

# ***INVISIBLE***

Frank Egerton



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*For Harriet*

# **Part One**

**Writing therapy exercises written by  
Tom Dickens under the supervision of  
Dr Martin Calder, July 2004**

**A Time When I was Happy**

I remember one weekend about three years ago not long before I decided to sell the business. Jill had been going on at me for ages to take a break. I'd tried to put her off by saying it was our busiest time but she wasn't having it. She knew it was the busiest time as well as anybody. How long had we been together? Seven years and the pubs had been part of my life ever since she'd known me. It was the fact that she was putting her foot down at the busiest time that made me realise she was serious. There was something seriously wrong with our relationship.

Anyway, she had these friends from when she was at university. Duncan and Ros. Duncan, or Dunc as he liked to be known, stayed on after they graduated and did a PhD. Then he became a philosophy don and settled down with Ros who was at college with him and Jill and who moved back to Oxford after training as a solicitor.

They had this big house at the top of Jericho near where the iron works used to be. It had originally been owned by the factory and its garden ran down to the canal. They lived a kind of alternative lifestyle. Ros was an earth-mother with a penchant for all things Indian: clanging bangles and voluminous faded tops and skirts. She had this long hair that she either wore down and straggly or up in a coil like a Cumberland sausage. She was nice although I didn't take to either of them to begin with.

Dunc was sort of hearty. His baggy shorts and near worn-out work shirts gave the impression he was still having to make do after the war. He was ex-public school, had thinning hair and thick dark-rimmed glasses which would've looked great on Michael Caine.

So, there we were for three nights, ostensibly free agents, using their house as a base. The idea was Jill would show me the places where she'd been happy. Of course it didn't work out like that. We did go to some of the places but the rest of the time got roped into helping Dunc and Ros. Feeding the chickens and keeping the kids amused mostly.

In retrospect I think Jill and I were relieved to be able to break ourselves into being together gently. If we'd been at a hotel we'd have driven each other up the wall.

I liked the kids. Especially the eldest, Charlie. He had something about him. Despite being the eldest, he wasn't cocky. Neither was he a chip off the old block. He had attitude and

could take the piss out of Dunc mercilessly. He had us in stitches - Dunc included - and it was done so dead pan. He was tall but had a tongue on him that suggested someone much shorter who'd learnt to live by his wits.

It was the last night that sticks in my mind, when it was just the four of us and the kids had been packed off to a neighbour.

Dunc had this idea that we should pedal out to a country pub then come back for a late-night barbie after it was dark. Before we set off, Ros decked out the garden with nightlights in coloured bowls and scented candles on spiky sticks.

Bikes weren't a problem because Dunc and Ros had a shed full for friends and visiting academics. Not that they were mountain bikes but you wouldn't expect them to be with Dunc. Like him, they were more 1950s than New Millennium.

Away we went, Jill and I following behind. First Jill in front of me, then when I'd got the hang of things, me ahead. To start with, when we were cycling through the streets, it wasn't so much the novelty of being on a bike that mesmerised me but the sight of Ros's billowing dress. I kept expecting it to get caught in the chain. Great lengths of it flapped up, dipped down, almost got snagged but never quite. It was like my grandad baiting his terrier with a handkerchief.

Then we were on Port Meadow, bouncing along a white track before veering onto the tow-path. Ahead of us was a steeply curved bridge which Dunc turned onto and powered over. He was stood up, legs braced but having to give as he negotiated a series of bumps which appeared to run the whole of its length. You could hear the rattle of his bike, sounding like it was going to fall to bits. Every couple of bumps he cried, 'Yo!' in triumph.

'Mad boy!' shouted Ros as she side-stepped off her machine.

I pedalled hard to get to the bridge before she did. I thought, Wow this looks great. I had this rush of adrenaline and felt I hadn't had such fun in ages.

Around the corner I went onto the narrow bridge just as Ros was going, 'Ride him cowboy!'

There was a line of what looked like wooden ribs going all the way up. I got over the first which made the seat ram into my arse and, fortunately, sent me leaping into the air. The front wheel skewed against the second and I leaped forward over the handle-bars legs apart, landing on my feet as the bike thwanged into the side. It was like I'd been winded but my first thought was, How the fuck did I do that? I had to check my crotch and the insides of my thighs to make sure I hadn't sustained some horrific and so far numbed injury.

I let out a yell of 'Whaaaa Heya!' in relief.

'Maaad Fucker!' went Dunc. Ros collapsed into a heap of agonised hissing laughter. Jill, looking worried, was dropping her bike and coming towards me saying, 'Tom! What happened? Are you OK?'

Once I'd straightened the forks we were off again. A short straight then a section where we had to haul the bikes over a couple of stiles - the tow-path in between ran through the garden of a pub I'd looked at once with a view to adding it to the chain. It would have been the first outside London. But it wasn't the one we were going to that night.

After that there were more meadows. The girls stuck to the path. I followed Dunc cross-country, which included a stretch of ridge and furrow. It was hard on the legs and I was still wobbly from the accident but I was just so exhilarated, bobbing up and down after Dunc. He was extraordinary from behind: standing up all the time, driving the pedals down then shooting back up again. His legs were milky white which was odd for someone who lived in shorts. There was an erectness about him and every so often you'd catch sight of his beaky nose and black glasses. He looked like a scout master.

Soon we were on the road, bowling along towards the pub. Dunc and I parked up and had to wait for the girls.

'It was bloody brilliant,' I said to him.  
'Shit,' I panted. 'Absolutely amazing.'

'Simple pleasures,' he said.

'I know, that's what's so good about it. It's like being a boy again. I swear I haven't felt like this since I was ten. It makes me realise how out of proportion everything's got.'

'Well, you'll have to come again.'

'Did Jill tell you why we wanted—'

And then the girls were there.

I kissed Jill as we went inside.

And I remember that pint. Hedgecutter. Dunc handed it to me. It was in a handle. It was medium brown and it had this really hoppy nose. It was clear as the evening light. I took the first sip. No hop until the after taste. Good length. Fruity. A taste like an infusion of hazelnuts. Cellar temperature which on a hot night like that felt like it had been in the chiller. Only I knew it was natural. You could tell this guy knew how to keep his beer. I downed half a pint in seconds. It slipped down wonderful.

I felt so happy.

I also knew then what I had to do. I had to sell the business. Get rid of all of the pubs. Get back on the other side of the bar.

I knew too, at that moment, could feel it like the beating of my heart, the singing in my veins, that everything was going to be all right. That Jill and me, we were going to be alright.

## ***The Source of my Pain***

It was Christmas Eve last year. I was at my pub in Clayfield. I'd bought the place along with a ruined mill which I'd done up as a home after I'd sold my share of the London pub chain. I was living at the pub, the Castle, because my manager, Andy, was in jail. A lot of things had gone badly wrong even before the worst things happened.

Sarah had gone back to the Folly that morning. The previous few days had been hell. She wasn't eating properly, only nibbling bits and pieces. She was very thin. We both knew we couldn't go on like we were. She and Griff were going to have to sort things out between them before anything further could happen with us. She didn't want to do that, saying she'd had it with Griff, couldn't go back. I told her she was deluding herself if she thought she could simply walk away.

There were other times when she said that we had no future.

'That's it,' she'd say. 'That's us. I'm off.' And she'd go on standing or sitting where she was.

I said what about the property, her possessions, let alone the fact that she and Griff went back half a dozen years. She couldn't walk away. She owed him.

Besides, I liked him. I didn't believe these drinking binges of his were anything other than unhappiness at the thought of losing her.

I didn't tell her about when he'd come to see me.

The night before she left, he phoned the pub and they talked for over an hour. When I asked her what he'd said, she replied that he was being 'unusually cooperative' as if she was talking about a naughty school kid.

She was docile that night. She seemed to pull herself together. She said she knew I was right about her returning to the Folly. She was calm and ate a meal of grilled goat's cheese with me. She was happy in a funny sort of way, or so I thought. She read a book upstairs when I was behind the bar. She was in bed when I went up. We didn't make love.

In my heart I was glad it was over for the time being. I told myself that as far as the future was concerned, I would take it as it came. But inside I was experiencing relief: the last couple of weeks with her had been a strain. It wasn't the situation with Griff, it was her. Mood swings, playing games, trying to impose some sort of structure on my life I couldn't fathom.

Anyway, that night I was up at about five-thirty having had a long nap after the lunchtime session.

I switched the gas fire on in the Lounge and stoked up the real ones in the Public Bar and the Tap. There wasn't much else to do because the lunchtime had been quiet. People were still not sure how to take Sarah being there, by daylight at least, and some of them were boycotting the Castle because of Andy's carry-on.

I pulled myself a pint of Wicca Winter Solstice and went through to the Tap. I drew my favourite Windsor armchair across the flags to the fire. I sipped. It was dark, roasted and spicy. There was a chocolateyness about it like a mild. Only Solstice was headbangingly strong. You couldn't manage more than two before the world became a bit unpredictable. I intended to ration myself to two: one then and one at the end of the night before I crashed.

I'd turned out the lights after I'd done the fire a few minutes earlier. There was just the light from the logs and the faint glow from a streetlamp further up the road. As I looked through the window I suddenly realised it was snowing.

I leapt to my feet and went over to check I wasn't seeing things. It must have been snowing for an hour or more. The flakes were like goose feathers. The ground was white.

Then I heard my mobile going in the Public Bar.

I went through. It was Sarah. She was calm to start with - disturbingly so, like a digital announcement.

'Tom. Come out. You've got to come out.'

'But it's snowing.'

'I'm not joking, Tom.'

'What's the matter?'

'It's Griff. You've got to come.'

I knew that something was wrong. And yet, I didn't believe it could be *that* wrong.

'What do you mean?'

'He's drunk.'

'Is that all?'

'Isn't it enough?'

'Is he trying to hurt you?'

'Yes but I think he's beyond that.'

'Well what do you want me to do?'

'I want you to collect me.'

'What, and you come back here?'

'Jesus, Tom. Anywhere. With you or with Fiona. I don't care.'

'Why can't you drive yourself?'

'I don't know where he's hidden the keys. Besides, he's padlocked the lodge gates.'

'Oh for fuck's sake!'

'Look Tom, I mean it about Fiona.' Her voice was sounding desperate all of a sudden. 'Just come and collect me. I've had enough, Tom. I've had all I can take. Don't you understand?'

I knew she was trying to manipulate me. But I gave in.

'I've got half an hour before opening time. I'll have to clear the snow off the car. Be down at the gate in fifteen minutes, all right?'

'OK.'

'Make sure you're there on time.'

I returned to the Tap and finished the Solstice.

\*

In the yard I reached into the outhouse and grabbed the coat I used when the dreymen came then nipped round the side of the pub to open the front gates.

As well as the snow there was a frost and I had to use some force to open the boot. When it gave the rubber seals crackled apart. I collected the de-icer and scraper.

As I worked, I thought about the time I should've been having in the Tap in front of the fire. I'd been looking forward to those moments all day. All the last fortnight in a way.

The main road out of the village was gritted but the side road across the Marsh to the Folly was untreated. The BMW's wide tyres have good grip, though, and I was outside the lodge in about five minutes. I got out and tried the gate. As Sarah had said it was locked. There was a huge chain around it and the post, secured by a gigantic padlock.

Griff never did anything by halves.

I went back to the car, intending to call Sarah but realised I'd left the mobile at the pub.

I decided I wasn't going to faff about so I climbed over the gate and started up the drive which rose diagonally along the side of the escarpment.

The snow felt comfortable under my boots and I listened to and felt the scrunching sound they made as I walked. The shapes of the first line of trees and shrubs along either side of the drive were different to the unruly ones behind. These were cedars and rhodies and yews - specimen trees the Victorians must have planted. Griff and Sarah never bothered to do much with them - Griff liked them looking romantically out of hand - and yet they retained a kind of natural dignity which was even more apparent in the snow.

