have been a riot if I’d actually lit up. But it’s just automatic with me, that’s all.’

‘But please, go ahead. No one else is here and you’re my . . . most valued customer.’

‘Am I, dear? Well,’ Shelly hesitated for a moment and removed the carton once again. ‘Thank you very much. Just lately you’re made to feel such a leper if you smoke. Do you smoke, by the way?’

‘Yes,’ Carla said, though she had never smoked in her life, such was her eagerness to please.

Shelly offered her a cigarette and Carla took one. She’d smoke the whole packet to get Shelly signed up to her funeral programme. ‘Some people say you shouldn’t when you’re pregnant,’ Shelly observed, lighting Carla’s cigarette before her own.

‘Oh, it’s just once in a while. And it’s my belief is a ciggie now and then is miles better at calming your nerves than sedatives, and definitely safer. I don’t care what the doctors say, smoking does wonders for me. So long as the cigarettes are not too mild.’

Shelly liked this. ‘I think a pregnant woman has an instinct for what’s good for her, and these are made with the very best Turkish tobacco, you know. The kind I smoked to calm my own nerves while I was carrying Stewart, my first son.’

There followed a brief interlude in which the pair indulged in smoking mannerisms peculiar to themselves. Shelly exhaled mean, thin clouds, as perhaps might have issued from the chimney of a death-camp incinerator, while Carla puffed away like a Wild West steam engine.

‘All pregnant women smoked when I was young,’ Shelly declared with satisfaction.

Carla considered this statement. ‘You know, nobody mentions that anymore. And yet, they’re still going on about Thalidomide. Just shows, doesn’t it?’

‘Yes, yes, that’s right, my dear,’ Shelly agreed warmly. ‘Now while I don’t know anyone who ever suffered because their mother smoked, with thalidomide the first person I always think of is my cleaning lady . . .’

Shelly, as it turned out, had an almost encyclopaedic knowledge of the frightful effects of thalidomide. And too, the frightful effects of arterial sclerosis, emphysema, cancer and gas gangrene. What’s more she could reel off the names of her contemporaries, and household staff, who had died of them. The grand prize went to Uncle Cecil – killed off by lung cancer, even though he had never smoked a cigarette in his life. Which just went to prove what Shelly had always suspected – that all these things came and went in fashions, like the length of women’s skirts. Apropos of which she now recalled with great fondness her friend at school, Lydia. She observed, ‘But isn’t it so odd, dear, how one simply never sees club feet

anymore?’

Carla tutted and shook her head, ‘So many things are changing for the worse.’

‘Very true! For a start this area of London is awash with drugs these days. They’re all taking them, pregnant or not. I dread to think what horrors pop out in maternity clinics. Things that make club feet look like buck teeth, I imagine.’

‘You’re telling it the way it is, Shell,’ Carla declared. ‘And yet, between you and me, a couple of club feet would be a godsend,’ she rubbed her belly. ‘His little kicks are really sharp.’

‘My dear,’ Shelly said with a smile, ‘the kicks are nothing. You wait for the birth.’

‘Well of course that’s when a little pointy head comes into its own.’

‘You may well be lucky, Carla, you may well be lucky.’

‘Have you ever heard of little pointy heads?’

‘Dear, nowadays little pointy heads are the only staff I can get.’

This was the moment that Gwynne and his crew lumbered in through the shop door.

Carla was set to step from behind the counter and save Shelly, who looked tiny compared to the gangly, loose-limbed youths. However, Shelly showed no fear. She smiled at Carla with a twinkle in her eye, ‘And talk of the devil.’

‘Carla, the back door’s bolted,’ Gwynne complained, leading the rest of the crew through the counter door and into the house behind.

Carla was too affronted to answer. She could only glare.

Gwynne was followed by a tall, dark-haired girl with a tough swagger. She gave Carla a quick on/off smile as she slipped by. Behind her was a lanky, dangerous looking lad whose simian features blazed with silent hilarity. After that . . . but it was too awful. As the last specimen vanished into the hallway that led into the house, chimpanzeeing as he went. Carla opened her eyes to check that Shelly was still alive.

‘My word, are you having a party?’ Shelly exclaimed, seemingly unaware of Carla’s distress. If anything, the crowd of thugs appeared to have thrilled her. ‘Or should I say – a rave?’

‘That was my brother and his friends.’

‘Oh, the one you’re going to do a really good funeral for?’

‘If all goes well.’

‘Let’s hope. But this talk of raves had reminded me why I’ve dropped by, dear. I think some daffs to brighten the dining room. We’re throwing a dinner party next Friday.’

‘Lovely.’ Clara gave her a bright smile. *Well, she reflected, a dinner party’s no funeral – but it’s better than nothing.*

Once Shelly had departed, with a promise to visit again soon (oh, these old crones were so sweet! It was more than some of her younger customers could do to mumble ta ta), Carla stalked back into the house and found the pack of jackanapes debouched in the kitchen.

‘This is Charmaine,’ Gwynne declared with that unmistakable proprietorial air which indicated to Carla that he had found some idiot to call a girlfriend. They shook hands. Charmaine’s eyes never left Carla’s gravid stomach.

‘Pleased to meet you,’ she said in a neutral tone.

Gwynne ran through the rest by name and they yipped their indecipherable greetings against a background noise of suppressed snickering – none of it quite suppressed enough. And how tall they all were! The most disturbing of these lofty clowns was Jake, with little round eyes and a fixed expression of ape-like hilarity.

Carla unbolted the back door with as much significance as she could muster. ‘I forgot to tell Kitty not to bolt the back door.’ As well as having to repeat to the girl every day what she must do, one also had to tell her what not to do. Still, despite the inconvenience, she could not bring herself to condemn Kitty for being a moron. The benefits were just too numerous.

‘Okay, when we go, we’ll go out the back,’ Gwynne said.

Carla slunk off back to the shop.

This afternoon turned out to be one of those afternoons when not a single soul drifted in – not even to browse. Once in a while, her customers would gang up like this to demonstrate that they didn’t need her. Even the street outside seemed deserted.

The last three hours passed in a torment of loneliness and Carla closed the shop with piercing sense of failure. Once again, *Romance* had proved itself to be the ultimate dead end, and once again she realised her only hope was to sell up and get into a different line of business. With any luck in a different city.

She went into the house and got a nasty surprise. Gwynne and his crowd were still in the kitchen. They were spread out, relaxed and engaged in conversation. The repartee crisscrossed the room like a rubber ball, one that kept whizzing just past the back of her head.

‘Could you go into the living room so I can get my tea?’ She snapped, expending the last of her self confidence. Running *Romance* was a severe drain on one’s self confidence at the best of times, and today had been more demanding than usual.

Charmaine scowled, ‘Yeah, we’re in the way, Gwynne,’ she scolded. ‘Why don’t you think?’

Gwynne thought, albeit reluctantly. ‘Um, lets go in the front then.’

This was a short-term solution, of course. Carla now could cook her evening meal in peace, but she could not go into the living room to eat it without being made to feel even more isolated and useless than she did in her shop.

She plodded up to her bedroom and turned her radio on. But this didn’t help. Every little noise that Gwynne’s gang made downstairs, not to say every big noise, found its way up to her and her nerves. Possessing ears turned into a physical liability.

When the yobboes trooped out, an hour or so later, she exclaimed with relief. Then, after a dignified interval – twenty seconds – she left her room with the intention of taking a no nonsense stand with Gwynne on the matter of this gross intrusion into her privacy. Being pregnant would add much weight to her argument. For a start, she could tell him that his gang of hooligans had almost given her a miscarriage. Didn’t he realise she would never balance the shop’s books next year unless she went the full term?

This stinging question was not going to be answered as soon as she might have wished.

Gwynne had left with his new friends and the house was empty.

And that’s how it stayed as the evening turned to night. The silence became oppressive. Carla discovered the peace and quiet of the house was only agreeable to her when she shared her solitude with Gwynne.

Her heart grew more and more heavy, like that old sorry blanket on the washing line, suspended now in a persistent drizzle.

She decided to turn in early for the lack of anything else to do. Once she had changed, she found she had a headache coming on, so she went downstairs to the kitchen, where the medicines were kept in one of the cupboards. As she opened this, she saw the plastic bottle of pills she had been prescribed for her stomach cramps. The invasion of Gwynne’s friends had made her forget to take one that lunchtime. She picked it up and found there were two left. She had been sure there had been only one. Well, she’d still need to get more tomorrow. She swallowed one and then took an aspirin and went to bed.

Yet, no matter how hard she tried, she could not sleep. It was as if she were being forced to stay wide awake and listen for her brother’s return. The bed clothes cloyed around her and every position felt awkward. When it got to the small hours, molten tears burned her eyes as her very faith was tested. Yes, even her dream of selling *Romance* and escaping London forever seemed like it could never come true.

All at once it was morning.

Somehow she had slept. The unbearable ache of loneliness had faded somewhat. It revived a little when she discovered Gwynne had still not come home, but by then she believed in her dream again, and what's more, it was better than ever. Because now, when she did sell *Romance*, she would refuse to take Gwynne with her.

Making him homeless would just about get her even.

After breakfast, Carla went through into the shop and let Kitty in. She gave her today's instructions and stood watching while the huge girl began to fill the water buckets.

A moment later, Carla blurted out, 'So, how are you today, Kitty?'

Kitty couldn't deal with the question at the same time as her hands were occupied. She put the bucket down and stared at Carla. How was Kitty? The question seemed to trouble her on some profound level. Carla helped her out by giving her a choice of two answers. 'Well, do you feel good, or do you feel bad?'

Kitty gave Carla a crafty look. 'I don't know.'

After a moment, Carla said, 'Like I told you, Kitty, only fill the buckets up three quarters. I don't want your mother round here again complaining you've got a strain.'

She stumped back into the kitchen and was still there by lunch time, when Gwynne showed up.

'Starving,' he said.

She watched him as he prepared his dinner, a wistful smile on his face as he cranked open a can of beans. His good humour put her in a state of some perplexity. She wanted to have a good go at him, but she needed him to be sullen to get started, and Gwynne wasn't being sullen for the first time in nineteen years. Such was the cursed power of love.

She had no choice but to pick an argument.

This was going to be a strange new experience for her. By and large arguments with Gwynne occurred spontaneously and Carla couldn't help feeling self-conscious as she kicked off with a complaint – for the lack of anything else to kick off with.

'You and your lot made a racket yesterday,' she sounded like she was arraigning him in court. 'You know I have to rest up. I'm pregnant, remember.'

Not looking at her, Gwynne nodded and stirred his beans in a saucepan on the stove. 'Yeah, I do remember,' he said, 'but yesterday I forgot and I'm dead sorry about that, Carly. Somebody said they wanted to see this shop my older sister ran all by herself and I never thought. But I give you my word it won't happen again.' He was serious when he said this. Then he was laughing. 'For a start off, Charmaine doesn't like flowers. They give her a reaction, like hay fever. Worse than hay fever, though. She gets a rash, see.'

'That's a shame,' Carla said. 'But there must be an injection that would help.'

Gwynne seemed to appreciate the thought.

'That's what I said, but Charmaine told me she takes too many drugs as it is. Anyway, she's got her own place near Hounslow. She's said I should move in with her so I could get away from the flower dust too. And I thought, *why not?* So I've told her I'll give it a go – starting next week.'

Eight: *Enter the Other Party*

On a leafy, prosperous square in Ladbroke Grove, a clap of summer thunder drew Tamsin to the balconied window of the bijou apartment.

Her friend, Juliet Westthrop, looked on with an indulgent smile as the winsome little creature waited, all aquiver, for the next peal of thunder. But none came. Instead the wind got up and a light rain began to patter against the pane.

Tamsin returned to her seat and asked, 'Darling, I may have to borrow an umbrella later.'
'Yes dear. I bought a new one Monday.'

Tamsin was stricken. 'Oh, but I have two of yours already, don't I? Listen, Jules, I'll pop back now and bring them.' She made as if to move, but Juliet halted her with a dismissive gesture.

'Stay here, Tam. People will be arriving soon and it'll look strange if I'm on my own.' As a matter of fact, Juliet did not mind receiving guests on her own, but she always tried her best to avoid making Tamsin suffer. They had been friends from school, when Tamsin's hopeless vulnerability was a large part of her charm, and although those days were long since gone, Juliet still nursed a protective instinct towards her.

'Come to think of it now, I have one of Phoebe's umbrellas too.'

Tamsin spoke with a polished accent. She was the only child of a leading barrister (her father) and the head of a London-based PR consultancy (mother). It went without saying they had always expected something remarkable from their cherished offspring. They had been glad to fund her at St Martin's College of Art. But her childhood friend, Juliet, could have told them from the beginning that their daughter had even less talent than ambition. Tamsin had gone to St Martin's for one reason alone – because Juliet was there.

'I'm surprised Phoebe has an umbrella,' Juliet said.

'It was still sealed in the original packaging.' Tamsin stared at the rain and sighed. 'She should try to take more care of herself.'

Juliet tried not to smile. For some reason the rain always made Tamsin melancholic, and when Tamsin was melancholic she was at her most ludicrous. 'No need to worry about Phoebe.' Juliet soothed. 'She's a real toughie.'

Tamsin took heart from these words and Juliet was about to tell herself, yet again, that the girl was such a pathetic and simple soul, when Tamsin said, 'I've just remembered something, Juliet. I've won ten thousand pounds on the premium bonds. Of course, it's not the jackpot, as such, but . . .'

Having taken a moment or two to swallow this, Juliet hastened to congratulate Tamsin on her good fortune.

It was then that she was struck by how often before she had congratulated Tamsin on her good fortune. Far more often, indeed, than she had ever congratulated any of her other friends. She had been obliged to congratulate her, for instance, on her triumphant graduation show at St Martin's College of Art. Tamsin's contribution consisted of a series of sepia portrait photographs of her friends' vacuum cleaners.

It had been acclaimed.

Tamsin was pleased to be acclaimed, but she was over the moon about her uncle and aunt leaving her as the sole beneficiary in their will. She wasn't quite rich now, but she had

enough to buy a tiny house near the Portobello Road and lead a comfortable lifestyle off what remained.

Since then, Tamsin had no longer taken account of her parents' high expectations for her.

'It's so nice to be able to come to a party,' Tamsin declared. 'I mean a party like this one, rather than Helena's. And when the weather gets gloomy, it helps to cheer one up thinking about beautiful summer evenings like this.'

Juliet gave her a pitying smile. No, Tamsin couldn't count on being cheered up at one of Helena Hursborg's art parties – the only kind of party she attended on a regular basis. Helena – their mutual friend from art college – was a decade older than either of them. They had met her at St Martin's only because Helena had somehow made her three-year degree course last eight years. She was a manager rather than an artist and knew by instinct how to use people. Juliet disliked the way Helena used Tamsin at her parties as a kind of waitress, and yet, she also had to admit that perhaps waiting on people with wine was Tamsin's true vocation. 'By the way, Tam,' Juliet said, just in case Tamsin got the wrong idea. 'Philip's got his orders – he'll be taking the drinks round.'

