

Two Caravans

There is a field – a broad south-sloping field sitting astride a long hill that curves away into a secret leafy valley. It is sheltered by dense hedges of hawthorn and hazel threaded through with wild roses and evening-scented honeysuckle. In the mornings, a light breeze carries up over the Downs, just enough to kiss the air with the fresh salty tang of the English Channel. In fact so delightful is the air that, sitting up here, you might think you were in paradise. And in the field are two caravans, a men's caravan and a women's caravan.

If this was really the Garden of Eden, though, there ought to be an apple tree, thinks Yola. But it is the Garden of England, and the field is full of ripening strawberries. And instead of a snake, they have the Dumpling.

Sitting on the step of the women's caravan, painting her toenails fuchsia pink, petite voluptuous Yola watches the Dumpling's Land Rover pull in through the gate at the bottom of the field, and the new arrival clamber down out of the passenger seat. Really, she cannot for the life of her understand why they have sent this two-zloty-pudding of a girl, when what is clearly needed is another man – preferably someone mature, but with his own

hair and nice legs, and a calm nature – who will not only pick faster, but will bring a pleasant sexual harmony to their small community, whereas anyone can see that this little miss is going to set the fox among the chickens, and that all the men will be vying for her favours and not paying attention to what they are really here for, namely the picking of strawberries. This thought is so annoying that it makes Yola lose concentration on her middle toe, which ends up looking like a botched amputation.

And there is also the question of space, Yola broods, studying the new girl as she makes her way past the men's caravan and up the field. Although there are more women than men, the women's caravan is the smaller, just a little four-berth tourer that you might tow behind when you go off on holiday to the Baltic. Yola, as the supervisor, is a person of status, and although petite she is generously proportioned, so naturally she has a single bunk to herself. Marta, her niece, has the other single bunk. The two Chinese girls – Yola can never get the hang of their names – share the fold-out double bed, which, when extended, takes up the whole floor space. That's it. There is no room for anyone else.

The four of them have done their best to make their caravan seem bright and homely. The Chinese girls have stuck pictures of baby animals and David Beckham on the walls. Marta has stuck a picture of the Black Virgin of Krakow beside David Beckham. Yola, who likes things to smell nice, has set a bunch of wild flowers in a cup,

hedge roses, campion and white-gold honeysuckle, to sweeten the air. .

A particularly charming feature of their caravan is the clever storage space: there are compact cupboards, cunning head-level lockers and drawers with delightful decorative handles where everything can be hidden away. Yola likes things to be neat. The four women have become skilled at avoiding each other, skirting round each other in the small space with womanly delicacy, unlike men, who are defective creatures, prone to be clumsy and take up unnecessary room, though of course they can't help it and they do have some good points, which she will tell you about later.

This new girl – she skips straight up to the caravan and drops her bag down right in the middle of the floor. She has come from Kiev, she says, looking around her with a smile on her face. Irina is her name. She looks tired and dishevelled, with a faint whiff of chip fat about her. Where does she think she is going to keep that bag? Where does she think she is going to sleep? What does she have to smile about? That's what Yola wants to know.

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'Irina, my baby, you can still change your mind! You don't have to go!'

Mother was wailing and dabbing at her pinky eyes with a tissue, causing an embarrassing scene at Kiev bus station.

'Mother, please! I'm not a baby!'

You expect your mother to cry at a moment like this. But when my craggy old Pappa turned up too, his shirt all crumpled and his silver hair sticking up like an old-age porcupine, OK, I admit it rattled me. I hadn't expected him to come to see me off.

'Irina, little one, take care.'

'*Shcho ti*, Pappa. What's all this about? Do you think I'm not coming back?'

'Just take care, my little one.' Sniffle. Sigh.

'I'm not little, Pappa. I'm nineteen. Do you think I can't look after myself?'