Near the top, immediately before I passed under the arch, I stopped for a moment and looked up at the tower. I couldn't see the battlements because of the trees and the effect of the blistering security light which forced everything beyond its range into blackness. I could just make out the tracery of the enormous second-floor window through the trees. The lights were on but they weren't bright. The trees and the security light somehow made the window look like it was shrouded in mist. The snow came at me in slow lines out of the black. They were soft and wet and inexorable.

It was only as I was about to move on that I saw the shape on the ground. It was near the outer edge of the security light's beams. It was big but

not human from that distance. It was made bigger because the snow around it had melted or been disturbed. At first I thought it was a dead deer.

I walked over to it. It was in a small clearing beneath the trees and the snow was beginning to cover it. It was Griff.

I knelt down and shook his shoulder.

'Wake up you stupid fucker!' I shouted.

How long had he been there? How long did it take for a drunken man to freeze to death on a night like that? All I knew was that the Solstice was making me feel like a brass monkey.

I pulled him over. He came easy, despite his weight. He'd been half-over my way in any case. It was as if his body wanted to end up facing me. His head lolled towards me. His eyes were wide and smiling. His nose was smashed in and loose so it smudged across his cheek. His mouth opened, the lips twisting as if they were made of rubber. A red bubble began to form rapidly over his mouth, expanding, distending, then popping. Seconds later a great burp erupted from him, its smell of puke and whisky mushrooming into my face.

I jerked myself away and, without getting up, threw up on the grass.

I heard footsteps on the snow and looked up.

'My God,' said Sarah. 'Oh, Jesus, no!'

She was staring beyond me in disbelief.

'What happened?' I asked, dragging myself to my feet. I wiped my mouth on the sleeve of my jacket.

She suddenly seemed to realise that I was there. I couldn't catch her expression properly because she had her back to the light, but I thought I could see fear in the way she held herself.

'I don't know,' she said. Her voice was faint.

She said something else. I didn't catch it. I tried to retrieve it. It came back to me as, 'You've got to believe me. I didn't know.'

Shit, I thought. 'What did you do?'

I began to walk towards her.

'What?' she said.

'Calm down,'

'What?'

'Let's go inside. You'll freeze—'

'No.'

'Come on.'

I was close enough to grab her.

'You bastard!'

Her tiny shoulders wriggled out of my grasp. I lunged at her. She went for me like a cat. Her fingernails slashed across my face. One of her fingers cut into my upper eyelid and I let out a howl.

When I was able to see, she was running off down the drive.

'You fucking stupid bitch!'

I began to chase her.

At the bottom she hauled herself over the gate. Balancing her stomach on the top bar and flipping herself forward.

I thought she had fallen but then I caught sight  
of her running off down the road.

Her footprints soon left the road and headed into  
the wood.

I thought I was damned if I was going in after  
her.

I returned to the car. I put my foot on the  
accelerator and drove fast back to the pub where I  
called the police.

I remember thinking as I drove that if she froze  
to death, it'd be no bad thing.

## **Sarah's Diary**

***Tuesday 9<sup>th</sup> August 1994 - Debbie's  
House, Norfolk***

I've decided to keep a diary.

For the second time in my life.

I wanted to keep one again before now but Daddy's words when he found out about the first served as a warning. I suppose I could have begun one at any time and kept it hidden, especially since I started at boarding school but I couldn't quite believe he wouldn't find out. How stupid can you get although I'm having these sort of half visions of him suddenly bursting into my bedroom here as I'm writing.

I know that's not going to happen with him a couple of hundred miles away but I'm still worried about where I'll hide the book when I get home. I know it's irrational but I can't help feeling that I'll look guilty and he'll know I'm up to something.

I decided to keep this diary yesterday.

In the afternoon Debbie's mum gave us a lift to Yarmouth where we did some shopping and then holed up in a pub on the seafront.

We went into Smith's to check out some CDs and I thought I'd buy a notebook and write a diary because Debbie has piano practice for two hours every morning.

It feels like the right time. Something logical but nevertheless strange has happened to me since starting at boarding school. I've grown away from home. Not a long way but enough to notice. It's like the girl who used to go to day school is still doing that and I'm someone else who's thinking what it must feel like to be her. Then when I'm at home in the holidays - which are just the same as always, in a way - I can't quite believe that life's so different for me. I'm Sarah on my school holidays but there's also a new me who's living this amazing new life for huge chunks of the year!

Before boarding school too my friends lived locally. It's good having a friend who lives a long way away. I didn't imagine that would happen when I went. I felt homesick for a start and couldn't believe the other girls would take any notice of me. I thought they'd all be very sophisticated. Some are but most aren't - not when you get to know them.

Debbie is one of the more sophisticated, oddly. But underneath she's vulnerable - and kind. She's an actress. Last winter she played Ophelia. I couldn't imagine anyone having the confidence to do that in their first term. Like me, she arrived for

the Sixth Form. She got the part even though there were girls auditioning who had been at the school for ages and who'd been in loads of plays before.

I helped out with the set and did some make-up.

That's how I got to know Debbie. Then her brother Peter was killed in a car crash and she wanted to confide in me. I'm good at listening. We'd also got drunk a few times during rehearsals and knew we were on the same wavelength. Plus I don't get as pissed as Debbie and can put things back together when she's out of it.

The day before yesterday, we went for a family walk along the coast after Sunday lunch. We were strung out along the lane in pairs chatting. For most of the time I was with Debbie's dad. At one point he put his hand on my shoulder and said, 'We're very grateful to you for what you did for Debbie. She's told us how you were there for her.' I put my hand on his arm for a moment. It seemed right - though it always seems odd when that sort of thing happens with a man my father's age. It's because it never happens with him.

Do I miss my dad? Yes, but I'm not sure now if it's the idea of him I miss or Daddy himself.

Strange how hard it is to write the word 'Daddy'.

Anyhow, I've managed to write several pages without him breaking the door down. I quite like the feeling of being disobedient. Writing to myself seems such an innocent pleasure. I wonder why he hated it? I also wonder whether he did. Sometimes after an 'episode' he'll tell me I shouldn't take any notice of what's been said: he says he blows up but then it's all gone the next day. How odd it would be if he'd forgotten what he said. Because it lodged in me and has been there ever since.

I can hear the sound of Debbie practising because all the windows are open. Outside it is hot and beautiful. There is a breeze coming off the North Sea which makes the curtains billow. I think I'll change into my bikini and swim in the pool for a bit. I need to cool off after the excitement of being so wicked.

## ***Thursday 11<sup>th</sup> August 1994***

Two days since I first wrote in this book. I feel I've betrayed it already. Trouble was I got into this novel Debbie showed me. On Tuesday afternoon her mum gave us a lift into Norwich because Debbie had a hair appointment - getting ready for tomorrow - and a check up at the dentist (she asked me if Dad ever did freebies for friends - I said that was a laugh). Before we left I decided I needed something to read. I told her I'd go book shopping in Norwich. She said that was a waste of money. What was the use of having friends with loads of books if you couldn't borrow one? True. It was amazing looking along the shelves. Such different authors to Dad's. Will, Debbie's dad, likes eighties stuff by writers like Martin Amis, Julian Barnes and Tom Wolfe. Debbie suggested *The Comfort of Strangers* by Ian McEwan. I hadn't heard of him and the date in the front said 1981 - when I was three! He was still writing, Debbie said.

What's good about it?

You won't be able to put it down. It's a bit - you know-

She was right - both ways.

I finished it when we were slobbing around in her bedroom yesterday afternoon. She was lying on her bed reading *A Pair of Blue Eyes* by Thomas Hardy (one of our A level set texts) and writing a song. She was wearing her favourite denim shirt and combats. She looks cool when she wears things like that. She looks like she's tough and doesn't care. When she dresses like that she's got that, Fuck you, take me as I am look that Tracy Chapman has (who Debbie thinks is God - I'm waiting for the right moment to tell her that Tracy must be as old as Ian McEwan).

I was curled up in a really comfy armchair.

What do you think then? she asked when I closed the cover.

I'm still in shock. I'm not sure I ever won't be.

Oh come on, it's not that bad. It's not as if you care about the characters. It's the story - it's like a thriller.

With sado-masochistic sex.

Yeah - it certainly broadens the mind. I didn't know what I thought about that when I read it.

It's kind of gross.

It's weird.

So why did you want me to read it if the characters are like Mister Men and it's full of bizarre sex?

I don't know. Devilment?

I pulled the cushion from behind me and threw it at her. I didn't throw hard but I was angry - angry-confused. I still am.

She was fine about me throwing the cushion. Her calmness made me feel so much younger than her. We talked about the book for a bit. She said she wasn't being a mischief maker by suggesting it, she just wanted me to try something different. She said it wasn't about characters, nor the sex, but the fact that it was a totally compelling story. What she found fascinating was the idea that you could be made to read something you didn't want to. We agreed that was really disturbing. I said it was an example of evil genius (well, maybe not evil, more dangerous) and tried to compare Ian McEwan with Mr Knight in *A Pair of Blue Eyes*. Not a success.

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Back from a coffee break. I went to the kitchen where Debbie's older brother, David, had the same idea. David was second oldest before Pete died. He's twenty-three and doing a doctorate in music at Manchester (such a talented family). He's home for a couple of weeks but still works religiously from nine to five. Debbie says he plays the sax and will probably provide some moody late-night music if it's warm enough to barbecue on the beach when Karl gets here. David looks so mature. He's got a more rounded face than Debbie, or any of her other brothers and sisters for that matter. He has these soulful eyes which remind me of Wynton Marsalis.

Now I'm back in my room, I realise I'm still confused by the twisted genius of Ian McEwan. Although I agreed with Debbie that the book made you want to read something you didn't like, I knew when I was saying the words they were only half true. It's not that I could identify with a woman who risks breaking her back to get sexual satisfaction. It's that I found the man, Robert, compelling psychologically. His silence, his black clothes, his kind of gay posturing in the bar - all these things repelled and attracted me.

I felt like you do when an older person is talking about how childish wanting to do something is and you think, Well actually I'd still get off on that (but you have enough sense to keep quiet).

It was also scary. I'm not sure I like the me the book appealed to. It feels like a naughty secret. But I don't know whether I should be ashamed or what I should feel.

God! It's so unsettling writing down your deepest thoughts. Daddy must never find this book! Not that he read the one he tore up. I can hear him saying, You've got such bloody peculiar writing. It's a wonder you get anywhere at school. Maybe that's it - you're really as thick as two short planks but they give you the benefit of the doubt.

I sometimes wonder if I should talk to Debbie about Dad and home. I tell myself I will, when I'm drunk enough. But I can't let myself get that drunk - not so far.

Talking of which, we went to this amazing pub last night. David drove us. It was an old mill. It was huge and its outside walls were planks of wood. It's supposed to be ancient and it's on a river in the middle of nowhere. Just cornfields stretching as far as the eye can see like the Canadian Prairies.

David left us to talk on our own for a lot of the time. He got together with some friends from when he was a boy. Debbie filled me in on who was coming to stay for the weekend. There's Karl, obviously, and some others who left last year I know slightly from the play but who Debbie knows really well. Then there's a couple of boys from other schools Karl knows.

Where are they all going to stay? I asked.

Well, if all goes fine and dandy, we'll crash on the beach - and if it's wet we'll pass out in the barn. It's going to be a mega brilliant party either way. And who knows, babes, this might be the weekend you pop your cherry.

## **Monday 15<sup>th</sup> August 1994**

Never a truer word spoken by Debbie. A lot has happened.