'Poor man. Anyway, I wish I could throw a party myself once in a while,' Tamsin said, referring to the limited size of her little house.

'It wouldn't be safe for any more than five or six people, dear. Fire regulations.' But the issue of safety was on Juliet's mind for another reason. 'That reminds me, I'd better put Phoebe's candelabra out on the table now. She might think we've flogged it otherwise. You know how sensitive she is.'

This was one of Philip's jobs, but her husband was still out, buying extra salted snacks from the nearest SevenEleven. Tamsin helped her take the candelabra from the locked cupboard in the hallway.

This gargoylesque contorted metal was only ever let out of the locked cupboard when Phoebe was expected to visit. A versatile artist and welder, the candelabra was the nearest she had ever come to the homely and utilitarian. Cautioning each other to take care of the many wicked spikes, Tamsin and Juliet lugged it to the living room and stood it on the middle of the dining table, where it squatted, looking ominous and malign.

The doorbell rang.

Juliet went downstairs and found Liam waiting outside.

Another friend from those bygone days at St Martin's College, Liam was a tall, youngish man, pale and yet saturnine, who nursed a throbbing core of rancorous defeat under the long, dingy, old man's coat he wore throughout the year. He got about London on a creaking boneshaker bicycle – his one constant companion in life.

'Where's your bike, Liam?'

'Stolen.'

'Oh dear. Come on up. Only Tamsin's here so far. When does your show show?'

'It's showed. Two weeks ago.'

Juliet made a fuss of wondering why she hadn't been told. And so did Tamsin. Joining their sympathy up seemed to make it amount to something.

'All of Helena's invitations got lost in the post once,' Tamsin said, in an attempt to make Liam feel less alone and worthless.

Liam's gloom sharpened into resentment. 'They were bound to get lost eventually. She sends them out every fortnight. My show was a virtual one off.'

'But maybe you ought to try the same approach to selling your paintings as Helena does,' Tamsin offered, as a tentative suggestion.

'The Hursborg Tupperware Party approach?' Liam sneered. He understood perfectly that the true agenda of Helena's art parties was to flog her paintings – abstracts that demonstrated that she couldn't even use a paint roller right.

Juliet said, 'It does seem to work though. She sells everything she makes.'

Liam nodded. 'That's true. But then, everyone's drunk before they buy anything.' He let out a bitter, but feeble laugh, and Juliet and Tamsin answered with repressed smiles. Liam went on, 'Actually, I don't resent her being such a good salesman. I wish I had her gift for selling. What does get to me is that her parties really are Tupperware parties. All her dreadful pictures are nothing but Tupperware still-lives. She's got a big collection Tupperware hidden in her attic. She uses them as her models.'

'Has she?' Tamsin asked, wide eyed.

Juliet laughed at Tamsin's naivety. However, Liam's wall-eyed stare made Juliet realise he was being serious.

Her laughter petered out.

'She's coming along later, Liam,' Tamsin reminded him.

'Don't worry, I don't actually care enough to tell her what I think about her.'

Juliet and Tamsin exchanged a look. They had never worried about Liam telling Helena what he thought about her, and they never would.

Just then, the front door opened and shut and Philip came clumping up the stairs with a box full of salted snacks. 'Hello, you two,' he greeted them with a happy smile. He was six foot six and sported a shank of floppy blond hair that still didn't look too young for him. He also boasted endless legs attached to lean, athletic body, and he was currently enjoying a vibrant City career in the *Centaur Corporate Investment Bank*.

Juliet always felt like punching the air when she added it all up.

'How you doing?' Liam asked neutrally. Tamsin went up to bestow a kiss.

'Fine, fine.'

'We'd better dish this lot out as well,' Juliet said, as Philip put the box of snacks on a chair.

'Use scissors,' Tamsin said, being the expert. 'It's quicker than opening the packets by hand.'

Juliet went to the kitchen to fetch the scissors and more plates and came back to find Philip telling Liam that his bank had recently invested in artwork to the tune of three million pounds. The doorbell sounded again and he broke off to answer it, returning followed by Phoebe – a tall rangy woman in her mid twenties, short-haired and wearing jeans and a white tee shirt. She was accompanied by a man of her own age, who was taller even than Liam and Philip. This guy, who boasted a frame of solid bone and muscle – the bone predominating – and was dressed in fashionable street-fighting style, evinced an air of physical menace. Phoebe introduced him as Justin.

'Hello there,' he said in a brisk, impersonal voice. His accent revealed him to be of purest upper-middle-class origins.

He was carrying a pair of bongos.

'I'm afraid you can't play those here,' Juliet told him as soon as she spotted them. 'The neighbours.'

Juliet's crisp command confounded Justin. As a gentleman, he knew he must do as the hostess asked, but, you know, the bongos was an important prop in his current image. He was at a loss. Philip stepped in adroitly and commandeered him to help Tamsin dish up the salted snacks – the bongos had to take care of themselves.

Meanwhile, in one corner, Phoebe launched into an enthusiastic conversation with Liam. She gushed about the bash she had thrown last week at her flat in Maida Vale. The lovely, but strange Elspeth Williams had been there – the Elspeth Williams who was tipped for this year's Turner Prize. Phoebe waxed lyrical about how Elspeth was working in the media of "found" crisp packets.

From time to time, Juliet, who was listening, but pretending not to, noticed Liam glancing

over towards Justin. That poor devil was busy emptying little packets of salted snacks onto small, dainty dishes. Perhaps Liam felt sorry for him. More likely though, his emotion was one of envy. Liam did not want to hear about Elspeth's "found" crisp packets. Those foil bags, whose ostensible function, once, had been to contain deep fried slivers of potato to be consumed between meals, were now lacerating his artistic sensibilities, smothering his own work under a layer of actual garbage. Juliet wondered whether she ought go over, change the course of the conversation and relieve his distress a little. But she held back when it dawned on her that Phoebe was making a play for the boy, despite having arrived with Justin. Okay, Phoebe was very much going the wrong way about it. Juliet could all too readily imagine what Liam thought about Elspeth Williams' "found" crisp packets. Still, with any luck, Phoebe would work that out by herself and leave the poor mutt in peace.

More people were arriving. Juliet and Philip got them set up with drinks. Soon, that critical mass was achieved which differentiated a party from a collection of mere individuals, and at that point, and not a moment before, Helena Hursborg arrived.

She was wearing a dark business suit and looked and acted just like a middle-aged member of some local government interdepartmental committee. Juliet walked with her to the dining table where the buffet was laid out. Helena had been far too busy all day to eat – she seemed to attend meetings more often than she painted.

'Do you like sushi?' Juliet asked.

'Love it.'

'We ordered it from Ginko's.'

'I adore Ginko's.' Helena inspected Phoebe's hideous candelabra for a moment, and lowering a voice a little, asked, 'How is she?'

Juliet checked to see that Phoebe wasn't within range. 'The latest round of therapy seems to have worked,' she said in a near whisper.

'I warned her,' Helena said, her rather deep voice adding to her solemnity. 'Africa – all those boils.'

'But they stuck together at the time, didn't they? That's what I find so odd. It was only months after they came back to Britain before she and Rob split up.'

'I'm not exactly sure the breakdown was about Rob. I sense it was because she simply can't make any headway as a working sculptor.'

'But she won a major commission not so long back.'

'Really?' Helena couldn't have looked more surprised if Juliet had told her Phoebe had won a pair a stuffed giraffe. 'I didn't know that. Who was it from?'

'Her parents.'

'Ah.'

'They asked for a piece to stand in the forecourt of the family's gas fire factory in Portugal.'

'Oh yes?' Helena began to look over the sushi. 'Did you see it, the piece?'

'Just photographs. It's a spine type thing, with sharp plates of metal instead of ribs.'

Helena paused to weigh this information and murmured her conclusion, 'As if doing twelve hours in a gas fire factory weren't bad enough.'

Nine: *The Art of Exhibition*

Carla had shut *Romance* early that day, unable to face any of her customers.

It seemed like they all knew something she didn't. Like she had been experimented on and presented a danger to their health.

But what about *her* health? She was supposed to pick up another batch of the tablets that Gerald had prescribed for her. However, when she had taken the last one at dinner time, (after too many jars of comforting chilly pickle) she had noticed it had a strange aftertaste. Somehow this fact had become fixed in her mind and, as the afternoon wore on, she had come to realise that Gerald was a mad doctor and he was using her as a guineapig in a grotesque medical trial.

Carla had never felt so alone. Gerald was mad, Gwynne had left home, her customers were all against her, and Sharon was running a bar in Cyprus.

Who else could she turn to?

It was nine in the evening before Carla found Juliet and Philip's house.

She closed her umbrella and let it drop beside the steps, which led up to a large, stuccoed terraced villa, typical of those lining the squares off Ladbroke Grove. But having thus safely disposed of her umbrella, she seemed to run out of ideas. All she could do was stand and stare at the door.

It swept open and two men appeared. They gave an immediate impression of youth that did not, however, stand up to closer inspection. They looked back at her with amused and contemptuous interest. She was trying to differentiate between them. It was quite amazing – they were almost identical. Both sported glossy tans and had close-cropped, bleached hair and a pampered, manicured look. They grinned at her now, producing shocking wrinkles around the eyes, and then they stood aside, bowed and flourished in unison. 'Greetings.'

Carla walked in.

'Thank you.'

She turned to ask them where Juliet and Philip were, but they were already walking away, voices raised in merry excitement as they headed off into the night.

Carla turned back, climbed the steep staircase and suddenly found she had stumbled into a crowded room. She tried to flee, but the door had abruptly disappeared and she wove hopelessly through the dense flock of bodies for a while. Then she had to stop. Her head was spinning.

A tall, slim man, not youthfully dressed, although he looked younger than the fairies she had met outside, handed her a glass of wine and asked, 'Aren't you Lynne's sister?'

'No, I'm Gwynne's sister.'

'Gwynne?' The man exclaimed, delighted to hear the name. 'I haven't seen the old reprobate in two years.' He gave Carla a fond smile. 'I never knew he had a baby sister.' Carla stared at him and did not reply. His smile faltered a little, then, as in a dream, she heard him say, 'Anyway, two years, eh? A long time. But of course, it's so easy to lose touch with these jet-setting foreign correspondents. And stepping on that land mine hasn't slowed him down one bit, has it? By the way, where is he now?'

Carla responded in a slow, even voice, 'Who? Gwynne?'

'Hmm, Gwynne.'

‘As far as I know he’s still working at the *EasyHomes DIY Superstore*. But he’s living with that Charmaine, so I wouldn’t know for sure.’

‘*The EasyHomes Superstone?*’ The man said, his smile faltering once again. ‘Is he covering consumer issues now, or something?’

‘No, he’s an assistant in the *Timber and Gardening Department*. Unless his new band’s been signed up for a recording contract. I expect he’d have to leave if he started making albums.’

Carla couldn’t help noticing how this simple statement stunned the guy. It was then she began to wonder how the hell this bloke in Ladbroke Grove happened to know Gwynne. Her brother’s social horizons seemed to have expanded even beyond Hammersmith. Perhaps he was a pop star now, after all.

That settled it, she was never going to turn the radio on again.

‘Strange, I brought a box of screws and some shelving only last week,’ the man said at last.

Carla stared at him. ‘That’s interesting.’

He winced. ‘Well, what I meant is, I went to the *EasyHomes DIY* place recently and, er, I didn’t see him there.’

‘You wouldn’t though, would you? Like I say, he works in *Timber and Gardening*, not *Shelving and Screws*.’

‘Ah, that explains it then. *Timber and Gardening*.’ He was looking unhappy now. ‘Trouble is, we don’t have a garden as such.’

Carla was unable to conceal her disgust. ‘The oldest excuse in the book.’

‘But we do go to the odd concert occasionally,’ he added, by way of an apology. ‘You say Gwynne’s in a band? So then, there’s a chance we may bump into each other after all. That would be nice.’ He cleared his throat. ‘I believe he used to be in a band before.’

‘He was in a band before, yes.’

‘Is this a new one, or a revival of the original?’

‘No. This lot work in the warehouse too.’

‘Do they? Crikey. A new band then . . . what kind of music do they play?’ ‘Eighties classics I expect.’

‘No. I think it’s called Psycho House.’

The man gaped at Carla. He kept on doing that, didn’t he? Just what was the matter with this drip? She might be disorientated by drugs, but that wouldn’t stop her getting aggravated by a drip.

She snapped at him, ‘It’s just a racket though! No one will ever buy it, even though they’re called *The Dead Dianas*. I told him, a great name on its own isn’t enough.’

‘No, I daresay it isn’t.’ The fellow murmured, just as if (of all things!) he was sorry that Gwynne would continue to be a miserable failure. That was bad enough, but what he did now was try and talk up the swine! ‘You know though, Carla, thinking about it, playing in a Psycho House band at his age, and with only one leg . . . well, it’s an example to us all. Gwynne was always young at heart, triple bypass or no.’

‘Only one leg?’ Carla was affronted. ‘He’s got more than that!’

The man was sympathetic. ‘No, he hasn’t, dear. It was in all the papers.’

‘I don’t read the papers,’ Carla assured him, like her life depended on it. However, she was already wondering how long it would be before Gwynne was on the telly too. Might there be no escape?

‘Well, I did hear he was in denial. Which, in a way, is quite an achievement in itself,’ the man reflected. ‘Still, lets forget I mentioned it. In any case, he’s in a Psycho House band now, so it sounds like it hasn’t stopped him living life to the full. And did you say he’s settled down with someone? That’s just brilliant. At long last, eh? Charmaine you say? You know,

I've never thought of that as a boy's name.'

Carla finally lost patience with these imbecilities. 'Are you on drugs too?'

It was a simple enough question and yet the guy didn't seem to have an answer. That's how far gone he was. Carla gave him a dirty look and knocked her wine back in one. She needed it.

When she looked again, the weird, jumpy geezer was gone.

She turned a full circle, but there was no sight of him. Troubled, she examined her surroundings again and began to wonder whether she had come to the right address. It was a strange place for anyone to live in. Bare wooden boards and odd furnishings, many in buffed steel, made it in some ways reminiscent of Gerald Lytton's fancy clinic.

The thought of the clinic gave Carla a queasy sensation. She shut her eyes for a moment and waited for her stomach to settle down. When she opened them again, she found a small, frail woman with huge glistening eyes standing in front of her.

Carla looked the greasy pixie up and down, but without comprehension.

It spoke, 'Hi, I'm Tamsin. Feeling alright, dear?'

Carla handed Tamsin the empty wine glass. 'Just so tired, really. I can't seem to sleep nights. I'd like to complain, but I'm scared he'll get angry and, you know, do stuff.'

Tamsin gave her a "knowing woman of the world" look. Carla knew this look well. It was affected by many of her customers in Kew. 'It's your neighbours is it?' Tamsin commiserated. 'They can be such noisy bastards, can't they?'