'Ah, my little pigeon.' Sigh. Sniffle. Then Mother started up again. Then – I couldn't help myself – I started up too, sighing and sniffing and dabbing my eyes, until the coach driver told us to get a move on, and Mother shoved a bag of bread and salami and a poppy-seed cake into my hands, and we were off. From Kiev to Kent in forty-two hours.

OK, I admit, forty-two hours on a coach is not amusing. By the time we reached Lviv, the bread and salami were all gone. In Poland, I noticed that my ankles were starting to swell. When we stopped for fuel somewhere in Germany I stuffed the last crumbs of the poppy-seed cake into my mouth and washed it down with nasty metallic-tasting water from a tap that was marked not for drinking. In Belgium my period started, but I didn't notice until the dark stain of blood seeped through my jeans into the seat. In France I lost all sensation in my feet. On the ferry to Dover I found a toilet and cleaned myself

up. Looking into the cloudy mirror above the washbasin I hardly recognised the wan dark-eyed face that stared back at me – was that me, that scruffy straggle-haired girl with bags under her eyes? I walked about to restore the circulation in my legs, and standing on the deck at dawn I watched the white cliffs of England materialise in the pale watery light, beautiful, mysterious, the land of my dreams.

At Dover I was met off the boat by Vulk, waving a bit of card with my name on it – Irina Blazkho. Typical – he'd got the spelling wrong. He was the type Mother would describe as a person of minimum culture, wearing a horrible black fake-leather jacket, like a comic-strip gangster – what a *koshmar*! – it creaked as he walked. All he needed was a gun.

He greeted me with a grunt. 'Hrr. You heff passport? Peppers?'

His voice was deep and sludgy, with a nasty whiff of cigarette smoke and tooth decay.

This gangster-type should brush his teeth. I fumbled in my bag, and before I could say anything he grabbed my passport and Seasonal Agricultural Worker papers and stowed them in the breast pocket of his *koshmar* jacket.

'I keep for you. Is many bed people in England. Can stealing from you.'

He patted the pocket, and winked. I could see straightaway that there was no point in arguing with a person of this type, so I hoisted my bag onto my shoulder and

Vulk - old style

followed him across the car park to a huge shiny black vehicle that looked like a cross between a tank and a Zill, with darkened windows and gleaming chrome bars at the front – a typical mafia-machine. These high-status cars are popular with primitive types and social undesirables. In fact he looked quite like his car: overweight, built like a tank, with a gleaming silver front tooth, a shiny black jacket, and a straggle of hair tied in a ponytail hanging down his back like an exhaust pipe. Ha ha.

He gripped my elbow, which was quite unnecessary – stupid man, did he think I might try to escape? – and pushed me onto the back seat with a shove, which was also unnecessary. Inside, the mafia-machine stank even more of tobacco. I sat in silence looking nonchalantly out of the window while he scrutinised me rudely through the rear-view mirror. What did he think he was staring at? Then he lit up one of those thick vile-smelling cigars – Mother calls them New Russian cigarettes – what a stink! – and started puffing away. Puff. Stink.

I didn't take in the scenery that flashed past through the black-tinted glass – I was too tired – but my body registered every twist in the lane, and the sudden jerks and jolts when he braked and turned. This gangster-type needs some driving lessons.

He had some potato chips wrapped in a paper bundle on the passenger seat beside him, and every now and then he would plunge his left fist in, grab a handful of chips and cram them into his mouth. Grab. Cram.

Chomp. Grab. Cram. Chomp. Not very refined. The chips smelt fantastic, though. The smell of the cigar, the lurching motion as he steered with one hand and stuffed his mouth with the other, the low dragging pain from my period – it was all making me feel queasy and hungry at the same time. In the end, hunger won out. I wondered what language this gangster-type would talk. Belarusian? He looked too dark for a Belarus. Ukrainian? He didn't look Ukrainian. Maybe from somewhere out east? Chechnya? Georgia? What do Georgians look like? The Balkans? Taking a guess, I asked in Russian, 'Please, Mister Vulk, may I have something to eat?'