Karl and his friends arrived on Friday night. Most of them came down from London by car, although a couple, Danny, a farmer's son who's starting at agricultural college in September, and his girlfriend Priscilla, had to get a train from Lincoln to Norwich. I'd never set eyes on Danny before (he was at prep-school with Karl). He's a wild boy. He couldn't drive here because he's lost his licence for being three times over the alcohol limit. His family are rich and he told everyone that he is paying for La(!) to have extra driving lessons. (I wonder if he's rich enough: slap on the wrist, Sarah.) I didn't speak to Danny much and when I did I couldn't understand him. He's always smiley. But he was pissed out of his head.

Debbie was over the moon at seeing Karl. I think she was trying to play it cool but when you're rushing to the mirror every other minute before he arrives, guzzling wine and looking at the clock when you're not looking in the mirror, you give the game away. She hadn't seen him for three weeks because he'd been staying with his dad in Los Angeles. I hadn't seen him since the end of term. I was amazed. During the play and when he was trying to catch up on his work for A levels he got thin and was as pale as a ghost - with funny wispy bits of beard on his chin in between the times when he was told to shave them off. Now he's tanned and hunky - on the way to looking like Brad Pitt.

As well as Karl, there was David and his and Debbie's five siblings (although Tamara was only allowed to be with us until her bedtime - she was furious on Saturday night when Will came to collect her from the beach - I expected her to sneak back, though she didn't, poor little thing). Then there was Andre, Karl's brother, and his girlfriend Sam. There were Teddy, Andi, Art, Groover, Ricky, Ronan, Irma and... Bob.

On Friday night everyone had drinks by the pool so people could swim and cool off until all the guests arrived. Then we had this scrummy curry that Diane, Debbie's mum, made (spoilt or what!). It was so good. It wasn't strong but mild and creamy. But still curryish.

Afterwards we drove to the pub David took us to and stayed there sitting on the terrace till closing time.

I chatted to pretty well everyone except Bob. I had no idea what was going to happen. All I knew

was I felt good. It was amazing being talked to by these older people. It was like being lifted out of one life and into another. So unfamiliar. I can't imagine someone my age talking to me and feeling the same in a year's time. Unbelievable.

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I hardly spoke to Bob all day Saturday either. It wasn't that I didn't know him (I did - about as much as I knew any of them), only that he'd always seemed far older than the rest. Kind of untouchable. I never thought he had any interest in me. He's tall and has long brown hair, parted on the left side. He's handsome when he looks at you with his green eyes but when he doesn't he's merely striking. He's striking because his features are defined (though his nose is a bit big) and because you can tell his body is pretty fit beneath his loose clothes. I don't mean sexy-fit, or not just that, but fit-fit. He was the school's top tennis player. People said he could get to Wimbledon only he's too much of an academic. If his As are good enough - which they will be - he's going to Oxford next year, same as Karl, only doing Classics. After that - he's got his life all mapped out - he wants to go to Harvard Business School. In his year off, which starts in a week's time, he's going to work on a sheep station in Australia (great timing, Sarah). Last year he was going out with an American girl called Lorna who was as tall as Jerry Hall. They were a couple with presence. Like the school Charles and Di. But that's over now.

How do I know these things?

Hum, he told them to me on Saturday night and when we walked along the beach on Sunday afternoon.

The barbecue was wonderful. Debbie's family have a beach hut half-a-mile from the house. Their lifestyle is set up for barbecues. They'd got crates of beer and wine which had been chilling in a special fridge in one of the old stables. They've also got a huge ice-maker that Will bought when a local hotel closed during the recession. Then there's a chest freezer full of meat. And boxes of fruit and vegetables were collected from Yarmouth that morning by Diane.

We loaded all the stuff into an antique Land Rover and headed off to the beach about seven.

By nine I realised that Bob and I had been chatting for an hour. I can't remember how we began. He was suddenly sitting there beside me, a little way off from where David was beginning to hot up the charcoal in the empty oil drums. Bob had been the first in to the sea and then at some point Andi, Ricky and I were gossiping only we weren't alone because Bob was there in a wettish Lacoste shirt and swimming trunks. After a while Andi and Ricky were laughing together and Bob and I were in our own private world.

We got food and came back to the others but didn't join their conversation. The time whizzed by - no it sort of glided past, without any effort from us at all. When it got darker and cooler people started scavenging the beach for driftwood and David lit a fire. Before the moon faded Bob and I went swimming with the others because Debbie shouted it was glitter time. It was extraordinary. The sea was full of plankton. When you jumped up the water sparkled as it ran off. I watched it spilling over my breasts. With Bob it ran off his chest and then whooshed over the bulge in his trunks. Everyone was screaming with delight. Bob put his arms around me and kissed me.

When David began playing his saxophone we were lying together looking up at the sky. Bob had given me his white jumper which was like a rug. Even though the sky was dark you could tell the clouds were thickening. By the time the rain started I had fallen asleep.

We helped put things away in the beach hut and Land Rover then raced back to the house. Debbie told us to keep the noise down and opened the doors of the old barn in the disused farmyard. Someone got a CD player and put on Björk *Debut*. The Land Rover arrived with the supplies of alcohol. A couple of joints were lit and some night lights. Bob got his sleeping bag from his car and we snuggled up in a corner by a stack of logs and watched the others.

When people began to pair off he whispered,  
You're so small.

I didn't know what to say. I tried not to panic.  
I willed my being thin not to ruin everything.

I meant slim, he said.

Not too thin?

'Course not. I've wanted to be with you since I came over to see Karl at the theatre last November. It was the night of the dress rehearsal. You were putting make up on Debbie and I thought, Wow!

Wow! The word echoed through my brain. The idea of him thinking, Wow!, about me.

I knew he was going to ask if I wanted to make love. I instinctively did what I'd done on the only other occasion that someone had asked me this. I asked him if he had a condom. The other boy had been so drunk he hadn't understood the question. In a couple of minutes he passed out. When I asked Bob I half expected he'd say no and that would be that. But instead he kissed my forehead and I was aware of him reaching across me for his jeans. Then we took the rest of our clothes off.

And it was- It was difficult and awkward but still amazing somehow. We made love again the next morning and that was far more amazing but the first time was indescribable. Although I think the best bit was waking up together and realising we'd made love.

Before it happened again I put on my T-shirt and went across the yard to the bathroom.

It was the first time since my life had changed that I'd been on my own. I looked in the mirror and then I had a pee and a shit and I felt like an animal. I was just tingly body and hardly any mind. I hugged myself and afterwards went back to Bob and made love. And it was like the whole of him inside me. It was like I was devouring him and him me.

## **Saturday 20<sup>th</sup> August 1994**

Bob got his A level results on Thursday. Straight As! He'll be going up to Oxford in October 1995. He said he hoped I'd come and see him. He was being typically modest. You have to guess what he means a lot of the time. He seems to be saying he hopes we'll have a future. I told him that he'll probably fall for some *Home and Away* type beach babe. He thought I was joking as if he couldn't possibly go for that sort of girl. I didn't like to remind him about Lorna.

It's been a week of not writing this diary because of Bob. I'm now on the train going back home, via London. I've spent the times I should have been writing either talking to Debbie about Bob (she skipped some practice sessions, she was so fascinated) or wandering along the shore thinking about him.

Almost Debbie's first words on the subject were, You're a dark horse. Though I could tell she was treating me with new found respect. She's working on the assumption that I pulled Bob. I've tried protesting but the idea is completely fixed in her head. It's as if she can't imagine any other variation on *girls pull boys*. From my point of view the fact Bob chose me is far more exciting - and puzzling.

Whenever Debbie asks me how I feel I say things like, amazing or brilliant (which are true), but the main feeling is utter bafflement. I suppose it's maybe the result of having been to an all girls school for such a long time. I can't get my head round the idea that the most desirable boy ever chose me. I wonder if I've missed something about myself.

Before, I thought of myself as a dutiful daughter, averagely naughty when away from home and a hard working student - I have some academic gifts but my good results in exams have been hard won. I've always thought of myself as holding my own in social situations but being on the sidelines of things, even so.

So what am I like now? It feels dangerously big-headed asking this question. It implies that I can suddenly be someone different. Where is this train of thought leading? The conclusion that up to now I've been needlessly timid? That from now on I should be more assertive? But these things wouldn't be me. It would be better for me to think I'm in the process of changing, of growing into being me.

And how strange this new aspect of me is.

Bob and I spoke on the phone three times this week. We talked not about love but what we'd been doing, the weather, packing for Australia, David and Debbie, what a lunatic Danny was - getting to know each other. He also sent me a love letter - well a card. It was the picture of Ophelia by Arthur Hughes - she has an oval face, very pale, and the river is slicked with pollen, there is a rather unrealistic bat flying towards you on the left. It was used by Karl for his Hamlet poster to emphasise the fact that Debbie was the opposite of the traditional image of Ophelia. We studied it when we did the Pre-Raphaelites last term too. Before Bob sent it, I thought it was a disturbing image. It's still that but beautiful as well. I can see the resemblance. Inside he wrote, *When I saw you in the make-up room, I thought, My God, it's the girl in the poster. How special she is.*

I shall use it as a bookmark for this diary. What a lot there is for Dad to read. Though I wonder if he'll need to snoop. Won't it be obvious I'm different? Debbie said I was. I guess you can't avoid that. I'll never look at a painting or read a book in the same way that's for sure. Whether it's *A Pair of Blue Eyes* or *The Comfort of Strangers*, I'll now know something of the experiences the adult world assumes you know about. At least Bob has put paid to my brief Ian McEwan/Robert fixation.

Will Dad want to snoop? I don't know. I'm not sure he's that calculating or intrusive. This year has changed the way I think about him. This week seems to have distilled my feelings. It's not just been Bob but my decision to talk about home with Debbie.

More about that in a while - I'm going to get a sandwich and maybe a beer.

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We haven't even reached the outskirts of London and I'm nervous.

I thought the beer might help but I've got into training in Norfolk and it's had no effect.

I broached the subject of home on Thursday.

That morning Debbie skipped the second hour of her practice. We got together a picnic and raided Will's wine cellar. Then we loaded up a couple of bicycles and pedalled inland for a bit so Debbie could show me one of the round towered churches before heading towards the coast again. We'd decided on a spot she showed me last week. We reached the little hamlet and leant our bikes against the railings between the deserted pub car park and one of five cottages. The place was as dead as the pub which only opens in the evenings. We still chained the bikes.

We were both behaving differently from the last time. Then it was a new experience. Now it was familiar and I had the sense that we should have

been more adventurous - somewhere new might have helped us to get over the end of party feeling.

Beyond the last house was a T-junction and on the other side of the road we had to climb a style and follow a footpath through some scrubby wood - called a 'car' according to Debbie - Beckham Car. The ground under the trees was wet in places although it hadn't rained since Saturday night. When we got to the dunes we covered the baskets with a rug and opened a bottle of wine.

We didn't eat for ages. We just lay on our tummies, looked out to sea and guzzled.

I won't know what to do when you've gone, Debbie said after we'd started on bottle number two.

You've got all this - and your brilliant family - and what about Karl? He's coming next week, isn't he?

I know but there's been something really special about having you here. You're so easy. You fit in. And then, of course, there was Saturday night. Debbie grinned at me, knowingly.

I flicked sand at her - only a little - with my index finger.

What's that for? I'm not taking the piss. I'm happy for you girl.

Oh I know you are. I've loved being here too. You've made it mega.

I realised that there were tears in my eyes.

Debbie put her arm around my shoulder. Hey babes what's the matter?

Nothing. It's nothing at all. I'm happy.

You don't look it.

I am, honest. I'm happy here. I didn't say anything else for what seemed like ages. Debbie didn't speak either. If she had maybe I wouldn't have said anything about home. But I did.

I don't really know how to explain but it's not just leaving here that's upsetting me but the thought of going home. How things are there.

Debbie didn't seem as surprised as I expected. Do you want to talk about it?

A little.

I'm all yours.

What could I say? I told her that whatever I said would probably sound stupid when put into words, but maybe the best I could do was give an example of the sort of thing I meant. I said I was keeping a diary and that Dad had torn up the one I'd started when I was ten and humiliated me. Whenever I tried to find words I found myself drinking.