Carla frowned. 'I have fabulous neighbours. Golden, they are. They've both got Alzheimer's and I never hear a peep out of them. No, it's the doctor we have to worry about. He has to be stopped and stopped soon, before he ruins more lives.'

'The *doctor*? My God, what did he do?'

'Artificially inseminated me.'

At that, Tamsin's "knowing woman of the world" hit a brick wall.

Smiling with grim satisfaction, Carla went on, 'I wouldn't worry so much if it was my baby I'm carrying, but it's somebody else's and the real parents don't know what's going on. That's why I came here, to warn them. See, they can formally adopt it straight away, before he aborts it and chops it up for stem-cell research . . . you aren't the real mother, are you?'

Tamsin, having given this some deliberation, it seemed, said, 'No, I can't be the mother. Twisted tubes, you see.'

'Twisted tubes? You don't know how lucky you are.'

Tamsin's eyes grew wide. Then they grew narrow. She looked down into the empty glass in her hand and then giving Carla an elvish smile, she asked, 'Would you like more wine, dear?'

Carla nodded and Tamsin fluttered off.

But instead of wine, she returned with a great lanky beast, almost as big as the ugly geezer with the bongos. Carla stared up into the ghoul's cold, but marvelling eyes, and felt her insides undulating – always the first sign of an agonising stomachache. Either that, or it was the onset of labour.

'Sweetheart, I hear you want to find parents for the child you're carrying.' This apparition, huge and threatening, with its ravaged and hectic face, had a beautifully pure and crystalline voice.

'Well, not any old parents,' Carla said, trying to sound calm. 'They have to be the right ones.'

'Of course. But isn't it a bit soon to put it up for adoption?'

Carla considered this. 'Depends how much other people are willing to offer. You don't want a baby, do you?'

'A baby? Me?' The bogey looked flummoxed for a moment. 'No thanks. I'm blessed

with a complete absence of maternal instinct, dear.'

'Fair enough. But if you change your mind in the years to come, I can give you a piece of advice – don't ever go to Doctor Gerald Lytton.'

'Doctor Lytton? Who's that?'

'Phoebe, dear,' Tamsin said, 'I think that's the guy who assaulted her.'

'He didn't assault me,' Carla interjected, ever a stickler for detail. 'He explained what he wanted to do from the very beginning, when we met in Cyprus.'

'Ah, a holiday fling,' Phoebe said, adding with impressive authority, 'a lot of bad shit can go down on holiday.'

'Sure, I was there on holiday,' Carla snapped, 'but that's beside the point. I'm a working girl and there was no question of my doing it for free.'

Phoebe's manner became righteous. 'A working girl? Well, that's great, dear. I really mean that. You know, I totally support full legalisation for working women. Like all our sisters, I think working women get a raw deal.'

'I got a raw deal, all right. Five thousand pounds – not a penny more. He was adamant.'

'*Five thousand?*' Phoebe's face dropped. She sounded less righteous and more jealous. 'Well, if he insisted on unprotected penetration,' she allowed, 'there's a chance of AIDS, isn't there? So – fair enough.'

'Unprotected?' Carla said, disgusted. 'Do you think I'd have stood for that? He wore rubber gloves.'

Phoebe leaned back. 'But as I understand it, he made you pregnant.'

'Getting pregnant was part of the deal.'

'What?' Phoebe was outraged. 'Some men have the most bizarre fantasies . . .'

Tamsin shook her head vigorously. 'No, no, Phoebe, you don't understand. She's talking about artificial insemination *and* a mad doctor.'

Carla scowled in disgust. 'What the fuck else did you think I was talking about?' But her annoyance petered out. She had begun to feel dizzy. Her stomach was churning.

Tamsin looked concerned, 'Are you alright, dearie?'

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

Phoebe got excited. 'When is your baby due, darling? Not now?'

'I've told you,' Carla snapped. 'It's not my baby – it belongs to Juliet Westthrop.'

'Who?' Phoebe hooted.

'Juliet Westthrop.'

'Who?'

'Oh Christ, is this the nut house or something?'

'Never mind that,' Phoebe said with diabolic avidity. 'Just tell me one more time whose baby it is and then I promise we shan't ever refer to it again.'

Carla answered in a cold voice. 'You tell me something first. Who lives here?'

Tamsin's eyes grew wide and fearful, and she put her hand on Phoebe's arm as if to restrain her.

'Juliet Westthrop,' Phoebe said in a hushed tone of expectancy.

'There's your answer, then. It's her baby.'

At this Phoebe quivered like a huge coiled spring. Tamsin withdrew her hand in trepidation as the fiend scanned the crowd. She soon spotted her target.

'Juliet, darling,' she hollered across the room with boundless mirth, 'come over and meet Carla. Guess what? She's having your baby!'

A deathly silence descended upon the room.

Finally, Carla was able to set eyes on Juliet Westthrop. She was the one whose face, one of a refined, metropolitan beauty, sagged now and went grey, like an old pair of Y fronts.

Tamsin whispered, 'Oh, *Phoebe!*'

Hearing that, Carla thought to herself: *this Phoebe makes the same mistake over and over again.*

And indeed, Carla could now enjoy the spectacle of Phoebe wither under the flames of contrition. It seemed to have dawned on her she'd made a faux pas. However, Carla's pleasure soon dimmed when she noticed everyone in the room was staring at her reproachfully. It seemed she was being singled out for interrupting them in the middle of a crucial sentence, and not Phoebe.

The jumpy geezer, that drug-addict Carla had spoken to first and who knew Gwynne, stepped forward out of the crowd and declaimed. 'But that's Gwynne's sister!'

There was a general exhalation. Gwynne, must have been a tried and tested source of needless alarm. And who was to say her sister would be any different?

But then a tall, lugubrious geezer wearing an old man's coat piped up, 'What are you talking about? Gwynne hasn't got a sister!'

There was a general murmur of mystification.

'It was only a joke,' Phoebe said, appealing forlornly to Juliet. 'Gwynne's set us up. You know what he's like.'

'I happen to know that he's dead.' This declaration was intoned by a late middle-aged woman in a grey suit who, going by her demeanor, appeared to be a member of the Government. 'It happened last night. Didn't anyone else know?'

'Gwynne's not dead. I know he's not,' Carla snarled with contempt, 'or I'd have heard off the EasyHomes DIY Superstore by now, wouldn't I?'

The woman from the Government opened her mouth, but a reply did not come out of it. Carla shouldered her aside and took a step towards Juliet.

'It's your baby that's in danger,' she yipped, gripping her belly like a bomb. Then glancing round to check no one else was listening, she added in rasping whisper, just loud enough for next door to hear, 'Gerald's feeding me drugs, you know. Trying to kill it so I don't get your five thousand pounds. He can use it for stem-cell research. It was on the telly!'

Juliet shook her head and squeaked. All at once, the woman from the Government was in Carla's way again.

'Listen sweetheart, who is this Gerald? Please tell me, so I know what to say when I call the police.'

Before Carla could open her mouth, Tamsin intervened on her behalf, 'Gerald's her doctor, Helena, and her doctor appears to be mad.'

Carla heard the news race round the party – *mad doctor!*

Helena produced a glacial smile. 'Well, if you don't want to go back to hospital because your doctor is mad, you don't have to. But dear, you can't stay here, now can you? So, tell me, what is it exactly that you want to do?'

Carla clutched at her stomach as the pain dazed her for a moment, then, collecting her thoughts, she made a supreme effort to carry on like nothing was wrong and to answer the question.

'I want to supply all the flowers for your funeral,' she wailed. 'So before you die, could you please call Rupert Nodes. You can't go wrong – he was established in eighteen ninety-nine.'

And with that she sank to the floor in agony.

Once down there, she assumed the position – it always eased the pain to get her knees as close as possible to her ears.

Apart from her grunts and snorts, an utter and complete silence descended on the room.

Till Tamsin spoke, that is. Or rather, screeched, 'My God, she's gone into labour!'

Carla dropped her legs in alarm and also screeched. 'What?'

She gaped at the towering figures around her. The guy with the bongos clutched them to

his chest in horror. Phoebe reached out to take the lugubrious man's arm, but the lugubrious man took a deft step out of reach and she gripped the freestanding lamp instead. And Juliet – Juliet put her hands to her sheet-white temples now and emitted a spine-tingling shriek.

'Dear God, not on my floor!'

This banshee cry sent a convulsion through the crowd. Many were galvanised into action. Amongst cries for towels and boiling water and – *Call the fire brigade*, the heftiest guests, not all guys, lurched forward in order to lift Carla and carry her into the bedroom. Though some of them tried to take her to the kitchen instead. As she receded into the darkness of the bedroom, Carla saw Philip holding onto Juliet while calling for an ambulance on his mobile. Several guests were also calling for an ambulance on their mobiles. But then, she reflected, you could never have enough ambulances, could you?

Carla was laid groaning on the bed. She closed her eyes to stop the room spinning, and then she must have blacked out, because all at once she was being grappled by two ambulance medics.

They made a right job of getting her onto the stretcher, groaning louder than the patient. After a moment to recover, they heaved her up, and stamped out into the living room like they were carrying a piano instead.

To get through to the stairs they now had to pass through an awkward succession of doorways. At their first attempt they got stuck and there was nothing for it but to back out and try again. But then they found the stretcher had lodged tight.

'Nige!'

'Vern!'

'Back!'

'Give us a chance then!'

'Just push!'

Vern pushed, Nige pulled and with Carla shouting, 'What the fuck are you doing to me?' they lurched free and pitched back into the livingroom.

People leapt out of the way, fearing for life and limb. Carla screamed, finding herself hurtling towards the window. Unhindered, Nige and Vern stumbled backwards right across the room, gaining momentum as they went. They crashed, with tooth-jarring force, into the dining table. Carla heard the thing squeal and scrape on its pointy legs and turning, she saw Phoebe's metal candelabra topple, bounce and roll off. Tamsin, staring wide-eyed at the unfolding drama, was standing in wrong place at the wrong time. The candelabra felled her in one and pinioned her to the floor, where she lay, screaming and bloodied.

Carla squeezed her eyes shut tight as she heard Nige say, 'Better bring her too.'

Merciful darkness swept over her then like a wave of warm water. She seemed to swirl round and round till a hand reached out and held her arm. All at once she was back at the shop. The plants were grotesquely overgrown. She could barely breathe in the fetid air. The hand gripped her arm more tightly.

It was Juliet.

'Carla dear, what an absolutely divine little place you have here. It's just so sweet and lovely. Look at all these fabulous flowers. Why, this is just heaven – you're so lucky, you really are.' Juliet was wearing that little smile that all her snooty customers wore when they claimed they envied her.

Carla couldn't bear any more.

'Flowers! Flowers! Flowers! I hate the bastards! This shop is the bane of my life and I can't wait to sell it. I tell you this, when I move to a new place, I'm going to cover the front garden in concrete and park a lorry on it!'

Juliet laughed derisively. 'But, darling, I wasn't ever going to buy any flowers. I've got what I want from you.'

Carla howled and tried to wrestle free. ‘No!’

The grip tightened on her arm. Juliet’s thin face was devilish. ‘Oh yes.’

‘God, help me,’ Carla cried, and, in that instant, He did! A brilliant idea came to her – the best idea she’d ever had, so it must have come from above – and she commanded Juliet, her most nightmarish customer yet, to – ‘Go to hell. I’m going to have an abortion, see, and I’m going to bill you for the funeral!’

Juliet’s face twisted demonically. Too late, Carla saw she was grasping a fork in her hand – a garden fork. In the next instant, the evil creature thrust it into her stomach.

There was no pain.

‘Carla?’

The smooth voice was familiar. She tried to open her eyes but the light was blinding. She shook her head and groaned. ‘Carla?’ The voice again. ‘How are you doing?’ It was Gerald. Other voices were murmuring further away. Some were laughing.

A gentle hand rested on her forehead and in its shade she managed to focus a little. The kind face of a middle-aged nurse was smiling down at her. ‘It’s a lovely little boy,’ she said.

Ten: *Taking Stock*

It was about six months later when Charmaine and Gwynne's relationship fell apart.

Everyone was taken by surprise. And that included Charmaine and Gwynne. They couldn't seem to see why they had to break up either. It just didn't make any sense. And yet . . . they did.

Gwynne moved back to *Romance*, and was disconcerted to find the place seemed different somehow. And after he was disconcerted, he was puzzled, because the place looked the same. But more than that, he sensed that he too had changed in some way, and this frightened him a little. For a start, he found he could no longer take comfort with "Beast Horde: The Ultimate Conflict" on his *GameBoy*. That had never happened to him before. Still more disturbing was how he had lost his urge to play in a band. It didn't rankle with him in the least that Pod, Ba'a and Rocco had kicked him out of *The Dead Dianas*.

Now *that* was odd.

In his experience, getting kicked out of a band should have rankled – and kept rankling for at least two whole years non stop.

Whatever the explanation, not being rankled led to an unexpected consequence – he stopped rankling other people.

And the first person he stopped rankling was his sister. Of course, Carla had shouted and balled when he first came back home, but Carla's shouting and balling was something he had heard countless times before. He didn't see the point in answering anymore. And because he wasn't answering, Carla appeared to lose the thread of her argument.

Which wasn't to say he had stopped communicating with her.

For instance, a week after his return to *Romance*, and just as he was about to finish his breakfast, he looked up from his cereal bowl and stared long and hard at her.

After a full thirty seconds, he asked, 'Didn't you used to be pregnant, or something?'

Carla started, like she hadn't been aware he was there and answered *yes*, rather than telling him to *mind your own fucking business*, which is what he'd sort of expected to hear.

But even so, Gwynne was a little too pushed for time right then to think of the next question.

He would be merely on time for work if he didn't get going, rather than early.

That's right, nowadays he made a point of arriving at the *EasyHomes DIY Superstore* even *earlier* than he needed to.

You see, there had been a change at work as well as at home, and he took his new responsibilities at the *EasyHomes DIY Superstore* very seriously indeed.

These responsibilities had devolved upon him because his superiors had noted how quiet Gwynne had become since he'd broken up with Charmaine. Interpreting his lifeless expression as a mark of a sober young man, mature beyond his years, they had offered him promotion.

Well, it was either him or that complete drip, Ba'a, in *Tiles and Grouting*.

Gwynne jumped at the offer. After all, even a complete drip knew promotion meant more money. What did come as an unpleasant surprise was the hidden catch. Promotion, as it turned out, involved stock taking.

Just his luck!

And Gwynne could tell you a thing or two about his luck. Things to make your hair stand on end. Except . . . wait about! After a few faltering first steps, Gwynne found himself zipping through the new procedures with ease. No, it was worse than that – he was soon taking an exotic pleasure in learning them.

Now who the hell could have predicted that?

Not Gwynne, for a start. For although stock taking theory was devoted to material objects it was, nevertheless, a form of abstract thought and till that day Gwynne had been a stranger to abstract thought. An enemy, even. Or at least he felt thinking rationally was something to be treated as a hazard. Thus he had engaged with abstract thought as tentatively as he would a tray of cacti back at *Romance*. To his delight, however, the result was not the very familiar pain and misery, but rather a revelation. Stock taking, unlike Charmaine, car insurance, Elaine, the popular music industry, Carla, Kitty and flowers made . . . perfect sense.