He looked up. Our eyes met in the rear-view mirror. He had real gangster-type eyes – poisonous black berries in eyebrows as straggly as an overgrown hedge. He studied me in that offensive way, sliding his eyes all over me.

'Little flovver wants eating?' He spoke in English, though he must have understood my Russian. Probably he came from one of those newly independent nations of the former Soviet Union where everyone can speak Russian but nobody does. OK, so he wanted to talk English? I'd show him.

'Yes indeed, Mister Vulk. If you could oblige me, if it does not inconvenience you, I would appreciate something to eat.'

'No problema, little flovver!'

He helped himself to one more mouthful of chips – grab, cram, chomp – then scrunched up the remnants in the oily paper and passed them over the back of the seat. As I reached forward to take them, I saw something else

nestled down on the seat beneath where the chips had been. Something small, black and scary. *Shcho to!* Was that a real gun?

My heart started hammering. What did he need a gun for? *Mamma, Pappa, help me!* OK, just pretend not to notice. Maybe it's not loaded. Maybe it's just one of those cigar lighters. So I unfolded the crumpled paper – it was like a snug, greasy nest. The chips inside were fat, soft and still warm. There were only about six left, and some scraps. I savoured them one at a time. They were lightly salty, with a touch of vinegar, and they were just – mmm! – indescribably delicious. The fat clung to the edges of my lips and hardened on my fingers, so I had no choice but to lick it off, but I tried to do it discreetly.

'Thank you,' I said politely, for rudeness is a sign of minimum culture.

'No problema. No problema.' He waved his fist about as if to show how generous he was. 'Food for eat in transit. All vill be add to your living expense.'

Living expense? I didn't need any more nasty surprises. I studied his back, the creaky stretched-at-the-seams jacket, the ragged ponytail, the thick yellowish neck, the flecks of dandruff on the fake-leather collar. I was starting to feel queasy again.

'What is this, expense?'

'Expense. Expense. Foods. Transports. Accommodations.' He took both hands off the steering wheel and waved them in the air. 'Life in vest is too much expensive, little flovver. Who you think vill be pay for all such luxury?'

Although his English was appalling, those words came rolling out like a prepared speech. 'You think this vill be providing all for free?'

So Mother had been right. 'Anybody can see this agency is run by crooks. Anybody but you, Irina.' (See how Mother has this annoying habit of putting me down?) 'And if you tell them lies, Irina, if you pretend to be student of agriculture when you are nothing of the sort, who will help you if something goes wrong?'

Then she went on in her hysterical way about all the things that go wrong for Ukrainian girls who go West – all those rumours and stories in the papers.

'But everyone knows these things only happened to stupid and uneducated girls, Mother. They're not going to happen to me.'

'If you will please say me what are the expenses, I will try to meet them.'

I kept my voice civilised and polite. The chrome-bar tooth gleamed.

'Little flovver, the expense vill be first to pay, and then you vill be pay. Nothing to be discuss. No problema.'

'And you will give me back my passport?'

'Exact. You verk, you get passport. You no verk, you no passport. Someone mekka visit in you mamma in Kiev, say Irina no good verk, is mek big problem for her.'

'I have heard that in England . . .'

'England is a change, little flovver. Now England is land of possibility. England is not like in you school book.'

I thought of dashing Mr Brown from *Let's Talk English* – if only he were here!

'You have an excellent command of English. And of Russian maybe?'

'English. Russian. Serbo-Croat. German. All languages.'

So he sees himself as a linguist; OK, keep him talking.

'You are not a native of these shores, I think, Mister Vulk?'

'Think everything vat you like, little flovver.' He gave me a leery wink in the mirror, and a flash of silver tooth. Then he started tossing his head from side to side as if to shake-out his dandruff.

'This, you like? Is voman attract?'