I felt like a traitor. I felt like someone was yanking open a door in my head and catching me betraying them.

It probably doesn't seem much, I said when I finished.

Nonsense - it sounds pretty grotesque. It's a bit like an assault. Is that the only kind of thing he's done? Debbie was looking at me suspiciously.

It's not like that, I said. He's never touched me. There's never been anything physical or you know-

Sure but it's still brutal. Barbaric. What's his problem?

I don't know. He has these- 'Episodes' Mum calls them. He gets these moods and everyone suffers. Even Alex can't stand up to him - at least not directly. Alex goes off and does stupid things. It's his way of coping. But Dad doesn't mean to hurt people - he's not malicious, he's got this terrible energy. He's a powerful man. Sometimes he can't control himself.

Which was about all I said.

I asked Debbie if it was OK if I didn't say anymore. She said, Sure. But when you want to talk again, remember I'm here. Give me a ring. Write me a letter. It's a real bummer you haven't got email.

She didn't hassle me, although I found myself working hard to try and get back to even the awkward kind of day we'd been having before I confided in her. At some point we both fell asleep.

Things got much better after that. Bob and Karl rang to tell us their results. They're both going to Oxford. We had a celebration on the beach that night - just us two roasting vegetables on the barbecue and drinking wine and smoking a joint. We fantasised about being with the boys in Oxford in a year's time - even though we agreed we were both realists.

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Which is where I'm going to stop. I want to finish on a happy note. I'm two hours away from home and I'm jittery and don't want to be there. If only I could phone someone in London and stay here for a few days. But who could I phone? Karl will be in Norfolk by now and Bob will be flying over the Far East. Even if there was someone, I couldn't change plans. It would cause too many problems at home. It would draw attention to me. Draw Dad's fire. I've just realised I didn't phone Alex to see how he's done in his As. Sorry Alex. (But then he didn't phone me - hope that's not a bad sign.) Hope you're OK. Will my failure to phone be commented on? If Dad knew I'd forgotten because I was too busy thinking about Bob, he'd probably say that if having a boyfriend was going to send me into a spin it would be better if I didn't have one. No, he wouldn't say that, of course I know I'm being melodramatic. But he'd pass some sideways comment and make me feel he'd said it. Perhaps I'm being unfair. Home can tear you apart. In a way, it's a good thing Bob's going to be over in Australia. I don't think I could handle him coming to stay just yet. When he rings it'll be difficult enough.

The train's coming into Liverpool Street. When I was in Norfolk I imagined I'd write this diary every day at home as a secret act of defiance. Now I'm almost there I'm not sure I have that much courage. I don't know when I'll write again. But I'll end on that happy note: Debbie and me visiting the boys in Oxford.

**Tom's writing therapy - begun  
July 2004**

**31/07/01 - A Tuesday**

I'll remember that day for as long as I live. It was a day of euphoria, being brought back down to earth, of rapidly deciding to be philosophical and of the bottom falling out of my world.

I turned up outside the offices of Busby Busby and Linklater with barely a couple of minutes to spare. Jill hadn't been feeling well and I made her breakfast in bed. I also nipped round the corner to get her some Codeine and Paracetamol tablets. She said she had an evil stomach bug, although she looked pretty good to me. I'd been struggling to catch up ever since. Now it was almost midday.

Busby-Linklater were accountants and FAs specialising in licenced and entertainments premises. I'd been put onto them by Len Banks my mentor and stuck with them through all the years of helter-skelter growth - from one-pub outfit, through the arrival of the venture cap boys to its present incarnation. A twenty-seven pub chain serviced by its own brewery, Dickens's. The business was centred on London but in recent years had spread out nicely along the south coast and across the Home Counties.

People said you couldn't put a cigarette paper between the big three Pub'n'Ents accountants but I always felt Claudette was gold dust.

The offices were in a little no-through alleyway off Dean Street. Once you'd pressed the buzzer and been let in you found yourself in a narrow flagstoned passage that led to a courtyard and a bit of lawn and flower beds. Before you reached that, though, you had to take this higgledy-piggledy flight of stairs to the first floor. There were several pine doors leading off the landing, each with a brass plate. By the time I got up Claudette was coming through the first of these to greet me.

'Tom!'

She threw her arms around me. As usual she smelt of top-of-the-range perfume and cigarettes. I heard the sound of her lips smacking the air next to each ear.

'Don't you look well,' she said, giving well an instinctive stretch as if it were an expensive silk shirt she was interested in buying.

'I had a weekend away in Oxford, with Jill.'

'Oxford? How delightful. How is Jill?'

'In herself, fine, although today she's got one of these nasty stomach bugs.'

We were inside her office and she was indicating the chintz sofa by her desk.

The room, like all the offices I'd seen there, was almost completely bare. The floorboards, panelling, sash windows overlooking the alley - all had been stripped back to the wood. The only furniture was Claudette's massive Victorian desk, the sofa and an oak chest against the panelling in between the windows.

The paint above the panelling was a yellowy cream done so it looked faded. There were spot lamps in the ceiling. I'd never known them to be switched off because what with the alleyway and the tall buildings opposite the office was naturally fairly dark.

Even Claudette's desk was bare, except for her laptop, the docking module for a handheld, a slimline matt black phone and a gargantuan gunmetal ashtray. All the gunk of office life was kept out of sight in the rooms behind the partners' offices. Although on the odd occasion I had a peek at these back rooms, I'd have said they were pretty minimal too. I sometimes teased Claudette that staff must be chosen on the merits of their tidiness and aesthetic sense as well as their abilities as PAs.

I loved the place. Its sheer eccentricity. I felt I was keeping in touch with a time when there were real characters in the business. People of Len Banks's vintage. None of these modern offices down by the docks. This was theatre, certainly, but theatre that tapped into the traditions of London life - just like my pubs did, especially in the early days.

'Want a coffee?' Claudette asked once I sat down. She was grabbing a cigarette from the top drawer of her desk and lighting it. She drew a hunk of smoke deep inside. You'd have thought she hadn't had one for a week.

'Not for me, I'm awash with the stuff.'

'Me too. So how can I be of service?'

She heaved the ashtray off the desk and clunked it on the floor boards beside her end of the sofa. She sat down and swivelled towards me. I always found it surprising how agile she was. I somehow thought that being a smoker her muscles would have started playing up by now. She was sixty if she was a day. But then she looked very trim. She was a couple of inches taller than me and in clothes like her figure-hugging black velvet dungarees and cream silk shirt she could be taken for someone half her age. Her hair - short, boyish and subtley blond - added to the effect. It was only her skin that gave the game away, especially when she was under a spotlight. You'd have expected her to have organised the lighting better but she never seemed bothered about disguising her skin - apart from make-up, obviously. Her indifference about her face was another thing I liked about her.

Yes, her skin. Smoker's skin. Not exactly orange peel but puffy with clearly-defined pores beneath the make-up.

'You're not going to believe this but I want to sell up.'

'Uh-huh.' This had a nasal quality as if she was biting on a solid tube of smoke. She wasn't going to be surprised. 'The whole thing? Could be tricky. You've got options that mature a few years down the line.'

'As much as I can get rid of.'

'What's brought this on?'

'To be truthful, I want to spend more time with Jill. Besides which, the nature of the business has changed. It's not what it used to be.'

'It's the venture capital people, isn't it? I did warn you what would happen.'

'I know but they seemed decent and on my wavelength.'

'Not the right attitude, Tom.' She blew a stream of smoke past my left ear, her lips skewed, her eyes looking straight at me. I got the impression she was wondering why she ever bothered with me.

'They've done well for me, though, I'll give them that.'

'They've eased you out of your business—'

'Not true.' I was angry at that.

'Oh no? And they won't have done as well for you as you think. Bet ya!'

I gazed at her, holding her triumphant stare.

'That hurts, Claudette.'

'Only playing straight. As always.' She stubbed out her cigarette and reached for another pivoting athletically on her buttock.

'OK. But if they haven't done as well as they should have, doesn't that reflect badly on you?'

'Not at all. You signed the contract.'

'Which you drafted.'

'Huh-uh. Your hot-shot lawyer did the juiciest bits. Much of it against our advice.'

I remembered there being something of a barney between Claudette and Mo. It'd been the one time I'd gone against Claudette. But I was damned if I was going to admit it.

Looking back now I suppose I'd have to concede I was blinded by what the venture capital company was offering: the opportunity to double-up my empire.

'We submitted a report. Which was ignored - like you ignored me when I said the venture people would change the nature of Dickens's. Once you signed we just had to make the best of it.'

'Look Claudette, let's stop sparring. To be quite honest I'm not that fussed about the cash. As long as I clear a couple of million, I'll be as happy as Larry.'

'Two million,' she mused. Her latest mouthful of smoke began to trickle out between her lips in ragged wisps before being decisively pulled back in.

'We'd better get some figs.'

By which she didn't mean fruit.

'I'll get Marcus to do a CD. How are you fixed for lunch?'

'I kind of assumed we'd do the usual - only this time it would be a very special sort of celebration.'

'Terrific. Usual it is. I'll have Marcus order us a cab too. We can run through the disc at Fagin's. Don't look so worried. I'm sure we'll sort out something.'

## ***31/07/01 - A Tuesday, Part 2 (after breakfast)***

We were turning into Shaftesbury Avenue from Dean Street. As usual Claudette was desperate to keep her hands occupied. She had her handheld and mobile out and was tapping away at both.

Before the taxi arrived, she told me that next week she was flying to New York to see her sister. I often wondered how she coped on planes without cigarettes. A sleeping pill probably - that or got blind drunk.

Her busy fingers were bone white, not a trace of nicotine. I once asked her what her secret was. Pumice stone? Some special preparation? She said, 'Whisky. At the end of the evening I pour myself an extra-large measure to help me sleep. I dip my fingers in for four minutes then suck them clean.' I couldn't tell whether she was having me on.

While she was talking to someone called Donna about an outfit in Margate I stared at the people in Charing Cross Road. There weren't as many as you'd have expected. The traffic was light also. Maybe the tourist numbers were down. Bad for business, although the home-grown crowd was keeping us busy - or so I'd been led to believe by my partners. Having spoken to Claudette that morning, I couldn't help wondering whether they were hiding something.

The cab pulled off Whitehall into Victoria Street then turned left and a couple of streets later we were outside Fagin's.

Although you couldn't actually see New Scotland Yard, people got the joke as soon as Fagin's opened seven years before. I was proud of it. It was the first pub I decided to theme explicitly. What I liked was that I didn't go mad like my partners nowadays - I struck the right balance between tradition and gimmicks. Up till then the only obvious link between pubs and brewery were names like Pickwick's and Copperfield's. Inside, the decor merely implied the characters. In Pickwick's there was tasteful Inn and Road House paraphernalia, coaching prints and a John Bull statue.

This formula worked but by the time I acquired Fagin's, or the Red Lion as it was called then, I felt we needed to move with the times. My original ideas were conceived during the recession of 1991 when people reacted against the crass 1980s. By the mid 1990s things were a bit different. We, that was me and Rajiv, my Master Brewer and right-hand man of the time, liked the look of what

Wychwood were doing in Oxfordshire with goblins and New Age imagery: fun beer names and artwork on the pump plates that was pure Glastonbury. We renamed our session and premium ales, Some More, Artful and Dodger, got the same artist that worked for Wychwood to do some grotesque paintings for the plates and then took things just that little bit further. Rajiv got a latex puppet technician to make one-and-a-half times life-size figures of Fagin, Bill Sikes and his dog. The dog looked particularly devilish. And that was it. For the rest we stuck to what we knew: Victorian truncheons, handcuffs, prison doors and prints of trials and executions. It was a sensation. It even became at one time the haunt of the Yard's senior officers.