In fact, if it came to that, what stock taking procedures actually made was . . . life worth living again!

By sheer chance Gwynne had stumbled upon what so many fail to attain in this restless and corrupting world – self-realisation.

And to think that if Charmaine and him hadn't split he might never have got promoted and learned stock taking. Just shows what a fine line runs between tragedy and comedy.

And then, all his friends had been wrong, hadn't they? They thought they were fucking him over by kicking him out of the Dead Dianas. But who was laughing now? Him, with a career in stock taking? Or that load of, plinky-plocky, warbling, guitar-twanging failed pop-star wankers?

And he would be laughing a lot, lot more when he found a way to frame Pod, Ba'a and Rocco for all the stuff that was going missing from the warehouse.

Stock taking – *geddit?*

So, anyway, that was the essence of Gwynne's transmogrification, and a rundown of his current intellectual obsessions, so it was not terribly surprising that the next question that logically followed from – *Didn't you used to be pregnant?* had yet to occur to him.

The hours passed. Then the days.

What he needed was a good Samaritan to jog his memory and give him a clue. And as luck would have it, that office was performed by Philip Westthrop, when he came to call at *Romance* one Saturday morning.

There was a knock on the back door, which was the nominal tradesman's entrance.

Just then Gwynne happened to be showing Carla the plastic buckets he'd nicked from the *EasyHomes Superstone* – a bit of stock taking lite – and, coming at that delicate juncture, the confident rap on the door played strongly on Gwynne's imagination. Glancing at the door in question, he was suddenly and absolutely convinced that the law was lined up on the other side of it, and at that moment he found his plastic buckets weighing like lead buckets instead.

'Don't answer it!' He hissed, 'I'll take that new shower attachment back tomorrow.'

Carla turned to the door and yelled, 'It's open!'

'For fuck's sake!' Gwynne was too indignant to run. He watched, filled by sullen resignation, as the door opened to reveal a tall, rather desiccated young man, dressed in a grey flannel suit.

'Oh great.' He thought. 'Someone from the non uniformed services!'

'Not another one trying to flog sphagnum moss?' Carla jeered lustily. She enjoyed a bit of raillery now and then with the salesmen.

'No, I'm not,' the man said.

'Everyone's trying to unload sphagnum moss just lately. Come on then, tell us what you got.'

He stepped in. 'I don't think you remember me, do you?'

‘We get loads of salesmen.’

‘I’m not a salesman. I’m Philip Westthrop. We have met, Carla. You know, during the party.’

Gwynne, struck as he was by his sister’s abrupt loss of colour, was enormously relieved to learn that the plainclothes detective was here to arrest his sister instead.

‘Yes, I recognise you now,’ Carla murmured darkly.

‘I’m sorry to intrude.’ The guy glanced at Gwynne. ‘I’d like a word, if you don’t mind, Carla?’

‘What about?’

‘It’s not something I can explain in a few words. Don’t worry though, I’m not here to cause any sort of trouble –’

‘What kind of trouble?’ Gwynne interrupted with subdued menace.

Philip looked at him. ‘The kind I’m not going to cause.’

Gwynne had to chew this one over and as he did so the guy from MI5 continued his conversation with his sister.

‘In fact, I think you’ll be very interested by what I have to say, so I hope you’ll hear me out. You don’t have anything to lose. In fact, you have a lot to gain. Everything that you want, perhaps.’

‘Everything that I want?’ Carla sounded incredulous.

‘I think you know what I mean,’ Philip said. ‘But this must be a shock for you, so what I want to do is go away and come back at about twelve and we can discuss it over lunch. I mean, I’ll take you out to lunch. I’ll explain the whole deal then. But there’s no obligation, Carla. If I come back at twelve and you don’t want to see me, then you’ll never hear from me again. But think about it first.’ He nodded. ‘Thanks for your time.’

He turned and left, closing the door after him. Gwynne gaped at Carla. ‘What the hell was that about?’

She shook her head. ‘I’m not sure.’

‘But you said you knew him. Who is he?’

‘He’s the father of that kid I was carrying.’

Gwynne slapped his head, ‘The father! *That’s* what I should’ve asked! Who the father was.’

Carla walked away and ended up in the chill livingroom, sitting on one of the armchairs and staring down into the murky patterns of the carpet. Gwynne followed cautiously, and watched her from the sofa, where she seemed surprised to see him when she looked up again.

‘What?’ She asked.

‘Carl . . . where’s the baby now? It’s not in your room, is it?’

But in actual fact he was thinking of the attic.

‘With its real mother, of course,’ Carla blared at him with exasperation.

Gwynne shook his head. ‘I don’t understand.’

‘It’s simple. That guy, Philip, and his wife, paid me to have her kid. She couldn’t have one herself, or that’s her story. But perhaps she could and she just didn’t fancy the idea.’

‘No shit.’ Gwynne never imagined his sister’s pregnancy could be this interesting.

‘Anyway, I did it for her because they’ve got the money and this business is going down the drain . . . but you don’t care about that, do you?’

He shrugged. ‘So, how did you meet them, these people?’

‘Through a doctor. He owns a clinic in Acton. I met him in Cyprus.’

‘Cyprus? Is he straight up?’

‘Of course he is. He earns a good living out of it too.’

‘Yeah? So how much did you get out of it?’

‘Five thousand.’

‘Five thousand! Is that all? You can’t even get a decent motor for that.’

‘You don’t have to tell me, but I was desperate, wasn’t I?’

Gwynne’s face flushed with indignation. ‘It doesn’t seem right. I mean it’s a new life, isn’t it? That should cost at least as much as a decent motor. You ought have kept it, just to spite them.’ Then he noticed that if she had done this she would be even worse off. So he added, ‘And of course, waited a few months before sending it to the social for adoption.’

Carla smiled. ‘You bonehead, if I did that, they’d only find out and adopt it themselves, wouldn’t they?’

‘Yeah. Slimy Bastards!’ Gwynne murmured. Then, having pinned these people down in the great scheme of things, he began to wonder about the motive for Philip’s visit. ‘So anyway, what’s he talking about when he says he wants to give you everything you want? That’s money, ain’t it?’

Carla thought about this. ‘Maybe they want me to have another kid. I wouldn’t put it past them.’

‘Well, now’s your chance!’ Gwynne cried feverishly. ‘Make fucking sure they pay the going rate this time.’

Carla reddened. ‘I don’t care how much they want to pay. Being a surrogate mother is a traumatic experience. The nearest you could come to it is being in a car crash. After something like that you just want to forget.’

But for Gwynne, a car crash was the very worst example of a traumatic experience, implying, as it did, the fulfilment of a dream – owning a car in the first place. A decent one too. He wouldn’t want to crash in an old nail, would he?

‘Well, they sound like a pair of right shits, Carl, I agree,’ Gwynne said, adopting the tone of the oily salesman who’d sold Carla the sphagnum moss that she didn’t need. ‘But still, if he wants to take you to lunch then why not just go ahead and see what he says. At least you’ll get a good meal out of it.’

Eleven: *Credit Lunch*

Philip arrived an hour later to pick Carla up.

He took her in his rust-blistered Rover down the traffic-clogged streets to Putney and having parked it between two other cars with mere inches to spare he conveyed her into a designer restaurant.

This had a striking similarity to the interior of Gerald's fertility treatment clinic. There was a predominance of white wall, broken by a discreet-few pine-framed pictures that did not retain the gaze too long, nor even try to draw it, but which were quite content to do no more than satisfy the peripheral vision.

'Ah, Saxifrage, hi there. Table for two, please.' Philip said, as a waitress approached them – a peculiar, diminutive being, with purple lipstick and a shockingly frosty smile. She welcomed them in a clipped, upper-class accent and led them to a table, leaving them with a menu each.

'I don't suppose I can smoke here,' Carla said, when they were alone. Not because she wanted to smoke as such, but because that was the only thing which all the designer chic said to her.

Philip glanced around. 'No, I daresay you can't. In case you are wondering what to try, I'd recommend the beef fillet, with baby carrots and pea volute. Though, for myself, I think today I'll try the rack of lamb with new season garlic. I'll get you a half bottle of Shiraz, shall I? It's not sweet, but not too dry either, and although this may come as a terrible shock, Carla, I have to say I want to do everything in my power to see you reunited with your baby.'

Carla found herself lost for words. The waitress, Saxifrage, returned to the table just then with a carafe of water.

Philip ordered for them both.

This gave Carla time to think. When the waitress had left them alone again, she asked, 'What's wrong with it, then?'

'With what?'

'The kid.'

'Nothing, it's fantastic. Look.' He pulled some photographs out and began to show them to her.

'Ugh, put them away! I'm here to eat, aren't I?'

'I'd thought you love to see Porchester again,' Philip said.

'Porchester!' Carla scoffed loud enough to turn some heads.

'Oh, well, don't let that put you off. Change the name. The kid won't know any better. Like, I had this dog once which my parent's brought as a puppy from a family who were moving abroad. They originally called it Carbon. Yeah, that almost put me off too. It was all black, you see. But I persisted, and within a week it learned to run to me when I called Butch.'

'Butch?' Carla queried with a faint smile.

Philip frowned. 'I do want to help you, Carla.'

Carla leaned forward and propped her chin on her hands. 'Then why do you want to do everything in your power to see your child back in my arms?'

He looked confused. 'Because . . . you really want him back?'

‘Bollocks to that.’

Philip’s jaw went slack. Then he bleated, ‘But what about the maternal instinct? It’s the strongest instinct there is.’

‘Which is why I can’t understand why Juliet would want to let it go.’

‘Ah, but you see,’ Philip went on, eager to explain. ‘Juliet and I are getting divorced. Or at least we’re on the downward spiral that leads to divorce. At this stage, I feel he would have a better future with you. You see? There’s no need to feel guilty about taking him.’

Carla groaned and put her face in her hands. She stared at him through her fingers. ‘You’ve got a flipping cheek. I carry the thing and now you expect me to bring the little fucker up.’ She dropped her hands.

Philip leaned forward and grasped one of them. ‘How about if I pay you as well – to take it away?’

Carla withdrew her hand. ‘Why are you so desperate to get rid of it?’ Her eyes widened in alarm. ‘Just what did I give birth to?’

Philip laughed. ‘He’s a healthy kid. Honest, Carla, you couldn’t wish for better.’

‘Yeah? Then why would Juliet let you get rid of it? What happened to *her* maternal instinct? Okay, you’re getting divorced, but that doesn’t mean she can’t keep the kid.’

Philip’s amusement faded fast. He picked his fork up so that he could twiddle something nervously between his fingers.

‘A kid, you know, would make a divorce very messy. Juliet will claim crippling child maintenance off me. Look, lets say I pay you instead. A one off payment. How about . . . another five thousand pounds?’ Carla did not respond. ‘I’ll add five later this year, and five next. You’ll have had fifteen thousand altogether. What do you say?’

‘But then I’ll get lumbered with a kid to bring up. And I don’t want one, even if you were paying me regular maintenance.’

‘Ah, but you see, you couldn’t claim maintenance off me,’ Philip said perkily, ‘that’s what’s so beautiful.’ He eyed the fork, moving around and around in his fingers and murmured . ‘But don’t worry about bringing it up. Just wait awhile and then sell it for adoption. They’re crying out for babies in America. You’d get even more money then, wouldn’t you? Maybe twenty-thousand pounds. Maybe a lot more. I tell you, he’s a great looking kid.’

Carla’s interest quickened. ‘Twenty thou?’

He smiled at her. ‘Or more. It’d be easier than you think. I’ll even do the research for you. And as for claiming the kid back off us, don’t worry – you won’t have to do a thing. I have a lawyer. David Chudhury. He’ll work with you and make sure you get him back. You have to hurry though, Carla. You have to lodge your claim within the next two weeks, or under English law you’ll lose your right to take him back. What do you say? You’re looking to make thirty-five thousand pounds altogether. Not bad for no work, eh?’

Carla didn’t feel the need to answer straight away. She studied Philip for a moment. ‘You must really hate Juliet to do something like this to her.’

Philip avoided her eyes. ‘No, I don’t hate her,’ he said. His lean, haughty face twitched with hurt. ‘I can’t help myself. I’m trapped.’ He scowled at his plate. ‘It’s my fault. I thought marriage would change the . . . way I felt.’ Misery played across his features for a moment, then he looked up at her defiantly. ‘All right, enough’s enough. There are other options. Will you help? Yes or no?’

A silence grew between them. Carla heard the sounds of the restaurant echoing from a distance. ‘Okay then, but only if I get all the money you’re offering up front. The full ten. That’s my condition.’

‘That’ll be difficult,’ Philip said, but he looked relieved.

‘See, it’s no good to me in installments,’ Carla kept drilling, not daring to believe she had

struck oil yet. 'I need the money straight away to make any difference. I've got a business to sell and I want to start up something new.'

'Okay, okay, lets fucking well talk.'

Gush!

Twelve: *Flies on Serena*

Spring. Yes, another one. And like every year before, Serena was in raptures as she made her regular appearance at *Romance*.

‘Oh Carla, *the blossom!*’

Carla just knew she had come direct from a haircut that very morning, and this haircut, much like the previous twelve months, had left her unchanged in every way. Hence that ineffably self-satisfied smile. Serena’s ineffably self-satisfied smile was something else about her which had survived all-devouring time. Except . . .

Serena’s ineffably self-satisfied smile congealed now and slid off her face, like half a pound of jellied eels.

Carla was smiling back at her!

‘Yes, it is a wonderful day,’ Carla cried. ‘Absolutely stupendous. It’s the sort of day when you’re just glad to be alive, isn’t it?’

‘Yes, it is,’ Serena said, sounding like a vacuum cleaner powering down.

Carla had always suspected that her own misery and hopelessness was one of the constants of Serena’s life. Serena liked life to be constant, even if it meant Carla had to die unhappy and alone. If Carla didn’t, then Serena would have to rely on her fifty quid haircut and the blossom in spring to bolster her illusion of immortality against the onslaught of all-consuming time.

So, as Carla had anticipated, Serena immediately went on the offensive. ‘Sounds to me like someone’s in love,’ she trilled.

‘Well yes, man has recently entered my life,’ Carla chirped back.

Serena’s frigid smile widened. ‘Tall, dark and handsome no doubt.’

‘Well . . . is the Pope a Catholic?’

Try as she might, Serena could not interpret this as a negative reply. Instead, she went with the spirit of the thing and laughed. Carla had never heard Serena laugh before. ‘And does he have a good job, like the Pope?’

‘Well, apart from being tall, dark and handsome, he’s a partner in a law firm. He’s based out in Houslow, as it happens.’ Carla could see Serena trying not to swallow this, so she crammed a bit more down her scrawny neck. ‘His name is David, David Chudhury. Do you know him? I only ask because he specialises in divorce.’