It took me a moment to realise he was referring to his ponytail. Was this his idea of flirtation? On the scale of attractiveness, I would give him zero. For a person of minimum culture he certainly had some pretensions. What a pity Mother wasn't here to put him right.

'It is absolutely irresistible, Mister Vulk.'

'You like? Eh, little flovver? You vant touch?'

The ponytail jumped up and down. I held my breath.

'Go on. Hrr. You can touch him. Go on,' he said with horrible oily enthusiasm.

I reached out my hand, which was still greasy and smelt of chips.

'Go on. Is pleasure for you.'

I touched it – it felt like a rat's tail. Then he flicked his head, and it twitched beneath my fingers like a live rat.

'I heff hear that voman is cannot resisting such a hair it reminding her of men's oggan.'

What on earth was he talking about now?

'Oggan?'

He made a crude gesture with his fingers.

'Be not afraid, little flovver. It reminding you of boy-friend. Hah?'

'No, Mister Vulk, because I do not have a boyfriend.'

I knew straightaway it was the wrong thing to say, but it was too late. The words just slipped out, and I couldn't bring them back.

'Not boyfriend? How is this little flovver not boy-friend?' His voice was like warm chip fat. 'Hrr. Maybe in this case is good possibility for me?'

That was a stupid mistake. He's got you now. You're cornered.

'Is perhaps sometime we make good possibility, eh?' He breathed cigar smoke and tooth decay. 'Little flovver?'

Through the darkened glass, I could see woodland flashing past, all sunlight and dappled leaves. If only I could throw myself out of the vehicle, roll down the grassy bank and run into the trees. But we were going too fast. I shut my eyes and pretended to be asleep.

We drove on in silence for maybe twenty minutes. Vulk lit another cigar. I watched him through my lowered lashes, puffing away hunched over the wheel. Puff. Stink. Puff. Stink. How much further could it be? Then there was a crunching of gravel under the wheels, and with one last violent lurch the mafia-machine came to a halt. I opened my eyes. We had pulled up in front of a pretty steep-roofed farmhouse set behind a summery garden

where there were chairs and tables set out on the lawn that sloped down to a shallow glassy river. Just like England is supposed to be. Now at last, I thought, there will be normal people; they will talk to me in English; they will give me tea.

But they didn't. Instead, a podgy red-faced man wearing dirty clothes and rubber boots came out of the house – the farmer, I guessed – and he helped me down from Vulk's vehicle, mumbling something I couldn't understand, but it was obviously not an invitation to tea. He looked me up and down in that same rude way, as though I was a horse he'd just bought. Then he and Vulk muttered to each other, too fast for me to follow, and exchanged envelopes.

'Bye-bye, little flovver,' Vulk said, with that chip-fat smile. 'Ve meet again. Maybe ve mekka possibility?'

'Maybe.'

I knew it was the wrong thing to say, but by then I was just desperate to get away.

The farmer shoved my bag into his Land Rover and then he shoved me in too, giving my behind a good feel with his hand as he did so, which was quite unnecessary. He only had to ask and I would have got in myself.

'I'll take you straight out to the field,' he said, as we rattled along narrow winding lanes. 'You can start picking this afternoon.'

After some five kilometres, the Land Rover swung in through the gate, and I felt a rush of relief as at last I

planted my feet on firm ground. The first thing I noticed was the light – the dazzling salty light dancing on the sunny field, the ripening strawberries, the little rounded caravan perched up on the hill and the oblong boxy caravan down in the corner, the woods beyond, and the long curving horizon, and I smiled to myself. So this is England.

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The men's caravan is a static model, a battered old fibreglass box parked at the bottom of the field by the gate, close to a new prefab building where the strawberries are crated and weighed each day. Stuck onto one corner of the prefab is the toilet and shower room – though the shower doesn't work and the toilet is locked at night. Why is it locked? wonders Andriy. What is the problem with using the toilet at night?