Claudette and I were shown to her favourite table in the smoking part. I naturally ordered beer while she asked for her customary bottle of champagne.

We agreed we should talk business before the meal so we could enjoy ourselves properly. I got the waitress to disconnect the Wandsworth Gaol Patent Cell Lamp above our table so that Claudette could plug in her laptop.

I remember that as Claudette got her machine going my mind began to wander and I thought that people looking at her in the glow of the computer might be forgiven for thinking she was a high-tech felon made by the puppet guy. I considered making a joke about it - I'm sure she'd have appreciated it - but couldn't quite summon the energy. I was suddenly feeling nervous. What would happen to Jill and me if the figures didn't add up?

I could see Claudette was examining some graphs. After a while of me sipping my beer and casting my eye over the place to make sure everything was being done properly, she swivelled the laptop towards me.

'OK,' she said, 'that's the little bugger. That one in the middle.' She slipped her cigarette round without burning her fingers and tapped the screen with the filter tip.

I hated figures. OK you had to live with them in business. I'd written dozens of reports based on figures. I'd extrapolated, I'd concluded, I'd recommended. But by nature I was hands on. I understood the bottom line, how to pull in my belt, how to tighten the day-to-day management, how to sell beer to retail outlets to buoy up the pubs side, how to motivate staff - all those sort of things. Figures left me cold.

'You'd better talk me through it.'

'Basically this shows how the pubs your partners control are doing. You'll notice the curve's not nearly as steep as the one next to it. I think your partners have expanded too quickly.'

'I don't doubt that. They're greedy sods.'

'Whereas this steep curve shows the pubs you're still managing directly are going from strength to strength.'

'I know what I'm doing.'

'I know, darling, you're mustard, but the trouble is, they know that too.'

'I don't follow.'

'They know full well they're expanding too rapidly. What they're relying on is you keeping the whole enterprise afloat while their new ventures prove their sea worthiness. If you say you want to sell, they'll do two things. One, they'll make you sign a document saying you won't set up in competition with them in any of the towns they're operating in over the next five years.'

'That's not much of a problem.'

'What? Not even a little pet project somewhere nice? Lake District, maybe?'

'I don't know, we'll see. What I hate about these people is their mean attitude. Men and women who've worked for me have gone over to competitors or set up on their own and I've said good luck to them. It's what happens in business. My view is you take it on the chin. You might have to work harder, be a bit more imaginative, but that's the nature of capitalism. It's what drives things forward. What my partners are doing is the pits. It's like these Americans that sue everybody—'

'I know everyone's not like you, Tom, we've established that. The second thing that's going to happen is they'll say that because of the poor performance of the new pubs the group's overall profit is down and, consequently, so is the value of your shares. The shares you can dispose of immediately, that is.'

'How much?'

'I think you'll get your two million. But for me, that's not the point. In three years time I reckon you'd get five for your pubs and a further two or three for your options. If you sell now, you'll no longer have any say in how things are run. Once they lose you, they'll reduce all management decisions to the lowest common denominator - profit.'

'They've had a good go at cheapening the concept as it is.'

'There'll be a lot more of that.'

'I'll have to grin and bear it. The options'll go up, at least.'

'I wouldn't bank on it. These sort of people have the habit of finding interesting ways of keeping the profits of inconvenient sleeping partners down and, hey-presto, magicking their own sky high. You'll get something. But far less than you deserve. You built the company up. Without you, they wouldn't make a penny.'

'How certain are you about the two million clear?'

She turned the laptop back towards her and lit her fourth cigarette.

After about five minutes of her machine clicking and rasping away, plus one call to Marcus, she said, 'Pretty sure. Say ninety-five percent.'

I was happy with that. Very happy. In the past, even when her certainty level had been as low as seventy, she'd never let me down.

I raised my glass and she raised hers.

'Let's turn off that thing,' I said, 'then celebrate.'

**31/07/01 - A Tuesday, Part 3  
(after coffee and a walk)**

Claudette's taxi dropped me at Charing Cross where I got the tube to Highgate.

I'd realised at the pub I was running behind. I'd told Jill no later than four. By the time I was coming up the steps onto Archway Road it was nearing five. I'd considered phoning but decided it was probably better to assume she was sleeping and let her be.

Two minutes later I was inside the entrance to the flats, crossing the hall and heading for the lift. We lived in a modernist masterpiece. A Grade I listed block of some sixty-five flats. It'd been built in 1935 by a Russian émigré architect for an industrialist who wanted to provide quality affordable homes for his employees. The philanthropic ideal went by the board almost immediately. Middle-class people wanted to live here and demand soon priced ordinary workers out of the market. Who could blame them? One of the highest points in London. Smashing views. A three acre garden, swimming pool, tennis and squash courts. Then this beautiful, experimental building. White slab facades without detail save for the windows and scrolled concrete fronts of the balconies. Minimal but somehow unmistakably sensational. And inside, the original specification was all mod cons. Snappy enamel and steel kitchens and bathrooms, cork tile flooring, long picture windows that concertina'd open, fitted cupboards and storage space with roller shutters. Even integral fridges cooled by a central condenser in the basement. On the ground floor communal areas like the tea room and winter garden.

Flats have continually been snapped up within minutes of being offered for sale - if they even get onto the market. We were getting letters from people asking if we would give them first refusal all the time. We'd been lucky ourselves. We were looking for somewhere when there was one of those rare windows of opportunity when confidence in London property dips for a month or two at the beginning of a lacklustre year. London held its breath but we had the dosh and we were laughing.

I didn't realise there was anything wrong until I got to the kitchen. I'd had the manager at Fagin's look out a special bottle of champagne and I wanted to put it in the fridge (a modern replacement, sadly) straight away. I thought that if Jill was feeling a little better, the bubbly would do her good. My news would lift her in any case.

As soon as I was inside the front door I put down my carrier and had a pee in the loo. We used this one off the hallway as the guest lavatory so there was nothing in there to alert me. Walking along the passage, I noticed the living-room curtains were open, so I realised Jill must have been up. I remember thinking this an encouraging sign.

It was only once I'd stowed the champagne in the freezer drawer that I saw the envelope on the butcher's block: pale blue, milled paper, oblong, the kind Jill liked which I bought her every Easter.

I didn't open it but ran out of the room to our bedroom. There was no Jill and the bed was made. I stared at her dressing-table. It didn't look right but I wasn't sure. I rattled up the shutter of her wardrobe. Like her dressing-table what I saw was inconclusive. She'd obviously not taken much with her. Had she taken anything, other than what she'd have worn if she'd gone out to the shops? I didn't think so. It was only when I went into the bathroom and checked the cabinet above the sink that I was forced to admit that she'd gone away somewhere for the night. But then she hadn't done a bunk. You'll clutch at anything when you know you're in trouble. I could taste her absence. It was acid like beer that has sat in the barrel for too long.

I returned to the kitchen. She hadn't sealed the envelope. I read the letter then threw up in the sink.

*Dear Tom,*

*Thanks for getting the tablets. I did feel awful but it wasn't a bug. Only nerves.*

*The trouble was I couldn't make up my mind.*

*I knew I wanted to leave but couldn't quite bring myself to do it.*

*You've said I'm a coward and I never get to the point.*

*You're right about both.*

*I really thought that last weekend would be a new beginning. Instead it made me realise I couldn't go on anymore. It's not your fault. It's me. It's as if someone's flicked a switch.*

*I'll be at Jemima's cottage. She's away in Thailand for a couple of months. I've taken a fortnight off work. Don't try and ring - the answer machine'll be on.*

*I'll be in touch soon and we can discuss it all then.*

*Please don't blame yourself. It's one of those things.*

*Love, Jill*

When I'd rinsed my mouth I read the letter again. I supposed she was trying to be kind by saying, *It's one of those things.* She could be like that: awkward in her attempt to sugar the pill. I also felt she was trying to avoid taking responsibility for her decision.

Looking back there's a gap of two hours or so in my memories of what happened next. I think I probably just sat at the breakfast bar and stared into space. I remember having a bath later that evening. It wasn't bedtime, only about eight o'clock. I decided to have a bath because I wanted the comfort of hot water. It was a method I used for years to help me cope with stress. All that happened this time was I noticed how many things she'd taken from the bathroom.

Afterwards I went through to the living-room and got myself a beer. I kept a stash of bottles in what I called the cellar, a zinc-lined Arts and Crafts cool cabinet which ensured they were exactly the right temperature. It was one of the many pieces we collected for the flat. We were never slavish about only buying things that were of the right period. We went for whatever took our fancy from Arts and Crafts to Utility, reasoning we were being true to the democratising architectural spirit that had produced the flat, without limiting ourselves unduly.

I was staring at a dozen Wobbly Toms, a bottled version of Dodger, for which Rajiv used a slightly sweeter malt to compensate for that sulphuriness you get when you bottle. It was our biggest-selling bottled beer. There was national front-page broadsheet advertising and export markets all over the globe, including China and Russia. Rajiv originally christened the beer Mr Dickens. It was supposed to be a one-off to celebrate our fifth anniversary. But someone in marketing took it up and it was rebranded under my Christian name with labels depicting cartoon images of me with a glowing nose, dressed up as one of the fictional characters. The character changed every three months. The bottles in the cabinet were Mr Bumble.

I took the top off one, poured the beer into my favourite mug, placed the bottle back in the cabinet and slammed the door shut.

I paced up and down a lot that night. At sunset I couldn't help but stop and gaze at the breathtaking scene. We were on the seventh floor. Our picture window opened onto the whole of London, that night bathed in fire.

On the three middle panes I'd had an engraver do little pictures of my London pubs with their names underneath and lines pointing to where they were. If you stood in the centre of the centre pane they

all lined up more or less right. I was going to have them done at my height but Jill said that would be selfish - as well as big-headed. So I had to look up at them. I think the engravings probably contravened the planning laws. My urge to smash the windows certainly would have done. I resisted the temptation.

At eleven I phoned Claudette. I couldn't think of any one else. It was a mistake. She sounded comatose. I wasn't even sure she'd registered what I'd been saying until she commented, 'Sounds like you're a million down already.' I imagined her sitting at home, her fingers dipped into her last glass of the evening.

## **Sarah's Diary**

**Friday 9<sup>th</sup> September 1994 - Home**

This is my first opportunity to write since I returned from Debbie's. Which is not literally true. No one has stopped me from spending hours alone in my room studying. I could have written it then. How many times did Mum and Dad come up? Mum once, Dad never. But I can't write under such circumstances. I need to feel free. Here I am sitting on a lounger by the swimming-pool, Major by my side. Mum and Dad in Oxford for Daddy's college weekend. Alex in the village smoking dope with Jerome. Min at Helen's riding ponies. This feels like open space.

OK so when Dad's in Bath at work and Mum's off doing hospital flowers, don't I have space? No, because I can sense their presence. Somehow the possibility of them coming back unexpectedly seems too risky. I couldn't write under a dictatorship. I couldn't be brave. How did Anne Frank manage? That's courage. Though I suppose she must have had the support of her family.

It's a beautiful day. The sunlight is full out but it doesn't burn you. Its light is rich like egg yolk and there is no haze or glare. The sun is lighting the world as it is. It's September light. It's everything strong and defined. I remember one afternoon at school when I was about nine lying on my back on the far sports field looking up at the sky. It was after lunch, although I'd still eaten blackberries from the hedge. Everyone else was playing nearer the school. I could hear their cries. Above me the sky was bright blue, perhaps just a bit of whitish haze really far up. There was a jet flying over. Watching it making its leisurely trail I completely lost the sound of the others. Maybe they'd all stopped for some reason. Anyway they weren't there. Only me, the plane, the sunlight and the taste of blackberries. Perfect. I associate this light with the autumn term, my favourite. A new beginning.