Serena glared at her. This rare display of genuine emotion lasted less than a second before Serena was smiling again. But nonetheless, Carla’s heart leapt in triumph.

‘No, my lawyer is based in New York,’ Serena said, like this was a crashing platitude. ‘I often visit there, you see . . . But you didn’t meet David in New York did you? Because that would be *such* a coincidence.’

‘No, we didn’t meet in New York. It’s difficult for him to get away.’

Serena pounced. ‘Oh dear, he’s not married is he?’

‘Yes he is,’ Carla countered without hesitation, having prepared for this question ‘But they’re splitting up.’

‘Splitting up? Dear, they all say that.’

‘His wife moved out quite some time ago. It’s been almost two years now. Actually, it’s a laugh – a scream, really, but she’s moved next door. So, you could say a wall has risen up

between them.'

Serena acknowledged the joke with the fleeting ghost of a smile. 'I'm very happy for you, Carla dear, but I'd better hurry off now, I'm due in Knightsbridge at twelve.'

'Shame, I've got some gorgeous irises in. They came yesterday.'

'I do love irises, but, what I want today is – ' Here it came now and Carla readied herself for it – Serena's monthly comprehensive statement of what she thought of Carla and her shop. The statement she had been making for years. 'A can of flyspray, please.'

'*A can of flyspray?*' Carla sang. 'Well, I do believe there's a can with your name on it around here somewhere. A reserve vintage, so to speak.' She chuckled to herself as she squatted down behind the counter. 'Lets see.'

Serena's countenance went cold at this insolence and she turned to one side to study a row of miniature roses on a nearby shelf.

Carla started shifting around the tin pots and pans she had put underneath the counter – just to provide good sound effects. The clashing noise soon had Serena's temple throbbing. Oh, she was such a sensitive creature!

All at once, Carla stopped.

Serena turned.

Carla had positioned herself so that her eyes alone appeared over the counter. Like a hippo submerged in a muddy African river.

From this vantage she could stare right up Serena's nose.

It didn't *look* like a dud.

'Carla!'

'Ready for a surprise?'

'I beg your pardon?'

Carla reared up from behind the counter and banged a can of flyspray down on top of it. Serena gawped. Carla had sellotaped a slip of paper to the can, on which she had written Serena's name. And then, out of sheer exuberance, she had drawn a few orbiting flies.

'This is *Lily of the Valley*, Serena. I tell you, it sells like hot cakes. My first batch was ripped off the shelves in a week. I couldn't believe it. But anyway, I've kept a can back so that you can give it a whirl.'

'*Pine Fresh.*'

'Yes, yes, I know you swear by *Pine Fresh*, but *Lily of the Valley* is the up and coming thing. It's got the full endorsement of my very best, most discriminating customer – Rupert Nodes. He should know, Serena. He's an undertaker.'

Serena fixed her with steely eyed determination. '*Pine Fresh.*'

Carla heaved a sigh. 'Here you are then,' She took a can of *Pine Fresh* from under the counter without even having to bend down.

'How much?'

'Tell you what, this can's for free, in gratitude for all your many years of faithful custom. But if I were you, I'd get used to *Lily of the Valley*. See, I talk to Eric, the leading flyspray salesman in West London, and the word is *Pine Fresh* has had its day.'

Serena listened to this, and then opened her purse, took out three pounds and placed them on the counter. 'Keep the change, Carla.' She put the can of pine fresh in her handbag, straightened its straps on her shoulder, checked the lapels of her coat and was all set to go. Yet for seconds and seconds and seconds nothing else happened. For some reason Serena was still there. Carla gave her a quizzical look, at which Serena's eyes dropped down to the note with her name on it attached to the can of *Lily of the Valley*.

'You're going to take my name off that, aren't you?' Serena asked.

'Yes, straightaway,' Carla assured her, as if she were already in a flurry to get the job done. Meanwhile, she didn't move a muscle.

Serena didn't move a muscle either.

At last, Carla picked the can up with some reluctance and said, 'I'll go get the scissors.' She began to edge away from the counter.

'Goodbye then,' Serena said, hesitated, then turned and went to the door. But as she opened it, she glanced back and caught Carla about to put the can under the counter again. Carla shoved the can under one arm and began to root around in an exaggerated fashion.

'Scissors, scissors, scissors,' she yodelled, 'where did you go to after I finished my toenails?' She stopped theatrically. 'I know! Gwynne's taken them upstairs to cut his hair.' She turned to Serena and grinned. 'I'll just call him.' But she stopped dead, her face alight with inspiration. 'Hey, Serena!' She was excited now. 'I've just thought! Gwynne's got pretty nifty at cutting his own hair now. What do you say? He could give you a trim . . . and it'll only cost you a fiver too.' Not waiting for Serena's reply, she turned to the door behind her and hollered into the house. 'Gwynne!'

Serena fled.

Thirteen: *Airgun Wedding*

Manhattan glinted like old silver in the winter sunshine.

Carla and David dawdled to a stop on the sidewalk and David turned to her, his head framed by *Macey's* sparkling window display.

'Well, Babe, I'll see you at *Treski's*,' he said with a knowing smile.

'Don't be late, I'll be starving by then.' Snow flakes began to fill the air between the tower blocks that sailed above them. Carla drew her fur coat more tightly around her shoulders. Suddenly, wildly, madly, David was holding her, his warm lips so very, very close to hers, and then . . . the shattering slam of the front door shook the whole city to its foundations.

She woke with a painful start and found herself at home in bed.

As always, whenever she woke at night, she seemed to catch *Romance* in the act of sucking the life out of her, like a vampire. She lay there, helpless, as her youth slipped away – nothing more than a fading dream. She was locked in the grip of an utter hopelessness and she almost cried out in her despair. As so often before.

Then she remembered – David was real. A real dream man.

Damn, it was almost too good to be true!

And not only was he a real dream man -- he was fighting for her in court!

True, he was *supposed* to be Juliet lawyer, because Juliet was contesting Carla's claim to the child. But *really*, and a bit secretly too, he on *her* side. And Philip's side too, because Philip was his old friend. And apart from being dishy beyond words, David was a fantastic lawyer. He assured her that he was extraordinarily confident about losing Juliet's case. And even if he hadn't been a fantastic lawyer, Carla could see for herself that Juliet had begun to show all the signs of an incipient nervous breakdown, and the way she ranted and raved in front of the judge wasn't doing her any favours.

Oh yes indeed, the transformation of Juliet from a haughty metropolitan middle class type – the very species who patronised *Romance* so insufferably – into a hollow-eyed female loon was a memory Carla would long cherish. But the real star of the show was, of course, David himself. He was putting up a magnificent-looking fight for her rights in the case. Such a contrast to Philip, who was actually Juliet's husband. Oh, it was sickening how he attended to her every little need in court, putting on a show like he shared her pain and whispering to her, 'Strong, Jules, be strong.'

David could never be such a two-faced shit to his wife. He didn't pretend that he liked her when he hated her really. No, he was unflinchingly cutting her out of his life. That was a real man. He was a tower of strength and she'd had no trouble pouring her heart out to him . . . Well, he'd asked her to, because the more he knew about her, he said, the better he could tip-toe around any area in her life that was best kept quiet about in court.

In return, he had revealed his own past with devastating honesty.

He admitted that some years before he had entered into an arranged marriage, simply to please his aged mother. His parents were from the Punjab and were very conservative. Well, as he should have foreseen, the marriage to Angit hadn't worked. Perhaps they should never have moved into his mother's house in Hounslow. Angit couldn't tolerate his mother's overbearing manner. As a compromise, David had added an annex to the house – a granny

flat – so they could all have their own space. But what happened was, after yet another dreadful screaming match, Angit was the one who moved into the granny flat, not his mother. David spotted his opportunity, and had the connecting door walled up. From that day on, he took it as read that Angit and he were separated. With a smile breaking out on his sensitive, rakishly handsome face, he told Carla that in a couple of months he could start divorce proceedings. Indeed, in telling his story he seemed rather amused by everything that had happened to his marriage.

Before she could stop herself, Carla had asked whether there was anyone else in his life now.

‘Maybe,’ he said in a low voice that was full of dark, wondrous hints.

Carla had oscillated between hope and despair ever since. Their meetings were bliss, their partings hell. Carla was sure that, despite his brave front, David had been so hurt he was afraid to show his real feelings. She almost trembled in her bed now as she recalled her resolve to declare her love soon. There wasn’t much time, the court proceedings would be over by the end of the month. She would win and Philip would pay up the money, as agreed. After that, she would sell Romance and with the proceeds from the sale, and Philip’s bribe, she would have enough capital to begin again.

To that end, she had asked David to look over different franchise contracts and assess them for her. He was going to give her his report tomorrow. Perhaps that would be her best opportunity – or maybe she was being too hasty. And yet, after the court case, every connection between them would be severed.

Oh, the notion was crushing. No! She had to tell him what she felt today . . .

Just then, a muffled bump from downstairs interrupted her tremulous meditations.

Carla strained her ears. She caught something like a voice, and then another. Half fearful and half eager, she slipped out of bed and picked up the extra-powerful air rifle – one of Gwynne’s – which she kept propped against the dressing table – and, having loaded this and pumped it up to maximum strength, she left the room and crept downstairs in the dark.

Light was shining from under the kitchen door at the end of the hallway. She could hear two voices now and although she recognised the more stupid-sounding one as Gwynne’s, she nevertheless stalked up to the door like she was going to burst through and kill someone.

At the very last moment she took her finger off the trigger and stole through into the kitchen.

Gwynne was slouched at the table and a big-boned young woman was poking through the cupboards, emitting a simpering burble as she went.

‘Alright, Carl!’ Gwynne yelled when he saw her, breaking out into a sottish grin. The woman turned with the least-rapid surprise Carla had ever seen, and presented a large, dozy face.

‘Hi!’ She whinnied.

Carla put the safety on the rifle. ‘Evening.’

‘This is Louisa, Carl,’ Gwynne slurred with a shapeless grin.

Carla sighed and leaned the rifle against the fridge. ‘Gwynne’s told me all about you.’ She stepped up to Louisa with her hand extended. ‘I’m Carla, pleased to meet you.’

Louisa dragged her eyes away from the rifle, examined Carla’s hand and put her own into it. ‘I’m sorry,’ she said.

Pumping her hand, Carla answered, ‘Don’t mention it . . . what for?’

‘We obviously disturbed you. And you must think I’m mooching through your cupboards.’ Louisa said.

‘Yeah, Carl,’ Gwynne hollered from all away across the other end of the kitchen, ‘where’s the coffee?’

Carla let go of Louisa’s hand and took a step back to look her up and down.

So, this was the idiot who had Gwynne for a new boyfriend. Without turning to him she said, 'It was your turn to buy some more and that's why there isn't any here.' She smiled at Louisa. 'But I'll brew you some tea, if you want. I fancy a cuppa myself.'

'You sure?'

'Yes, I'm sure. Go on, sit down.'

Carla grabbed the kettle and started to fill it at the sink. 'So, Gwynne tells me your father makes aeroplanes,' she said over her shoulder.

'Daddy is an aeronautical engineer,' Louisa tittered from the table. Greater proximity to Gwynne had reduced her IQ still further.

Carla connected the kettle. A depressing reality was dawning upon her now as she set the cups out and dropped a tea bag into each of them. Louisa had that air of brainlessness and that cut-glass accent that characterised the typical customer of *Romance*.

Gwynne had gone native.

She took the milk from the fridge and poured some in each cup and then, steeling herself, she turned to face the happy pair.

They weren't smooching.

Thank God!

Gwynne already had his hands full, propping his head up off the table, while Louisa sat adjacent, demure in a rock-solid sort of way and watched Carla with benign curiosity.

'Tea will be better for him than coffee. It'll stop him dehydrating in the night. You don't want that,' Carla said. She frowned. 'You *are* staying over, aren't you, Louisa?'

'The train at Thames Ditton –' Louisa began, but Carla halted her with a raised hand. She understood and sympathised.

'Say no more.'

A silence developed, broken only by the singing of the kettle.

Without warning Louisa broke out, 'I like your rifle!'

'It's mine, Lou,' Gwynne splattered, full of pride.

'I thought you might be burglars,' Carla explained, stifling a yawn.

'Is it a legal rifle?' Louisa asked.

'It's only an air gun, not a proper rifle, lover,' Gwynne confessed bitterly. He dragged his arms back, setting the ugly head they were supporting into a more upright position. 'Though the fact is, it isn't legal,' he added, rallying a little. 'Because it's fitted with an extra powerful spring.'

'Ah,' Louisa said.

'It can kill at close range,' Carla chipped in. Then she scowled at Gwynne, her voice heavy with suspicion. 'It can, can't it?'

'Yeah!' He protested in defence of his impeccable honesty.

'Have you been burgled often?' Louisa asked.

'Never!' Carla spat with disgust. 'We've got nothing worth nicking, have we? A load of plants, that's all.'

'I was thinking of the takings.'

'Huh, some hope. This place is dead on its feet. That's why the burglars don't come. They can smell failure a mile off.'

'But it's so lovely,' Louisa neighed in distress. '*Romance!*'

The kettle boiled as Carla and Gwynne guffawed.

'Trust her, she *knows*,' Gwynne confided to Louisa. 'This place is a dog.' Smiling, Carla turned away and attended to the tea. She heard Gwynne add, in a loud, loud whisper, 'Carla's going for a hardware franchise in Milton Keynes.'

There was no verbal response to this from Louisa.

When the tea was ready Carla took the cups to the table and set them out.

‘Sugar, Louisa?’

Louisa’s face was still clouded. ‘No, thank you.’

Carla fetched the sugar bowl and spoon from the work top and placed them in the middle of the table. Gwynne lurched into action, grabbing the spoon and heaping sugar into his tea.

‘Leave some for me, pig!’ Carla yelled as she sat down. Then she giggled and smiled at Louisa. ‘We’ve both got a bit of a sweet tooth.’

Louisa’s expression brightened. ‘Sweet by nature.’

‘I’ll get another packet when I get the coffee,’ Gwynne slopped and slurred, giving Carla the spoon.

‘You already sound like you ain’t got no teeth left,’ she observed happily as she spooned sugar into her tea. ‘Never mind, that lets the beer sluice through quicker, doesn’t it?’ She beamed at Louisa. ‘You’re not a drinker, are you?’

‘Hardly at all.’

‘Me neither,’ Carla said. She picked her tea up and slurped. Gwynne began to slurp too. Carla gave him a dirty look and then exchanged a covert smile of female camaraderie with Louisa.

Louisa responded with, ‘But I can’t believe you want to sell *Romance*.’

Carla stopped mid slurp. Hadn’t she already covered that subject from every angle? ‘Maybe it is a mistake,’ she said, to be nice, ‘but events have taken over. I’ll be finalising a franchise tomorrow, and then I’ll have to put this place on the market soon. Of course, you’re right,’ she added with perfect equanimity, ‘it might be the worst mistake of my life.’