Next week I'll see Debbie again. I miss her so much. We speak a couple of times a week and that's great although I don't feel comfortable. I can't speak in the same way I could in Norfolk. That was even easier than school. I know she can tell I'm different but understands. When she was away in St Lucia we didn't speak, although Bob's phoned four times from Australia. He's having a brilliant time. I think I might be falling in love but I won't tell him yet. Besides our - whatever it is - has hardly stood the test of time. Wish I had email even though Bob phoning hasn't been as bad as

expected. Dad's been too preoccupied with what Alex is going to do to notice who phones me and how often.

How blissful life is! I feel so warm and snuggly out here. It seems incredible that there was unhappiness today. When Mum and Dad left almost the last words he said were, Well, burn yourselves to death then, I don't care! Which could've sounded like mildly bad taste. He'd been giving us his fire prevention lecture. In the end he confronted us with the consequences of our inadequacy, hurled poisoned-tipped words at us. I think we could all see and feel the flames. He had broken off from his lecture when Min started humming and Alex got the giggles, real wide-open-mouthed goose-hissing laughter like he was still stoned from a couple of nights ago. Mum persuaded Dad not to get in the car. Peter you can't say things like that. You don't mean them.

I wanted to ask the others, why give him the opportunity to get at us?

Sorry Dad, said both Alex and Min.

Shush! said Mum. Peter, please just say your piece and we can all not worry.

He came back, staring straight at me. At least you've got some sense, Sarah. All I want is for someone to check the cooker, sockets and lights when everyone goes to bed. As he spoke his head shook from the reasonableness of what he was saying. That's not too much to ask, is it?

No, Dad.

Good. He smiled at me.

Come on, Darling. Mum took his arm. And be good you lot.

Mum, we all groaned.

This isn't 1930, Mum, said Alex. He and Mum grinned at each other.

Push-me-pull-you.

It's like Major's coat.

Dear Major, he's such a roly-poly old Labrador even though he's only three and a half. He hates the heat. I call him Scruffy when no one's about. I wonder if the others have pet names for him. If so he must be very confused - or very intelligent. I cringe at the name Major. Better than Thatcher, I grant you. A lucky escape. Quite apart from the chilling connotations of the name, she was female (although the puppet of her on TV pissed in the Gents). The dreadful thing is, he has this gormless look. With the right glasses, even Norma would be fooled.

Poor Major. When you stroke his coat the way it wants to go, you can make it look glossy, smooth, untroubled. But ruffle it the other way and it becomes choppy, inelegant, unkind. You see the blotches underneath, the loose flakes of skin, a wart, once even creatures hopping about (not fleas - worse) which resulted in him having to be anointed with some really evil-smelling stuff.

Our family life is like Major's coat.

## **Saturday 10<sup>th</sup> September 1994 - Home Continued**

### **Smooth Coat - Smoothish**

The day I came back from Debbie's, Mum picked me up from Bath station. She was waiting on the platform. Dad never does that. He's either late or sits in the car outside the main entrance with the engine running, looking grumpy. He once got a parking ticket when collecting Alex. Alex had stopped at the kiosk to buy a Coke. It was this act that was to blame for the ticket, according to Dad. Alex said that when he came out Dad was still remonstrating with the traffic warden. Why didn't Dad move to a parking space, was what I said?

Mum's good about doing things like waiting on the platform. It's partly because she's basically a kind person, partly because she really does have this old-fashioned sense of doing the right thing. Alex wasn't joking when he said it's not 1930. He says it rather a lot in fact but it's still true.

Mum was brought up in the house where we live. Her father, Grandad, was a gentleman farmer. I can't remember him but from what Gran says he had the same outlook as her and she's sort of like Barbara Cartland only on a pretty modest budget. (Gran doesn't like talking about money, which is fine with Dad: he gives her the monthly allowance that was agreed when she made over the farm but none of the promised extras. Unless Mum kicks up a fuss which is not that often. When she does, she fights harder for Gran than she does for anyone else in the family; i.e. us, the kids.)

Our house is big but not huge. Debbie's place is much bigger even though it's an Edwardian bungalow. It goes on for ever and it's called a Manor. So it's a bit odd that Mum was brought up to behave like minor royalty.

I was pleased to be back in Bath. I wasn't looking forward to home but it's great having a home town. It's changed so much since I started boarding school. Changed in my head.

That Saturday Mum said she wanted to do some shopping for the weekend. Did I want to go with her? Not much, so she said she'd park in the multi-storey then meet me outside the Abbey in an hour. I said, Fine.

I walked through the gardens alongside the river towards Pulteney Bridge. The borders are pretty boring - it looks like the gardeners buy a job lot of the same flower in just one colour, red - but the bridge is brilliant. You think of bridges with

shops on them with classical facades happening only in France or Italy but Bath has one.

It's funny how little I noticed the buildings as a kid when we came here to shop, and when I was at school it was just the place you escaped to when you felt brave enough to skip an afternoon. Which for me wasn't very often. Then it was the shops and cinemas I noticed. I liked the old-fashioned cake place off Milsom Street and later the off-lodgement along Sydney Road which seemed miles away from anywhere. I must have spent my childhood not looking up. Now I think what a beautiful town it is. All the history. That Saturday I wandered the streets, losing myself in the surprises round every corner, especially the out of the way ones like a Georgian bridge between two buildings over a cobbled alleyway. Something else you wouldn't expect in the West Country. I got to the Abbey a quarter of an hour early and Mum was late. I spent the time gazing at the angels and dragon's teeth around the west door.

I felt much calmer as we drove home.

How's Debbie? Mum asked as we were heading up Lansdown Hill.

We were passing a small development of mini-Georgian houses that must have been put up in the sixties. When I was a little girl I used to think I'd live in a house like that. They look a bit tacky now but when I was small I loved their smoothness, their tininess. A complete contrast to the medieval crookedness of home (nothing's straight) - though I didn't think of it like that then. It just seemed bulging and jumbly.

She's wonderful, Mum.

You look so much better. You needed a break. You've been working like a mad-thing. It's not good for you to put in so much effort early on. You'll peak too soon.

I've got into everything, Mum. Work's brilliant. It's different from when I did Os. Then I was like a parrot. Now I'm finding out things for myself.

You're so different from me when I was at school. I always seemed to be hopeless. Rather like Alex.

We didn't say anything for a bit. Mum often drops her bombshells at the end of paragraphs. I think she believes they'll stand out less there. Instead they blow the atmosphere to pieces.

What happened? I said eventually.

Not much, according to Dad. But Alex says there are plenty of courses he can do with the grades.

Well come on Mum what are they?

D, E, F.

Wow!

Exactly, I was amazed he got any of them from what he'd been saying when he came home.

He hadn't said anything like that to me. But then he did have a special relationship with Mum.

Which courses is he thinking of?

I don't know, you'll have to ask him. But he doesn't seem worried.

What about Dad?

He was annoyed to start with.  
Furious? Incandescent?  
Annoyed. But everything's fine now.

### Rough Coat

The first person I saw after I took my bag upstairs was Alex.

I'd just come into the hall and was about to go and help Mum in the kitchen when he staggered through the side door from the garden.

I could hear Dad in his study. When I'd gone up he'd been shouting at someone down the phone. Now his voice was still loud but more reasonable. Evidently he was doing all the talking.

Oh shit, I said when I saw Alex.

Well that's a nice way to say hello tuh— He was going to continue but his voice broke up into bad speech difficulties. He bendy-toy'd onto the bottom step and sat with his body arched forward, his legs wide apart, his elbows resting on his knees and his head in his hands. The manoeuvre was executed without any thumping or bumping. It had a sort of improbability about it — that and a comic elegance, enhanced by his long thin limbs.

I stood over him. Come on Alex, up! I said. I had to get him upstairs.

No reaction.

Oh Alex, please.

He turned his head with his hands and his face swivelled towards me. He was grimacing as if the whole rubber body'd incoherence thing had been a joke. Only I knew it wasn't.

You didn't ring, he said with alarming clarity.

I'm sorry. I just forgot. I feel awful about it.

Suppose Mum huh—

Yeah. Sorry.

Ho hah—

His head was back in its navel-gazing position.

I knelt down and took his face in my hands. I kissed his forehead and nose. I put my forehead against his and rubbed gently.

What are you doing, boy?

We looked into each other's eyes. His whites were crazy paving with red cement.

What is it? What've you taken?

Hope.

Not just dope. Come on.

Temazepah—

Jesus! Idiot.

Suddenly his arms were around my neck and he was sandpapering my cheek.

Come on. Stop it. I tried to wriggle away.

He was mumbling. I felt like Esmerelda to his Quasimodo.

Come on you idiot.

I managed to extricate myself.

Will you stop calling me a fucking idiot!

It was extraordinary. He sounded perfectly normal. But the effort had been too much and his eyes began to cross.

Behind me I could hear Dad's voice shouting again. I sensed he was about to slam the phone down. I panicked. I got behind Alex and tried to haul him upright by climbing the stairs backwards.

I must have pulled him against the hard edge of one of the steps because he started howling. The pain energised him and he got to his feet. I grabbed his arm and he lolloped upstairs after me.

I got him into his bedroom and then into the bathroom. I pulled his shirt over his head and sat him on the loo. I ran a little warm water into the sink and got him to stand over it. I eased his head into the water and massaged his scalp. I wasn't sure if I was doing the right thing but I wanted to get him clean. His hair stank of dope. He looked as if he hadn't washed it for a week. I shampooed his hair. I listened to his breathing. I wanted to know if he was going to be sick. Instead the washing seemed to calm him.

## **Sunday 11<sup>th</sup> September 1994 - Home Continued**

### **Smooth Coat**

Dad was on the phone to someone else when I got back to the hall. He was telling a story to someone. I heard, Yeah, I know, absolutely unbelievable. Couldn't believe it. You wouldn't get away with it in a novel. I presumed he was recounting what had happened in the last conversation.

In the kitchen Mum was preparing Saturday supper. She was peeling carrots. I could smell roasting beef.

What's for Sunday lunch, then?

Figs and Parma ham, corn on the cob with pesto sauce, spaghetti carbonara and green olive ice-cream.

Jees, what's that in aid of?

I might have guessed: Rick, Dad's partner in the practice, was coming over with his new girlfriend who was Italian.

Your Dad didn't want to miss out on his Sunday roast so we're having it tonight. He thought it would be a welcome home meal for you too.

I felt so flattered.

Dining-room? I asked.

Of course.

Is the table set?

No, Min's gone riding.

I wondered how many of the tasks I usually did Min had actually done while I'd been away. I imagined Mum did most of them. Min hates being told to do things. Like Alex she's a rebel only unlike him she's able to get away with it. Criticism is like water off a duck's back. Most importantly she doesn't drink or smoke dope and so can argue herself out of anything with absolute single-mindedness. Even if she did drink or smoke dope, I couldn't imagine she'd be any different. She doesn't like arguing, mind you: she prefers to just get on with what she wants and sod everyone else. Do I wish I was like her? A bit I suppose. Most of all I wish Alex was like her. He's so vulnerable.

The dining-room was still, like a chapel. It's only used a couple of times a week and is kept spotless by Una. Whenever you go in on your own it makes you feel calm. It smells of polish from the table and the bare floor-boards around the edge of the carpet and of stone from the big fireplace. I love setting the table. I select the mats and put

them out first. The mats have hunting scenes on them. That day I was in two minds whether I should give 'The Kill' to Dad or Min. Dad's never been hunting in his life but likes to show solidarity with that kind of thing. Min, I'm sure, will be starting before long. I'm amazed she hasn't already.

Then I select the cutlery, pinching the sides of the handles between my thumb and forefinger and laying them in a tea-towel before transferring the bundle to the table and positioning them. The glasses come from the corner cabinet which smells of polish and old wood. It's not a soft, fusty smell but clean and nutty and hard as if the last four centuries have cured the wood. Each glass is given a polish before being put in place.

In the winter I also light the fire.