‘Oh, I don’t think it will be,’ Louisa gushed, ‘though, I have heard that some people do get robbed by some franchises.’

Gwynne rinsed his mouth out with more tea and leered. ‘Carl’ll be okay. She’s got her very own financial advisor.’

‘Oh?’

‘He’s a top-notch lawyer too,’ Carla said with an almost girlish pride. It sounded odd to her, this girlish pride of hers. Unnatural.

‘Oh, super,’ Louisa said.

‘Yeah,’ Carla cleared her throat and spoke more gruffly. ‘He’s making sure I get the best deal. Like I’ll be able to buy out the new shop after a certain time. The franchise companies didn’t like that, but David drives a hard bargain.’

‘David sounds nice,’ Louisa tittered, provoking a double-take from Carla. But Louisa’s smirk was already gone. ‘So anyway, if you asked him, couldn’t David give you some good advice on making *Romance* more profitable?’

‘I said he was a top-notch lawyer, I didn’t say he was Jesus Christ.’

‘But surely you don’t need Jesus Christ,’ Louisa persevered. ‘I mean, Kew is a wonderful location for a florist’s shop.’

‘Milton Keynes is an even better location for an ironmonger’s.’

‘Yes, but you’re already here. You have to move to Milton Keynes and that costs money, I should think.’

Carla considered this. ‘Yes, you have a point there – except, getting out of this dump will be worth every penny. On the other hand, I like what you’re saying about Kew being a good location. See, I’ll have to start talking this place up when the buyers come round. Okay, every word’s going to stick in my throat, but I’ve got to try.’

‘Well, I shouldn’t mind buying it, for a start,’ Louisa panted.

Gwynne, who had powered-down for a while, was now thrashing about like he was about to drown. ‘Lou! Lou! No!’ He gasped.

‘Hey,’ Louisa murmured, stroking his arm. ‘Be careful.’

‘Are you choking?’ Carla enquired, before taking a delicate sip of tea.

Gwynne gulped and flopped about like a stranded fish, but in the end he managed to draw breath again. ‘Lou,’ he coughed and wheezed, ‘you mustn’t say things like that. This place *sucks*.’

Carla broke out into a hearty laugh.

Louisa kept petting Gwynne. ‘But why don’t we talk to Carla’s financial advisor? See what he thinks?’

Carla started. ‘No you *won’t!*’ At that, Louisa stopped petting Gwynne and settled her steady, bovine gaze upon Carla, causing the blood to tingle in her cheeks. ‘What I mean is,’ she muttered in confusion, ‘it’d be a conflict of interest.’

Louisa began to smile – very, very slowly.

Gwynne said, ‘That’s right. Carla and this guy have got a thing going on. Deep shit I can’t even talk about.’

Louisa’s brows arched and the smile became more knowing.

Carla’s toes curled in her slippers. ‘What he means is,’ she explained, biting the words out, ‘David’s a family friend.’ Carla glared at Gwynne, willing him to open his big fat mouth. ‘He only helps family. *Our* family.’

‘But that’s not going to be a problem for me, is it?’ Louisa simpered at Gwynne.

Gwynne’s two-inch brow corrugated for a moment. Then he erupted. ‘Yo, that’s right! Carl, we’re getting married!’

Carla hadn’t been drinking her tea, but she almost choked to death anyway. ‘Come off it!’

‘Straight up, it’s true! Ain’t it, Lou?’

Louisa laughed, ‘Of course it is, silly.’

Carla gaped at her. Then she managed to speak. Her tone was mechanical, like a robot’s – the old fashioned kind of robot that works off gears and valves. ‘Congratulations.’

‘Thank you,’ Louisa mewed with pleasure.

‘No, you’re welcome,’ Carla added, floundering. Beyond expletives, was there really anything else to add?

Hell’s bells – there was something!

‘But if you’re getting married, Gwynne, you can’t both of you live with me in Milton Keynes.’

‘That’s what I thought – thank fucking God!’

‘Never mind,’ Carla commiserated, ‘you’ll find it so much easier to buy something around here with a partner, won’t you?’

Gwynne’s soused grin vanished. He quivered with emotion. ‘But we’re not buying this place!’ He turned to Louisa, and more calmly reiterated his reasoning. ‘Because, sweetie, we’d be cutting our own throats, see?’

Carla wasn’t so anxious about them cutting their own throats, but having realised this marriage was the ideal way of getting shut of Gwynne, the last thing she wanted was for them to argue and break up. Not yet.

‘That’s right, Louisa,’ she assured her. ‘And you being a part of the family now, like you say, I wouldn’t advise you wrong, would I? This place would be a total liability for you.’

Louisa’s docile gaze softened. ‘Of course, you would know that better than I would. Even so, it’s *such* a pity.’

‘Yes, it is a pity,’ Carla said, ‘but on the positive side, Louisa, as you are going to be a member of the family now, I can speak to David and ask him to find you the best deal on a mortgage, and arrange the legal stuff for you too. He’s so great like that, you know.’

‘Is he?’ Louisa asked, her knowing smile was back.

‘But you have to get married. I mean to Gwynne. Anyone else and the deal’s off.’

‘Oh, for sure,’ Louisa hastened to agree.

Carla glared at Gwynne, who was frowning at his tea, troubled by this talk of David. She

barked, 'So you're going to be nice and friendly with David, aren't you?'

Gwynne glared back. 'Why friendly?'

'Gwynne!' Louisa moaned. 'It's a really *fantastic* idea. Free financial advice saves us money twice over.'

Instead of provoking him to louder petulance and greater obstinacy, which was Carla's experience over the past twenty-five years of trying to reason with her brother, Gwynne's reaction was all meek agreement. 'Yeah, go on then.'

Carla could have slapped him.

'It's so good of you to help us like this, Carla,' Louisa said.

'Well, I'm just relieved to be gaining a sister . . . it's got to be better than gaining a brother.' She wondered at this new and sentimental side to her personality – such is the transforming power of love!

Louisa was filling up. 'Thank you.'

Gwynne, who had been filled to overflowing hours ago, now arrived at the maudlin stage.

'Carl's a great girl,' he spattered. 'And I tell you this, babe,' he clamped a huge, bony, comforting hand over Louisa's shoulder, partly to support himself, 'if there's some problem down the line with the old tubes and stuff, then don't worry – Carl here will stand in. She's done it before. Only for us it won't cost no five thousand, will it, Carl? . . . Carl? . . . Carl!'

Carla was rising to her feet. Gwynne fell silent with awe as she leaned forward and drew back her right arm. Way, way back, at the shoulder, so she could give Gwynne the almightiest clout across the chops. And most obligingly, Gwynne's chops went all slack as he gawped up at her.

Time became suspended. Tension drenched the air.

And then Carla brought her left hand forward and gave Louisa's arm a gentle squeeze.

She spoke woman to woman. 'Louisa, dear, he's started to ramble and lose the plot. Best get him tucked up now, eh?'

Louisa's bust hitched up a notch with motherly responsibility. 'I will, Carla.'

Carla nodded, turned, picked her rifle up and went to the kitchen door. She paused to look back. 'Nighty night.'

'Nightly night,' Louisa breathed.

Gwynne didn't answer or even seem to hear. He gripped the edge of the table and gawked at the rifle, which Carla had angled to point straight at his sweaty forehead. And with that uplifting image in mind, Carla turned away and pretty well skipped back up the stairs.

Fourteen: *Nomance*

Gwynne woke at dawn.

His pillow always got harder than his head after an evening on the booze.

Louisa lay beside him, fast asleep. She liked to get a good nine hours a night. While he listened to her, working hard at filtering all the oxygen out of the room, he waited with great patience for the agony at the back of his skull to become unendurable as it rested on what felt like a bag of stale cement.

When it did become unendurable he vented a melancholic sigh, got to his feet and stumped around for a bit, snatching his clothes up from the floor. He slipped out the door and crossed the landing into the bathroom, where he put the light on and looked at himself in the mirrored door of the wall cabinet.

He vented another sigh – more melancholic than the first.

‘Oh, fucking hell.’

Then he took a shower, dressed and left the bathroom to go downstairs. But he hesitated on the landing when he noticed light shining from under Carla’s bedroom door.

What had brought him up short was the sudden recollection that in a month’s time he might well be homeless. For some reason last night that had not seemed to matter at all, but right now he found himself wanting to clarify the situation without delay.

He went over to Carla’s door and tapped at it with just one knuckle, the way his hangover was telling him to.

‘Yeah?’ The answering voice didn’t care about his hangover.

‘Carl.’

‘What?’

‘Carl.’

‘What?’

‘Carl.’

The door was yanked open. Carla was dressed in a new suit and her face was half made up. ‘For fuck’s sake, *what?*’

‘Shush – Louisa.’

Carla glanced down the landing. ‘What you done to her?’

‘She’s asleep . . . Hey, what you mean?’

‘Oh, nothing,’ she sounded disappointed. ‘Come in then.’

Carla went back to her dressing table and stooped down to examine her face in the mirror. Gwynne followed her in and closed the door after him.

‘Did you say last night you’re putting the place up for sale next month?’ He demanded.

‘Yes.’ Carla scowled as she poked amongst the cosmetics scattered over her table.

‘That doesn’t give me much time to find somewhere else, does it?’

‘I told you last night, didn’t I? I’ll ask David to help you and Louisa with a mortgage. You’ll have to rent a place for a bit maybe.’

‘Louisa? What’s Louisa got to do with it? I’m the one who’s house is being sold from under him. Not her.’

Carla seemed not to listen. ‘She’ll be paying half the mortgage, won’t she?’

‘Nobody’s that fucking stupid,’ Gwynne said wistfully.

‘That’s what I thought, but there you are.’ Carla picked up a tube of lipstick and looked at it.

‘Why?’ Gwynne asked, mystified, ‘why would Louisa pay half the mortgage?’

Carla turned to him. ‘She can afford it, can’t she? Her dad will help her out. They sound well off.’

‘They are. But – ’

‘I know what you mean,’ she said in all sincerity, ‘I wouldn’t do it myself. But some people just go crazy like that when they find out their daughter’s getting married – ’

‘She’s getting married?’ Gwynne was outraged. ‘Fucking bitch. Who to? Did she say?’

Carla looked blank and then gave him a fond smile. ‘Oh, you silly alcoholic you. *You* asked her.’

‘Bollocks.’

Carla jeered. ‘Fine then, I’m making it up, you fuckwit.’

Gwynne stared at her for a moment. His brows contracted, thus squeezing his aching brain that little bit more.

‘I asked her if she wanted to get married?’ He was asking himself as much as anyone.

‘That’s what she claimed.’

‘Do you think she was making it up?’

‘I don’t know . . . maybe. But she seemed serious last night. Well, I’m not sure now, come to think of it . . . but still, if she *is* serious, you have to go through with it.’

‘I didn’t sign anything!’

‘But you want a decent place to live in, don’t you?’ Carla snapped. ‘With two people paying the mortgage, you’ll be able to afford something nice.’

‘*Nice?*’ He queried with contempt. ‘Fuck it, *Romance* is nice enough. Why flog it now?’

Carla leaned back against her dressing table and folded her arms. She regarded him without emotion as she spoke.

‘I’m seeing David today. I’ll be signing the contract for the franchise and after that I’ve got to get the ball rolling. There’s no reason why I shouldn’t put the shop on the market next week. Okay?’

‘Fucking hell!’ Gwynne blazed. ‘It’s our inheritance you’re selling. Mom and Dad will be spinning in their graves.’

‘So tell me now.’ Carla kept her voice slow and even. ‘Am I going to ask David to help you and Louisa get a good mortgage deal, or not?’

Gwynne groaned. His old enemy, *thinking*, was being really antagonistic today. He soon surrendered. ‘Oh . . . go on then.’

Carla stiffened ‘*Go on then,*’ she mimicked. ‘You always say that. You know something? Eh?’

‘No.’

‘You make me sick.’

‘Really?’ He tried to sound surprised.

‘I mean, you didn’t even have to try, do you? That Louisa just fell right into your lap.’ Gwynne was about to take this literally when she went on. ‘And if it wasn’t her, it’d be someone else. And it’s the same with everybody else, except me. They don’t even have to raise a finger. They don’t have to think about it twice.’ Her voice trembled with bitterness. ‘It all just happens for them.’

‘What’s this you going on about now?’ Gwynne shook his head, and then stopped, because shaking it hurt.

Carla reddened. ‘Never mind.’ Her voice was steady again. ‘I’m telling you now, just watch your mouth with David.’

‘*Him?* What for?’

‘I’m doing you and Louisa a favour,’ she declared like a true martyr. ‘But,’ she went on, emphasising every word, ‘you say one fucking word to him and I’ll break your fucking neck.’

Gwynne was bemused. ‘What word?’

Her voice sharpened. ‘You lay off him, do you hear?’

‘I don’t follow you,’ Gwynne said, pleading ignorance. His surefire excuse.

‘You know I’m seeing him.’

‘Who?’

‘*David*, you dozy swine!’

Gwynne jumped at her vehemence. ‘Of course you’re seeing him,’ he said, trying to appease, ‘he’s your financial advisor.’

‘There’s more to it than that,’ Carla said. ‘A thing’s started.’

‘I *know*, Carl. That Westthrop guy is paying him to help you out so he can avoid maintenance when he gets divorced. See, I know.’

‘No, I mean . . . a thing. Me and him.’

‘A thing?’ Gwynne exclaimed in genuine amazement. ‘You and him – a *thing*?’ The affront to reality was stunning. ‘You’re joking!’

Carla drew herself up. ‘You listen to this,’ she spoke with quiet menace. ‘You spoil this for me,’ she pointed to the rifle leaning against the wardrobe, ‘And I’ll stick that down your fucking throat. You hear?’

Gwynne followed her stubby pointing finger and was not the least bit surprised at what she was going to stick down his throat.

‘I wasn’t going to say anything,’ he protested, conscious (as so rarely) of his innocence. ‘But, look, Carl. I’m serious. Never, ever did it cross my mind about you and him. See, it doesn’t stack up . . .’ he backed away as Carla leaned forward. ‘Come on, seriously, I just don’t get it!’

‘No shit.’ Carla sneered.

Gwynne marshalled his thoughts over the soggy field of his early morning brain.

‘See. Like. He’s. Look . . . once, when he first started coming round here, I was on the loo downstairs and I heard him outside through the window, round the side of the house, you know. He was on his mobile, talking to someone called Phil.’

‘Westthrop?’

‘Yeah, most likely. And it sounded like to me they were planning to move in together, and when he signed off he said, “Love you loads, honey”. Now me, I always reckoned David was a shirt-lifter,’ he raised his hands in self defence, Carla’s expression was terrifying. ‘But if you know different, Carl, fair enough. And anyway, I promise I’m never, never ever going to say a word to him. I want a good mortgage, like you say. Don’t I? So forget what I’ve said. Go ahead and try and make it work. Who knows, perhaps he swings both ways. And they go at it like maniacs, don’t they, them gays? There’s always that in their favour.’ His mouth had got very dry during this marathon speech and his head was pounding worse than ever. He turned to the door and opened it. ‘Sorry, Carl. I can’t talk about it anymore, I’ve got to get an *Alka Seltzer*.’

And with that he went out and quietly closed the door after him.

Fifteen: *Prince Alarming*

Gwynne took his Alka Seltzer in the kitchen and slumped down at the table, waiting to feel a little better.

Minutes later, Carla strode in, looking like thunder. She had applied her lipstick and the vivid crimson intensified the strong impression that she was on the verge of committing murder.

Gwynne sighed and hauled himself to his feet. Treading very, very carefully with these, he set about brewing two mugs of tea. Meanwhile Carla stumped around in dangerous proximity and quite literally threw her breakfast together.

Gwynne hurried from the kitchen and went upstairs with the tea.

Louisa was sitting up in bed, as wide awake as she ever got, and the tea came as a delightful surprise.

‘Oh, how lovely!’

Gwynne sank into the chair beside the bed.

Swilling some tea round his mouth and rinsing it down his gullet, he ventured to say, ‘Morning – Mrs Chalcott.’

Louisa didn’t choke or anything. Rather, she gave him an adoring smile.

So, it was true! They were getting married!

He had to shake his head at this funny old world. She was saying something like *And morning to you, Mr Chalcott*, but he less than half listened. Not for the life of him could he remember asking for her hand in marriage. However, what made his skin prickle now was the possibility he’d been so drunk last night that he had gone down on one knee in the pub. There was a chance, therefore, he would never be able to go to the *Slug and Lettuce* ever again.

‘What’s the matter, lover?’ Louisa was asking.

Gwynne came back to the here-and-now. ‘Sorry love, I’m just creased, that’s all.’

‘What does that mean, sweetness?’

‘Oh, that I’m well knackered, dear.’

‘Well, sugar, perhaps you shouldn’t drink quite so much.’

‘Too right,’ Gwynne agreed. ‘I’m going to be a lot more careful in the future – honest.’

Louisa gave him her warmest smile. ‘Good.’

‘Anyway, we’ve got to start saving now . . . by the way, your mom and dad are supposed to pay for the wedding aren’t they?’

‘That’s the tradition, lover.’

‘I only ask because, you know, Carla’s going to be strapped for cash and as for me – ’

‘Don’t worry about it, Gwynne,’ Louisa said with a soothing caress across his fevered brow, ‘I’m their only daughter and my wedding day is something they’ve been dreaming about for years and years. Especially Mummy. They’ll want it to be as memorable as possible.’

Once again, Gwynne had to marvel at this sudden turn of events. It was amazing that he could get away with such a massive rip off.

‘Yeah, we’ll have to video it, all right.’

‘Gwynne,’ Louisa said with concern. ‘You look worried. You’re not getting nervous about it, are you?’

‘Hmm? Nah, I’ll be okay,’ Gwynne assured her. However, he knew by experience that Louisa did not shift gear all that fast and he was not surprised to see, therefore, that she remained pensive.

She heaved an unsettled sigh, ‘Gwynne.’

‘Yup?’

‘You know, Mummy and Daddy . . . they may seem a trifle tense when you first get to know them.’

‘You’re saying they’ll be upset about me, aren’t you?’

‘I suppose . . . but you shouldn’t blame them, sweetness. You see, they’ve been hoping all along that I’ll marry Prince Charming instead.’

‘Who’s he?’ Gwynne scowled.

‘Oh, the director of his own company, I expect. Or a barrister, or someone who went to Sandhurst. But you see,’ her voice went breathy with earnestness, ‘love just doesn’t work like that. Sometimes it takes you totally by surprise.’

‘Damn right.’

Louisa’s chest ballooned at this vehement affirmation of the power of love.

‘But they’ll see the true Gwynne soon enough.’

Gwynne fought an impulse to look over his shoulder. But an instant later he worked out who she was talking about.

Him.

Only she couldn’t mean him, not really. Lou might be dim, but she wasn’t insane. And that fact led to the inescapable conclusion that he must have told her a pack of lies about himself down the pub. Maybe something along the lines of blackmailing his employers for millions – his all-time favourite dream. He debated with himself whether he could maintain the illusion, at least till she and her parents had paid off the mortgage.

He sagged in his chair. No, he couldn’t maintain the illusion for one second longer.

‘Thing is, Lou, I ain’t in line for a monster pay off from *EasyHomes* to keep my mouth shut.’

Instead of throwing her tea into his face Louisa said, ‘Yes, but what Mummy and Daddy have to understand is you’re a fighter. You’re going to work your way up from the bottom to the top.’

Gwynne was jolted upright in his chair. These words brought it all tumbling back. The recollection of what happened last night stunned him for several seconds. He’d been drinking, that was for sure, and he’d been in full flow, and yet, and yet . . . he *hadn’t* been bullshitting!

‘It’s true,’ he said in awe of himself, ‘what I was saying was true.’

‘Of course it was, dear.’

‘I’m in line for another promotion at the *EasyHomes Superstore*,’ he said, pausing to check yet again that it hadn’t happened to someone else instead. No, it had to be him, otherwise he’d know the name of the other guy, the one it had really happened to instead, wouldn’t he? ‘And anyway,’ he continued, ‘Tim, the area manager for West London, said I should do the accountancy course because they’re paying for it, and the thing is, accountancy is just a kind of stock-taking, and believe me, I’m red hot at stock taking.’ He shook his head, dazed. ‘That’s true too.’

‘You’ll show Mummy and Daddy, won’t you?’

Gwynne’s conviction gathered impetus.

‘Hey, accountancy might not seem as bitching as aeroplane design, but look at Enron. Accountants make things happen too, you know.’

Louisa gave him an adoring smile. ‘My little genius.’

He was going to marry her after all!

‘Fully rested, darling?’ He murmured softly – for the first time in his life. ‘Do you want to lie in?’

‘No, no, I’ve got to get started.’

‘Okay, I’ll shoot down and rustle up some brecky.’

He went downstairs.

In the hallway he paused at the living room door on his way to the kitchen. He could hear voices from within and he readily recognised the smug and plausible tones of David Chudhury.

‘Poor bitch,’ he couldn’t help saying to himself. After all, Carla was his sister.

When Louisa came down a little later and they were seated at the kitchen table, he explained that Carla was in a meeting and that she would not be able to say goodbye.

At the mention of Carla, Louisa’s brows knotted in thoughtfulness – gradually.

‘Carla’s a very serious woman, I think,’ she declared.

‘Hmm,’ Gwynne nodded, chomping toast.

‘And yet, very kind too,’ she tinkled.

Gwynne gulped hard. The toast – it hurt.

‘How’s that?’ He rasped, eyes watering.

‘You said yourself, if ever we have children we’ll have to fight her off.’

‘She seems to have a thing about kids, yeah,’ Gwynne said, examining his plate.

‘A lot of women do.’

Gwynne smiled. ‘Just the same, Carla’s very, very busy these days. Too busy for kids.’

‘She’s quite a business woman, isn’t she?’

‘She works hard, yes. But sometimes she doesn’t make the best of her investment opportunities.’

‘Well, I still think *Romance* could do so well.’

Gwynne didn’t answer straight away.

An *incredible* idea had just hit him – and hit him hard!

‘There are easier ways to get money, you know,’ he said, staring at her now as if he had never set eyes on anything so stupendous, such was the potency of his inspiration.

‘Can’t we at least think about it?’ Louisa implored.

‘Um? Buying *Romance*? Yes, but then, we should be open to all sorts of other possibilities, shouldn’t we?’

She gave him an adoring smile, nodded and leaned over and kissed him. ‘Got to go!’ She exclaimed, so jolly exuberant all of a sudden that it knocked his head back.

‘I’ll walk you to the station.’

‘I’d rather you didn’t,’ she said. ‘It’s hard to explain. I want to be alone right now. Do you understand?’

Gwynne shook his head. ‘Sure.’

‘I want to feel single again.’

‘Alright.’

‘Only for a little while,’ she reassured him. ‘And I want everyone looking at me to think I am, when really I’m not. It’s a secret. I love having secrets on lovely days like this. Don’t you?’

Gwynne nodded and began to grin. ‘As it happens, I’ve sort of got one too.’

‘Don’t tell me what it is then.’

‘Oh no, not yet. I have to phone someone first.’

‘Is it a surprise you’ve got for me?’

‘Yes.’ There was a box of cornflakes on the table and Gwynne’s eye fell on this. ‘It’s a way to fortify our finances with vitamins, if I can pull it off.’

‘I’m sure you can.’

‘With your help.’ He smirked up at her. ‘Anyway, you go on now, lover. Shoo.’

They parted on the back step.

Gwynne returned to the hall way and listened at the living room door to be sure that the meeting between Carla and the shirt-lifter was still in progress.

It was.

He raced upstairs and went into the smallest bedroom, which served as the administrative office for *Romance*. There was a large writing bureau here, with a dead spider plant on top. Gwynne hunted through the untidy files and piles of papers till he found a letter from Gerald Lytton – gynecological consultant and fertility specialist.

He grabbed the phone and keyed in Gerald’s number.

‘Yes?’ A man’s voice answered. Both curt and deliberate.

‘May I speak to Gerald Lytton?’

‘Who is this?’

‘Gwynne Chalcott. I’m Carla Chalcott’s brother.’

‘And what are you calling about?’

‘That’s something I’d like to discuss with the doctor. It’s private.’

‘I’m Lytton, Mr Chalcott. Is Carla well?’

‘I suppose so. This doesn’t have anything to do with Carla. I want to talk about my fiancée, Louisa.’

‘Louisa?’

‘She’s a very calm person and . . . consistent. Not uptight or anything like that. And when she sets her mind on something, you better believe she sticks at it to the bitter end.’

‘Good. You’re a lucky man, Mr Chalcott.’

‘And she loves the idea of kids. She’s already going on about them and we only got engaged last night down the pub.’

‘A very healthy sign.’

‘Yes, healthy.’

‘And yet, you are perhaps worried she may have . . . difficulties.’

‘What’s that?’

‘In conceiving, Mr Chalcott.’

‘Who said that?’

‘I did.’

‘She ain’t got no difficulties!’ Gwynne was fervent in his assurance. ‘She’s as strong as a horse. She’s broad like Carla. But nothing like Carla in any other way. And *that’s* my point. She wouldn’t be a one off. She comes from a very good family and she knows if you sign a contract you keep to it. And what it is too, we’re setting up home and all that. We’re going to need the extra money and if I tell her we’re going to buy *Romance* then she’ll see that we’ll need to put out five or six kids at . . . lets say eight thousand each – ’

‘Let me stop you there, Mr Chalcott.’

‘How about ten at seven thousand each?’

‘Look, I love what you’re telling me, but the fact is, I’m relocating to Switzerland soon.’

‘Louisa loves to travel.’

‘But you see, I’m also changing the line of work I do, so to speak.’

‘You’re not going to be into pregnant women anymore?’

‘No. No more pregnant women . . . well, I shouldn’t think so. At this early stage at least. You see, I shall be running a clinic dedicated to offering the terminally ill assisted suicide. I did mention this to Carla. I’m surprised that she hasn’t told you.’

‘Well you know, we don’t do a lot of chat, she and I.’

‘No. So anyway, you see Louisa wouldn’t have a future with me.’

Gwynne slumped. ‘She’ll be disappointed to hear that, doctor.’

‘But Mr Chalcott, there are other fertility clinics she could try. If you like, I can send you a list of names and numbers.’

‘That’s an idea!’

‘Though I can’t tell you anything about their fee structures and so forth.’

‘We can only find out.’

‘Just so! Got a fax?’

Gwynne had a gift for numbers and he rattled the shop’s fax number off without having to think about it. Gerald had to get him to repeat it.

‘Well, that’s that then,’ Gerald said, ‘I’ll send the list now.’

‘Okay. Cheers.’

‘And congratulations on your forthcoming marriage.’

‘Yeah, thanks.’

‘I hope, Mr Chalcott, that you both have many happy and prosperous years ahead of you . . . but how about if I append the details of my new clinic, just in case?’

‘Oh, I don’t know whether you should, man. Might be unlucky.’

‘I’ll do you a discount.’

‘Right O!’

Sixteen *Me Jane, You Jane*

Head down, zig-zagging between the knee-high ferns, Carla pushed on in the sweltering heat till she could pitch herself down behind a cluster of palms. She paused just long enough to wipe away the sweat beading her forehead and, sick with dread, she clawed aside some of the glossy fronds and peered out.

Juliet was standing on the other side of the street.

Carla recoiled, letting the fronds spring back into place. She cringed in the sweltering green shade. Had she been spotted? She cursed herself for not being more careful and hunkered down lower so that she could squint between the leathery leaves of a yucca.

Juliet had begun to pace along the pavement, trying to look casual, but she was casting suspicious glances up and down the empty street.

Carla craned round as far as she dared, so that she could also scan the street. There wasn't another soul in sight. She just couldn't understand it. The street outside *Romance* was always crowded with pointless pedestrians. In the past, she had spent whole days watching a perpetual stream of non customers stroll by. And now, when they could at least act as witnesses to the movements of Juliet before she murdered her, they didn't even bother to turn up!

Carla cursed.

Juliet looked more likely than ever to commit murder. She had gone downhill pretty far since her divorce from Philip, five months ago, piling the pounds on and dressing in cheap sports wear (fighting gear). As usual she was carrying her large handbag, a piece of boho chic left over from a previous lifestyle and into which you could all-too-easily fit a sawn-off shotgun.

The blood pounded in Carla's ears. Juliet had stopped pacing so as to study the palms, yuccas and ornamental grasses filling the shopfront of *Romance*. Inspired by Vietnam, Carla had installed the 'green' in order to provide cover, and yet she couldn't help feeling that those burning, haunted eyes were able to penetrate it and expose her.

She whimpered and inched back. Too late. Juliet was now crossing the road. Carla scrambled away, crawling through the dense undergrowth of potted ferns till she could stand upright and make a clear dash for the counter. There was a click at the door. Carla ran like she was wading through mud and hit the counter with a dull thud. The counter top was up, but the low swing door below tended to stick on its catch.

It stuck now.

Carla flapped at it like a circus seal.

The bell over the shop door tinkled.

She swung around and pressed herself back against the counter.

Juliet was standing at the threshold. She swept the scene with a hooded gaze, familiarising herself with the lie of the land.

'Good morning.' She said in a low, deliberate voice, just before her blazing eyes rested on Carla. 'Here again.'

She smiled mechanically as she closed the door behind her.

Carla faced her with a frozen smile, while scratching for the catch. It sounded like she was hiding a rat behind her back.

‘And lovely to see you, I’m sure,’ she answered, a tremor in her voice.

Juliet responded by coming at her, at a slow, steady pace.

Carla’s hidden rat scabbled at the catch in wild desperation and suddenly it flipped.

She lurched backwards, almost crashing to the floor as her foot caught on the tub of fertiliser. The one she had been meaning to move for the past six months.