I'm glad it's only me that likes these tasks. They give me such pleasure.

Back in the kitchen I de-stringed, topped and sliced the runner beans Una brought up from her husband's garden.

When Dad came in I was lost in a trance brought on by the smell of their juice and by Mum's easy chatter.

You'll never guess what that lunatic woman's— he began and I thought he's full of some scheme to do with the practice or the City Council and he's going to rant. But then he saw me.

Sarah. I didn't know you were back.

I looked at Mum, as did Dad.

I thought you were coming back late this evening. Pen you never told me—

Honestly, Peter, you're so wrapped up in that planning business.

She rolled her gaze towards the ceiling and tutted theatrically.

Well, Dad said, it's tremendously important for the future of the practice— and I thought he was going to go on.

Instead he gave me an enormous hug and kissed my forehead and both cheeks.

Sarah, how are you? We've missed you, haven't we Pen? How was Norfolk? And how's Will?

He'd met Debbie's parents at speech day and immediately took to Will. He admires anybody who's good at business. Not that Dad is that good at business, I don't think. Although he says he is. But it's Mum's money. He admires Will because he's made a killing with his software company.

I looked at Dad and was kind of overwhelmed by him.

And I felt guilty because I'd told Debbie he has 'Episodes' and written about him in my diary.

### **Rough Coat**

Min was cutting it fine, as usual. Although how she gets out of her riding stuff, showers and makes herself look as cool as a cucumber in fifteen minutes is a complete mystery. We heard Helen's

Mum's BMW draw up on the gravel at seven twenty-seven, Min and Helen calling out the arrangements for tomorrow as Min crunched to the front door and then there she was - just as I was draining the veg - looking tall, willowy in a flowing fuchsia dress and most definitely *not* fourteen.

Hi Sare, she said when she realised it was me. I didn't think you were coming back tonight. Is there anything I can do? Where's Mum?

She gave me a tight little peck on the cheek.

Mmm, beef!

Mum's upstairs - freshening up, babes.

Babes! She gave me an Oh please look.

Out-of-the-way, out-of-the-way.

I plonked the joint down on the kitchen table.

Anything I can do? Table laid?

Min! We're serving up!

I know how much you just *lurv* it. She sashayed out of the room. I'll get Dad.

I poured off the juices for the gravy, feeling like Cinderella, although I enjoy getting the food ready. It helps me steady my nerves.

OK all under control? said Dad coming through from the hall. Smells good. Shouldn't it still be in the oven, though?

As you say, Daddy, all under control.

I gave the gravy a stir and put the meat back in the oven.

Um, Yorkshires, said Dad.

Shoo!

I'll go and open the wine.

All done.

Check it then.

As he left Mum arrived. Have you seen Alex?

He's in his room.

Is he? I poked my head round his door and he wasn't there. Must've been in the bathroom.

I finished draining the veg and putting them into serving dishes. I suddenly wanted to crack myself open and let myself out like I was one of those Russian dolls. I told myself to keep calm. I opened the oven and turned the roasties even though they were coming out in about half a minute. I wanted to burst. I wanted to leave me to it - this dutiful me, the one that just *lurved* all this getting the meal ready. I wanted to skip off down the lane and magically meet Debbie and have a pint or get stoned. I wanted to be anywhere but here. Although if I had to be anywhere in the house I'd rather be here.

I wondered whether I should go and check on Alex but couldn't move. He'd be alright, I told myself. He always was. But then what about D, E, F and all the drugs? Had I done the right thing leaving him? He seemed to improve before I came down. But I couldn't help thinking I'd been selfish - after all I did know how vulnerable he was. Every time I smoothed things over, I was just being selfish, wasn't I? I wanted everything to run smoothly. But it never did. It always span out of control.

Right, Mum said, shall I take these through?

Push-me-pull-you.

Dad carved, as usual.

I let him serve everyone else - everyone else except Alex - while I busied myself fetching things from the kitchen and putting the saucepans in to soak.

By the time I got the roasting dish in the sink I'd summoned up enough courage to go and see if Alex was alright, but I knew I was too late. It occurred to me I'd been deliberately deceiving myself, pretending to be looking for an opportunity but finding it only when there was no hope. But then why would I do that? The summoning and the indecision, not to mention the realisation I'd missed my chance, were all agony.

I knew I had to get back in time for Dad to serve me.

He was putting a gigantic hunk on Min's plate when I arrived.

Mum had put on a CD - Leonard Cohen.

Just a little for me, Dad.

Nonsense, you've had a long day.

No really, I'm not hungry. *Tiny piece*, I said putting on a little girl voice.

Pen - your daughter's turning into a vegetarian!

I felt angry and embarrassed.

*Yuck!* went Min.

Don't bully her, Peter.

Doesn't matter, I said to Dad, and the moment I did I thought, But it does, it *really* does.

How's that?

I looked at my plate. The meat was thick and bloody. I knew it would taste nice and I'd loved cooking it. I just didn't much feel like eating it. I felt defeated. I wanted to sulk.

But there was a fiercer self inside too. Another Russian doll struggling to get out. It wanted to smash the plate on the floor or stuff the blood-soaked strips of leather into his stupid mouth. I hated the thought I could think that.

Mum poured me some water when I sat down.

Don't eat it all, she whispered.

I smiled thanks.

What she didn't say but I knew she meant was, He doesn't mean it.

Push-me-pull-you.

Min, can I have some wine?

'Course, babes. She was speaking with her mouth full. She seemed annoyed I'd brought her out of her chomping stupor. She crashed the bottle onto the table, as hard as she dared, gave it a shove and it began to tip. When I stopped it, I swear she looked disappointed.

Then, just as Suzanne started playing, Alex wandered in.

Better late than never, said Dad.

Sorry I'm late. Alex was subdued but OK. He even looked cool, I thought, with his newly-washed hair, and had had the sense to put on a clean shirt.

He wasn't simply cool-cool but like a cool breeze streaming into the room.

I felt Dad could sense this too. He sounded as if he meant 'Better late than never'. I stared at the two men and it occurred to me how much they loved each other, deep down.

I cut a piece of meat, not a big piece - I didn't feel that confident - but big enough to be a celebration.

While Dad cut Alex's meat everyone else was silent. I listened to the music. Mum told me once that she and Dad loved this CD because they'd bought it on vinyl when they got together. I imagined what it would be like if Bob and I got married - or lived together anyway. Would we be like Mum and Dad in twenty years time, having supper with our kids and playing Björk *Debut*?

Have you been taking drugs?

Min was staring slyly at Alex who'd sat down opposite her.

Fuck off, he said.

I couldn't believe it was happening.

Don't swear please, said Dad.

Yes, don't Alex, said Mum.

Anyway, said Dad, have you?

Have I what?

Been taking drugs?

Why don't you fuck off too, Dad. Alex sounded chilling. I thought, My God, they hate each other. How could I have got it so wrong?

D'you hear that, Pen? Your son just told me to fuck off.

Mum didn't know where to put herself.

Dad wasn't looking at her anyway. Look sunshine, he said, jabbing his fork towards Alex, if there's going to be any fucking off here, it's going to be you. Now, apologise to Min or get out.

It was only then that I noticed Min. She was still in her meat trance. She seemed completely oblivious to what was happening.

I got up from the table.

Dad and Alex's voices were getting louder and more angry.

I apologised to Mum as if I was going to the loo. I was but I sort of knew I didn't want to pee.

I felt like my head was about to burst. Not only my head, but my chest, tummy and abdomen. It was like the doll inside me wanted to burst out. I locked the door, lifted the lid and put my fingers down my throat. The softness gagged on them. The skin of my palette felt dry and like it was sticking to them, like it might come off. I coughed and felt saliva and the skin suddenly slippery. I rammed my fingers harder then pulled them out. The puke streamed out of my mouth and splashed into the water. I was amazed how digested it was. And then I felt a wave of pleasure. A

warmth. An anaesthetic. I flushed the lavatory. I went to the sink and rinsed my mouth. As I straightened up I was overwhelmed by a feeling of cleanliness. I was empty, pure inside. I was slight. I was like an egg. I was smooth as a shell. I was calm, infinite and strong. I went back to the dining-room a different person.

## **Tom's writing therapy**

**04/08/01 - A Saturday**

The Saturday after Jill left I drove out of London on the A12. At Chelmsford I took the A414 for Maldon. Just beyond Danbury I turned down the B1010 and followed it through Hazeleigh and Rudley Green to the B1018. I crossed over and set off along the lane that takes you to Cooper's Creek and the River Blackwater. But instead of going all the way I took the left turn half way along and headed north back towards Maldon.

Almost immediately the lane passed over the Mundon Wash. I knew this route like my own face, could recite the names of the farms - lovely names like Copkitchen and Bramble Hill - could hear my grandfather's voice telling me them. Over to my right the land began its gentle fall to the river and I caught sight of Northey Island. I came to the ash and oak standing either side of the road. I could hear - can still hear - Grandad's rhyme: 'If the oak shows before the ash, there'll be a splash; if the ash's before the oak, you'll see a soak.' This was said by a man who'd spent fifty-five years in Essex but still retained his Norfolk accent. I can hear Mum chipping in her version whenever she heard him tell his. 'Oak before ash, summer splash - ash before oak, summer soak.' 'It's neater that,' she'd say, hamming up her usually light Yorkshire accent. 'None of this iffing and showing business. To the point Grandad.' 'Ah, but you can't beat Norfolk for poetry, can you girl?'

We used to take Grandad down to Cooper's Creek when he lost the use of his legs so he could watch the coming and going of the tide.

Near the town I passed the sign to the site of the Battle of Maldon - one of the subjects I was able to write well on before I decided to chuck in my history degree. I was always good on battles, especially primitive ones. With battles you can see the way things stand. You can make clear sense of strategy and tactics. Although there's no absolute rights and wrongs - just like with people-history - with battles I found I could speculate about what might have happened if so-and-so had done such-and-such much more easily. Battles are practical common-sense things. It was when it came to teasing out the different levels in social history or trying to work out how two people interacted in the political arena that I came a cropper. I sometimes wonder whether I'd fare any better now if I went back to finish my degree - as I occasionally consider doing.

Anyway, after the sign to the battlefield, I went straight over the ring-road roundabout and hung a left into a newish estate. The farmhouse was around the next bend. The road dipped down to a stream and on the opposite side was the farmhouse to the left of the road and the engineering shop on the right. Both buildings looked mightily incongruous in the middle of all that self-conscious eighties residential vernacular. The fact that Grandad's farm was the real McCoy only made the fake detail - the chalk lump, timbering and pargetwork - seem all the more bolted on. The engineering shop stuck out for different reasons, although Dad went to a lot of trouble to disguise it with shrubs and trees.

I pulled over to the side of the road and switched off the ignition. I'd had no fixed idea of where I was driving when I left Highgate. I'd not exactly intended to end up here, although I wasn't surprised by the route I followed either. I suppose, looking back, the act of driving was as important as anything - I often feel calm behind the wheel - although I also needed to touch base. It was like I needed to confirm I was me.

The farmhouse was clay lump painted white and this together with the depth of the walls and the bold roundness of its shape - not a single corner was pointed, no door or window opening had a straight edge - made it look like it was made of icing sugar.

Great Grandad moved there in the Depression. Up till then he'd been a tenant farmer up by Beccles. But around 1930 Great Grandmother inherited a chemist's shop in Chelmsford, the town where she'd grown up. She said he could buy a farm with the cash from the sale of the business so long as they moved to Essex. They were only there five years before he committed suicide. Grandad never talked about his father but according to Dad, Great Grandad never settled. Added to which he couldn't make the land pay. I suppose it was a different kind to what he was used to.