‘Shit!’

She brought the counter top down with an almighty bang.

‘Beautiful morning,’ she gasped, tottering back against the shelves for support. ‘I’ve never known it so quiet.’

Juliet reached the counter. ‘They’re all on holiday.’ Her voice was robotic. ‘Normandy, Algave, Tuscany.’

She stopped dead and was immobile for a moment. Abruptly, she jerked back to life and began to rummage round in her boho bag.

Carla’s heart missed a beat. She had forgotten about the sawn-off shot gun. The sweat prickled at the back of her neck. Her own weapon was in the kitchen – the extra powerful airgun that Gwynne had been so generous as to leave her when he and Louisa moved to Billericay.

Bleeding typical! Like the pointless pedestrians, Gwynne had buggered off just when, at long last, he had come in useful for something. I.e. to manhandle Juliet out of the shop whenever she became hysterical.

Carla had been loathe to call the police for help, because by stalking her, Juliet had become one of *Romance*’s best ever customers. The last thing Carla wanted right now was Juliet locked up where she couldn’t buy anything. Why upset the status quo when she was doing such wonders for *Romance*’s balance of payments? Especially when Carla was starting to get serious interest from potential buyers.

But Carla had been playing a dangerous game. Juliet patronised *Romance* in the hope that she might one day snatch Porchester. However, if Carla had locked the baby up in total safety then Juliet would not have any reason to visit the shop. Carla, therefore, had positioned Porchester, in his buggy, on a spot behind the counter where Juliet could see, but not reach him. Even so, she had added a stockade of selected cacti after a close call – maternal craving had once got the better of Juliet and she had jumped the counter. That’s when Gwynne had stepped in and got her into an arm lock before marching her out of the shop. He would defend that kid to the death, he said.

With a twenty per cent stake in the final sale of Porchester for adoption, who wouldn’t?

Except, true to form, Gwynne hadn’t died trying to protect Porchester. He had married Louisa instead, and gone to live in Billericay. Carla wasn’t saying he’d taken easy way out, but it did mean she might have to die instead of him . . .

Juliet was still groping around in her bag. Perhaps she couldn’t get her finger round the trigger. Meanwhile the corner of her red-rimmed eye was fixed on the empty spot where the buggy used to stand.

Carla swallowed. Perhaps she had already pushed Juliet too far.

Today the kid was out of sight, under lock and key in her bedroom. Juliet would need to gun her way into the shop to get him. But perhaps that was the plan, because she still didn’t know that Gwynne was gone, and Carla had to concede that a sawn-off shot gun would be her weapon of choice if Gwynne was the obstacle.

The sweat burned on Carla’s skin. She wanted to run, but her legs wouldn’t move.

Juliet’s arm jerked out of the boho bag and a silvery object flashed in her hand.

Carla shrieked.

‘Gorgeous, isn’t it?’ Juliet grated. She was holding a designer purse made of metal. ‘Exclusive to *Chrysalis*.’

Carla didn't understand what this meant, but that didn't matter – she could see it didn't fire bullets and that was the main thing.

Now that she was not *definitely* going to die, Carla asked, 'Is there anything I can get you?'

The monotonous, grating voice began at once.

'I'll have a pot mum, the red. A tray of pansies. A Busy Lizzie. A can of flyspray, *Pine Fresh*. No, make that *Jasmine*. Okay, *Lily of the Valley*. A tub of petunias and a . . . ' Juliet was speaking faster and faster. Carla got into a flurry as she piled the stuff up on the counter. ' . . . and a geranium. That one there. And another pot mum. The yellow this time. The purple rather. No both. Carla!' Juliet's sudden exclamation brought Carla to a dead stop. Her knuckles whitened as she gripped the pot mum.

'Yes?'

'A bunch of cut dahlias.' Juliet blubbered. Eyes welling over with tears. Carla hurried to the bucket of dahlias. 'And, by the way . . . ' Juliet's voice became tiny and squeaky, 'may I see Porchester, please?'

'Oh Gawd!' Carla grabbed a bunch of dahlias and stomped back to the counter. 'I knew this would happen!'

'Why not?' Juliet wailed.

'He has to stay in my room,' Carla said, slapping the dahlias down onto the wrapping paper that she had spread over the counter. 'He's got a big day tomorrow.'

Juliet's features writhed around for a bit. 'Why's that?'

Carla began to wrap the flowers.

'Oh, I'm taking him shopping first.' She paused to look at Juliet. 'I'm sorry, but I'm sure you understand that I can't tell you where.' Juliet nodded, her lower lip trembling. Carla went on, 'What I want to do is get him a complete new outfit. Something nice. Not too dainty though, because he's a little man. After that, we'll go to the park for a lovely, lovely couple of hours in the sunshine, where we can listen to the birds singing in the trees and the little kiddies laughing and splashing in the paddling pool . . . ' Juliet's face developed a crippled smile and Carla assumed she had calmed the situation down. She sellotaped the wrapping paper around the dahlias and, to promote the happy vibe still further, added, 'And then after the park we have a really, really important appointment – we're off to Richmond-upon-Thames.'

'Such a lovely place!' Juliet's voice cracked.

'Gorgeous, gorgeous. And the clinic is right on the river. Brilliant views. I'm sure Porchester won't kick up a fuss when they give him the MMR jab – '

Carla fell silent as Juliet's expression became riven with horror. Her eyes were ablaze.

'You fucking bitch!' Juliet jabbed at her with stiletto fingers. Carla stepped back and raised the dahlias like a club. Juliet screeched, 'You're going down!'

Carla shook her head in perplexity. 'Why?'

'Because you're not going to do it. You're not!'

'You'll wake the baby!' Carla remonstrated in desperation.

'You don't care about my child,' Juliet hissed.

'Of course I care,' Carla said with feeling. After all, Porchester was worth twenty thousand quid in the States. 'And anyway, he's *my* child, remember?'

Juliet pressed her fists to her eyes and shuddered. 'Don't do it,' she begged, her voice drained of emotion – that was reassuring in a way. 'Don't give him the MMR. I'll pay for the separate jabs,' She dropped her hands to reveal dulled eyes.

Carla looked into these with a throb of regret. There was fifteen quid's worth of stuff on the counter. If she didn't agree with her, Juliet might not buy. Carla had recourse to cajolery.

'Now that's silly. You don't want to waste your money on doctor's fees, do you Juliet?'

Not when the doctors themselves say MMR is as safe as houses.'

'No it's *not*,' Juliet intoned.

'But they should know. And anyway, he'd have to have three jabs otherwise. He's not a pin cushion, is he?' She gave Juliet a coaxing smile. 'Come on, what's wrong with getting it all over with in one?' At this Juliet's eyes began to well up again. 'Oh fuck,' Carla said, in lieu of *please don't cry*. Glancing around she noticed a can of deluxe weedkiller. She picked it up. 'Look, Juliet, it's the same thing.' She read from the can. "'Perfectly safe for lawns, while counteracting dandelions, nettles *and* squitch.'" See? Three in One. Like the MMR jab. Measles, Mumps and Rubella. It's progress – that's all.'

Seemingly lifeless, Juliet stared at the can of weedkiller for a moment.

Suddenly, shockingly, she came alive again.

She leaned forward and using the whole of her arm she swept the pot plants off the counter.

They hit the floor with a collective smash.

Carla flourished the dahlias. 'Right.' She directed her voice to the doorway behind her. 'Gwynne!'

'Gwynne!' Juliet sneered. 'Gwynne's busy picking his nose in a Billericay semi.'

'No he's not,' Carla said, without a trace of conviction.

Juliet emitted a cheerless laugh. 'Check it out in the *Daily Telegraph*'s special announcements.' She glanced down at the floor. 'I'll leave you to clean the mess up.' She turned and started towards the door.

'Hey! You should pay for these,' Carla hollered after her. Juliet kept walking and Carla's hollering took on a wounded undertone. 'I was hurt too, you snotty cow. I loved David . . . I didn't make him run off with your damned husband!'

Juliet stopped, turned and gave her a chilling look. Carla closed her mouth and was silent. Juliet produced a smile – a thing of pure malice and sauntered out of the shop.

With a juddering sigh, Carla threw the dahlias and the can of weedkiller to one side and raised the counter. She hesitated for a second and then hurried straight to the shop door. The street was adorned now by its usual quota of pointless pedestrians. Juliet had disappeared. Carla debated for a moment whether she should close the shop for the rest of the day . . .

She started in surprise and wondered at herself.

Running *Romance* for all these years had left her with a cavalier attitude to mere death, and yet here she was, fretting like she had something to live for after all! Then she remembered that she had a hardware franchise waiting for her in Milton Keynes.

Oh yeah, *that's* why she wanted to go on living.

Or was it?

All of a sudden Carla needed to check on the baby, and to check it right *now*.

She hurried back behind the counter and through into the house. Upstairs, in her bedroom, she found Porchester fast asleep. For the merest instant she saw something other than a bag of cash lying in the cot and before she knew what she was doing she gave him a tender little caress.

Carla jerked her hand away and backed off, disorientated.

What the hell?

She clawed her hair away from her sweaty forehead.

'Too hot,' she murmured to herself.

Trouble was, she had to keep the heat up in the shop for the palms, ferns and other exotic greenery. It was tough to work in there now. On the other hand, she had noticed some of her older customers almost swooned in the torrid atmosphere and she glimpsed the tantalising possibility that one or two might pass away through heat exhaustion, thus providing *Romance* with gratifying funeral orders.

She would keep the heat up.

Turning, she went to the bathroom to douse her face in cold water. Then she stood by the opened window to luxuriate in the breeze. Feeling fresher, she went downstairs and took the secateurs from the cutlery draw before going back into the shop.

First she cleared the mess away that Juliet had caused, and then she set about pruning the miniature roses on their trestle opposite the *Green*.

From time to time she would go to the door to check on the street. Her anxiety about Juliet nagged her, yet she refused to give into the temptation of closing the shop. She had to admit locking up would give her nerves a rest, and yet she couldn't bring herself to do it. If an old customer couldn't get in and die of heat exhaustion she would never be able to forgive herself.

Oh no, Carla had let too many glittering prizes slip through her fingers before now. The shop must stay open.

A half hour passed quickly, as it always did when she dwelt on her customers' funerals . . .

She couldn't remember when she'd stopped pruning, but she found herself staring into space, her secateurs poised, inactive in her hand.

Somehow, a dreamlike longing to go upstairs and look at Porchester had stolen over her. Carla fought the impulse, but it refused to let her alone. At last, she banged the secateurs down on the trestle and galumphed back up to her bedroom. She was beginning worry about the state of her mind. No doubt about it, Juliet's persecution was taking its toll.

Porchester was asleep.

And now Carla was afraid.

She had been disappointed that he wasn't awake!

But having the kid unconscious should have been ideal. It meant she didn't have to go through the motions of paying it any attention.

What the fuck's going on?

She went up to the cot and looked down at the child. Her heart shot into her mouth.

It had happened again – that unaccountable shift in reality, when for a second or two the little fellow didn't look like a bag of cash.

She shrank away and stood for a while, uncertain about what to do next. Glancing at the clock on her bedside table she saw that soon Porchester would need feeding. That was something to grab onto. When the kid started screaming to be fed she would soon get back to wanting to sell it.

She went downstairs to the kitchen and put the kettle on. Still troubled, she returned to the shop, so as to finish the pruning.

She came to an abrupt halt in front of the trestle.

The secateurs were gone!

Carla stifled a scream, whirled round and backed against the trestle, making it scrape over the tiled floor.

The shop was profoundly quiet. The thick, glossy foliage of the *Green* drooped before her in slumbering menace. One sinister shape laid over another to create a dark, feral core. Juliet was in there, she knew – watching.

Sweat stung Carla's skin like needles. She threw the shop door a glance and judged she could reach it in a couple of bounds. The cluster of palms at the window were too thick to allow an easy ambush. She could just make it. With any luck.

Carla, snorting ragged breaths through her nostrils, forced herself to move. She began to shuffle, one foot after the other, edging bit by bit towards . . . the counter!

She almost wept at her stupidity. Some nightmarish and perverse instinct was driving her to protect Porchester. The rational part of her mind was begging her to forget the money and save her life instead. To no avail. She kept going, back and back and back – into the jaws of

death. At every step she expected the steel blades to flash out of the green and sink themselves into her exposed and helpless flesh. As she neared the last of the larger palms, where concealment was still possible, the attack seemed inevitable. By then, Carla could only just about stand up, let alone walk.

A palm frond shook. She screeched. All at once she could move again. She broke for the counter.

Where Juliet was waiting for her.

The madwoman leapt from behind the cash register, one arm scything through the air with the secateurs. Carla felt a deep, electric shock of pain pierce her left shoulder and she screamed. Juliet raised the secateurs again. Carla pushed herself away from the counter and staggered backwards, coming to a stop as terror and shock drained the last of her will power.

Juliet contemplated her from behind the counter, the secateurs frozen above her head. For a single moment her livid face flickered with horror . . . then it was gone, leaving nothing but an insane rage.

She charged.

Paralysed, Carla watched Juliet bound through the gap in the opened counter. In the same instant there was a hollow thump as her foot caught the tub of fertiliser that Carla kept forgetting to move from the entrance to the counter and, in a comical succession of slow, clumsy movements, Juliet sank down and hit the floor with a loud slap.

The secateurs clattered from her hand.

Carla looked down at Juliet, prone and face-down at her feet and without having to think about it she plucked up one of the largest potted roses from the trestle and positioned it above the back of Juliet's skull. A sob of utter despair rose up from below and Juliet began to stir. Carla let the pot go.

There was a dull explosion. Shards of ceramic flickered in all directions and a cloud of fine compost enveloped Juliet's head and shoulders.

Her body jerked, shuddered and was still.

Carla kicked the tub of fertilizer out of the way and pulled Juliet along the floor till she had got her out of sight, behind the counter. Next she secured Juliet's arms and legs with gaffer tape – she kept a roll on a shelf under the till – and added a strip across her mouth, being careful to avoid blocking the thin nostrils of Juliet's aristocratic nose. She didn't want a death on her hands. And anyway, there was no way Juliet's family would hire *Romance* to provide the flowers for her funeral. Even so, the notion tickled her and Carla couldn't help chuckling to herself as she dragged Juliet out into the hallway of the house. From there, at least, the customers wouldn't be able hear Juliet's muffled groans when she woke up.

Only now did she call the police. She explained there had been an incident at *Romance*, the florist's shop and hung up. She saw no reason to answer any questions straight away when she would only have to answer them all over again down at the cop station.

Besides, she could hear Porchester crying.

She hastened upstairs into her room and picked him up. 'There, there,' she murmured, 'don't cry.'

She smiled down at him, cradled in her arms, and, in that unguarded moment of relief, the last of her resistance melted away.

'Alright,' she laughed. It was perhaps her first spontaneous laugh in years. 'You can stick around . . .' A cloud darkened her heavyset features. 'But only if we change your name – I'm not having somebody called Porchester staying under my roof!'

End

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