When he took his life he wasn't in debt but soon would have been. Oddly enough, his death was probably the best thing that could've happened for Grandad and his brother, Uncle Ted. They weren't much interested in farming and so they sold the land and one of the cottages and set up as welders and mechanics. Grandfather, his young family and Great Grandmother lived in the farmhouse while Ted moved into the remaining cottage which was no longer needed for a farm worker. The original shop was converted out of a corrugated iron barn.

Grandad and Ted were craftsmen - and artists in their own way - and were soon coining it. They did farm machinery, obviously, but their big success was a contract to service Council vehicles. Then when the war came they took it in turns to go over to Lakenheath and work on the planes in one-week-on, one-week-off shifts. It was knackering but the money was exceptional.

Dad didn't join the business until the early nineteen-fifties. By then he'd done his National Service and had enrolled on a Guilds' Diploma in Light Industry and Book-Keeping which would take him three years at night school. During the day he worked as the firm's apprentice. I don't know whether he ever considered doing anything else but I suspect not. I think he knew a good opportunity when he saw one and decided he'd learn as much as he could from the older generation while developing his own ideas through his studies. He was very respectful of Grandad and Uncle Ted, introducing new ways only gradually and leaving a respectable interval between Grandad's retirement (Ted died a couple of years before) and putting up the new shop.

I can just remember being taken to see the old one coming down. I had to stand with Mum at a safe distance as if it was being blown up. Whereas in reality Dad and the two lads, Wal and Richie, were dismantling it piece by piece with such tenderness that hardly a rusty washer got lost.

The funny thing was it wasn't so much Mum as Dad who wanted us to stand back. In fact Mum would've probably been easier about me being closer. She had a sort of you-can't-alter-the-future outlook on life. Dad, on the other hand, has always been a stickler for safety. He'd never have forgiven himself if the wind caught a loose sheet and it sliced me in two. At the time, I guess I didn't understand Mum and Dad's different temperaments and assumed it was Mum spoiling the fun.

I think it was that day I kicked her in the shins. I caught her wrong so my toes rather than the sole of my rubber wellingtons connected with her leg. I howled the place down and had to be carted off home, missing out on one of Granny's longed-for high teas.

As I sat in the car looking at the old farmhouse and the shop, I began to feel sad. Remembering my childhood and the stories Grandad and my parents told me reminded me of little fantasies I had about Jill and me having kids. We never really discussed children apart from testing the idea on each other now and again. Once when we were going for a walk near home this tiny boy whizzed past us out of nowhere on a skateboard and flicked a V. He deliberately skewed in close to my ankles making me jump against Jill and nearly sending us both over. 'Little fucker!' I said to her. 'Kids, eh? Who'd have them?' 'I bet you were like that once,' she said. 'And you never know, one day I might make a dad out of you.' Not that she'd ever put up any explicit signs pointing in that direction before and wouldn't do after but I felt so close to her at that moment. There was something real there and we both knew it.

Coming back to Maldon suddenly made me realise what I'd lost in ways I never imagined it would.

It was then, on the spur of the moment, I decided to see Dad. I needed to tell him about Jill.

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Dad lives about a mile from the shop in a brick detached Edwardian house with about half an acre of garden. He and Mum bought it in the late sixties not long before I was born. It isn't as big as the farmhouse - three double bedrooms, one single - but Grandad used to take the piss out of Dad about it without quarter. It's in a fairly up-market area and our neighbours when I was young were a doctor and bank manager. Grandad used to say Dad was getting 'High-blown ideas, boy' and would sell the shop next and move to the Costa Brava.

I love the house. Mum made it a real home.

When Dad opened the door I was as surprised as him. It was only when I saw him that the fact I was there and intending to tell him about Jill hit me.

'Tom, what are you doing here? Nothing's wrong I hope.'

'No Dad. I was just passing - on my way back from a meeting. Jill's gone to stay with Jemimah for the weekend and I thought I'd come and see you.'

'That's good of you. Well, don't stand there, come in. I've got the kettle on.'

There was a lovely display of chrysanthemums on the hall table. Dad is amazing about keeping things like that up - things Mum used to do. For a second I expected her to come through from the kitchen.

As I followed him down the passage I realised my surprise visit had settled one thing I suspected about him. He was wearing his old tweed jacket Mum bought when I was a little boy. He'd always loved that jacket but even so I couldn't help thinking his wearing it was a bit morbid. It seemed to me it was indicative of the depressed state he went into when he lost her and which he's never entirely got out of. I'd bought him a new jacket the previous Christmas. A real cracker - just his colour, light-weight like he preferred but a really top quality, hard-wearing cloth. I even got the tailor to put leather patches on the elbows and strips round the cuffs. Whenever Jill and I came over he was always wearing it but I felt it wasn't ever looking worn in - despite the material. Now I knew the truth.

As he attended to the kettle, I put my hand on his shoulder. 'Good to see you Dad.'

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'Dad, I've got something to tell you.'

It was now evening. Dad had suggested we went out for a meal and offered to do the driving.

The Marney Tower stands on its own about half-way between Messing and Easthorpe and has been a favourite of his for as long as I can remember. It's changed precious little since I first went

there when I was fourteen. Before then he and Mum and occasionally friends went there without me. The place took on a kind of mythical status and I remember being unbelievably proud when I was finally allowed to accompany them.

Outside, it's a beautiful warm brick with old grey timbering. It's a low building with an unusually tall barley-twist chimney. Inside there are flagstoned floors and a massive fireplace. There are hops above the bar and copper-topped tables. Only once, for a period of about five years, has it fallen into the hands of an unsympathetic landlord. It wasn't that he changed the way it looked but he was clearly in the wrong business. His fondness for his product made him surly and occasionally violent. He was evicted by the brewery in Mum's last year. It always seemed to me a blessing that she and Dad could go there a couple of times and enjoy a nice atmosphere before she passed away.

That night we were eating our mains - chicken for Dad and beef Wellington for me - accompanied by pints of Abbot. As usual the beer was proving a difficult one to define. I grew up on it, after all, and I could never recapture the purity of my first pint when I was bunking off school. I could still taste the distinctive fruitiness but couldn't put a name to it. It was simply a familiar combination of flavours. Although its pleasing effects also had something in common with Dad's old jacket (now replaced by the one I bought him) and how it affected him because the beer reminded me of being there with Mum.

The way Dad looked at me when I said I had something to tell him immediately knocked my confidence. He was surprised for a millisecond then his green eyes sparkled. He hid his emotion quickly but I was in no doubt I'd glimpsed it. I could guess what was behind it: marriage or children. Of course he would have liked me and Jill to marry first because he wanted us to have what made him so happy. But if we stayed as we were and had a kid he'd have still been over the moon. Having kids was the Big One. Given what I'd been feeling earlier I assumed his twinkling eyes were about children.

I panicked. I couldn't tell him about Jill, could I? It would have hurt him too much. It wasn't the right time. I couldn't do that to him when we were all cheerful with our food and pints.

'I've decided to sell up,' I said.

He was taken aback, I could tell, but I knew I'd succeeded in deflecting him from the emotional stuff and he was engaging with the business issues.

'The business?'

'Yeah, the whole shooting-match. Well as much as I own.'

'I don't know what to say.'

'Well I hope you'll be pleased for me.'

'I dare say. But are you sure about it? What will you do? What does Jill think?'

'I haven't told her yet. But I know she'll be pleased. She's been on at me to spend more time with her for ages.'

'There's time and time. Don't think I'm interfering but you can't just click your heels, you know. I've seen people from the Chamber of Commerce sell up a good business and sit on their backsides for a bit thinking they've got all the time in the world to find something else. Well some do but some take a fall. They find they've spent too much of their capital rewarding themselves for selling so well, or else inflation catches them out. You know, they suddenly realise markets have moved on faster than they bargained for and their capital isn't going to buy them a business that'll give them half as much income as they're used to. It's a dangerous time, when you've sold up. Unless you're careful the days turn into years before you know it. Anyway, you'll be bored to death and drive Jill up the wall. She'll be begging you to get out from under her feet.'

'Quite a speech,' I said, though I wasn't knocking him and he understood that.

'I'm bound to be worried. It's that you've done so well. I'm proud of you and don't want you to come unstuck.'

'I'm grateful for that Dad. I really am. It is a bit of an unreal time. It's good to have someone bringing you down to earth.'

He smiled at me. 'Even so, I haven't said well done, have I? I haven't even asked how much you're getting, if you don't mind me asking. I'd quite—'

'No, Dad, I don't mind at all.'

As we talked business our different sides of the conversation meshed together tightly. He could see where I was coming from. He'd voiced doubts about getting the venture capital at the time and had considerable sympathy for my disenchantment about the way the company was going. He was impressed by the sum I was getting. Though I didn't explain about the options. I reckon I'd mentioned them to him before, thinking back, so he didn't raise them either because he'd forgotten or didn't want to burst my bubble. I suspect the latter. He'd made his speech and now wanted to bask with me in my glory.

I love my Dad. He's my rock. It's corny to say so - a million princesses must have used that expression up and down the land - but it's true. It is for me just as it was for Mum. When she campaigned for branch libraries she showed a flair and commitment Dad could never have matched but without his solidity she could never have done it.

I take after her as far as chancing my arm is concerned. Or rather she was who I got the confidence to try different things from. Not that it was always obvious she was adventurous when I was young. To me then she was often simply a librarian. The campaigning didn't start until I was in my teens.

Looking back I think Dad was probably embarrassed when she began, although he didn't let that stop him supporting her. He would have given her a little lecture - same as he gave me that night - but as soon as he realised she was serious and had thought things through, he was behind her.

As we chatted I forgot Jill - quite got into the part I'd decided to play. Instead I slipped back into those other rites-of-passage moments that I'd shared with him and which he carried me through. There was my decision to give up university, my choosing the pub trade, my first pub on my own, buying the flat with Jill - loads of other times too.

The funny thing was I'd never consulted Mum about things like that first: not often anyway; though maybe when I began going out with Jill. Mostly the protocol was to talk to Dad then he'd discuss things with Mum who'd have a word with me afterwards. It wasn't that Dad was patriarchal, far from it, but we both wanted him to take that role.

He has quiet authority. It's not simply his engineer's precise manner but his capacity for love.

I wonder now whether I wasn't in a state of shock that evening. I should have trusted that love and made a clean breast of Jill leaving. Dad's love was big enough when I did eventually tell him four months later but I couldn't help feeling guilty. He wasn't stupid and must have been hurt I'd kept quiet that evening at the pub. I'd led him into a conversation and emotional responses under false pretences.

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The guilt began that night when I was lying in the bed I'd had since I was fifteen. I lay awake reflecting on the evening and Jill - she was coming back into the picture as the effects of the Abbot wore off. In the foreground, though, were bits of what Dad said. His voice was both balm and a reminder I'd not been straight with him. It also provoked the thought I'd let not only myself down by not spending enough time with Jill but my family as well. My ancestors.

Of course Dad wouldn't have wanted me to feel like that but there's gravitas in that voice. It's the accent. He's of that generation that was caught between two vernaculars - in our family's case, old Norfolk and my Estuarine vowels. Both Mum and Dad flattened out their native speech considerably - in order to get on, I suppose. In the fifties, I guess, it was what you did. The fact it somehow made me feel a bit of a lout wasn't intended. Nor would Dad have deliberately courted the deep respectfulness Grandad had towards him for all his taking the piss out of Dad.

As I fell asleep, I felt like an idiot quite honestly.

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## **About the author**

Frank Egerton started out as a land agent in North Oxfordshire. He then studied English at Keble College, Oxford and since 1995 has reviewed books for a variety of publications including the Times, Times Literary Supplement, Spectator, Financial Times and Oxford Times.

Frank is a former editor of the Oxford Writer and is a member of the Society of Authors. He is Chair of Writers in Oxford and also works part-time as an Oxford University librarian. He teaches creative writing for Oxford University and lives in the west of the county. His first novel *The Lock* was published in 2003. The digital edition reached the finals of the Independent e-Book Awards in Santa Barbara.

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