He has woken early with a full bladder and an unspecific feeling of dissatisfaction with himself, his caravan mates, and caravan life in general. Why is it, for example, that although the men's caravan is bigger, it still feels more cramped than the women's caravan? It has two rooms – one for sleeping and one for sitting – but Tomasz has the double bed in the sleeping room all to himself and three of them are sleeping in the sitting room. How has this happened? Andriy has one of the seat-beds and Vitaly has the other. Emanuel has made himself a hammock from an old sheet and blue bale-twine, skilfully twisted and knotted, and slung it across the sitting room from corner to corner – he is lying there breathing deeply

with his eyes closed and a cherubic smile on his round brown face.

Andriy recalls Emanuel's look of astonishment and horror when the farmer suggested he should share the double bed with Tomasz.

'Sir, we have a proverb in Chichewa. One nostril is too small for two fingers.'

Afterwards, he took Andriy to one side and whispered, 'In my country homosexualisation is forbidden.'

'Is OK,' Andriy whispered back. 'No homosex, only bad stink.'

Yes, Tomasz's trainers are another insult – their stink fills the caravan. It is worst at night when the trainers are off his feet and stowed beneath the bed. The fumes rise, noxious and clinging, and dissipate like bad dreams, seeping through the curtain that divides the sleeping from the sitting room, hovering below the ceiling like an evil spirit. Sometimes, in the night, Emanuel rolls silently out of his hammock and places the trainers outside on the step.

Another thing – why are there no pictures on the walls in the men's caravan? Vitaly keeps a picture of Jordan under his bed, which he says he will stick up when he finds something to stick it with. He also keeps a secret stash of canned lager and a pair of binoculars. Tomasz keeps a guitar and a pair of Yola's knickers under his bed. Emanuel keeps a bag full of crumpled papers.

But the worst thing is that because of the slope, and the way their caravan is positioned, you can only get a view of the women's caravan from the window above Tomasz's bed. Should he ask Tomasz to move over so he can take a look, and see whether that girl is still around? No. They'd only make stupid remarks.

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In the women's caravan they have been up since dawn. Yola has learnt from experience that it is better to rise early if they don't want the Dumpling knocking on the door and inviting himself in while they are getting dressed, hanging around watching them with those hungry-dog eyes – doesn't he have anything better to do?

Irina and the Chinese girls have to get up first and fold away the double bed before there is room for anyone to move. They cannot use the lavatory and washroom until the Dumpling arrives with the key to the prefab – what does he think they're going to do? Unroll the toilet rolls at night? – but there is a handy gap in the hedge only a few metres away, though Yola cannot for the life of her understand why there always seem to be faces grinning at the window of the other caravan whenever any of the women takes a nip behind the hedge, don't they have anything better to do down there?

There is a cold water tap and washing bowl at the side of the women's caravan, and even a shower made from a bucket with holes in the bottom, fed from a black-painted oil drum stuck up in a tree. In the evening, after

it has been in the sun all day, the water is pleasantly warm. That nice-looking boy Andriy, who is quite a gallant despite being Ukrainian, has erected a screen of birch poles and plastic sacks around it, disregarding the protests of Vitaly and Tomasz, who complained that he spoiled their innocent entertainment – really those two are worse than the children at nursery school, what they need is a good smacking – and now they can no longer see the shower, they spend all their time making comments about the items on the women's washing line. Recently a pair of her knickers has disappeared in mysterious circumstances. Yola cannot for the life of her understand how grown men can be such fools. Well, in fact, she can.

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It was Tomasz who stole the knickers, in a moment of drunken frivolity one night last week. They are of white cotton, generously cut, with a pretty mauve ribbon at the front. He has been looking out ever since for the right moment to return them discreetly without being caught – he wouldn't want anyone to think he is the sort of man who steals women's underwear from washing lines and keeps it under his bed.

'I see Yola has washed her undies again today,' he says morosely in Polish, peering through Vitaly's binoculars from the window above his bed. 'I wonder what is the meaning of this.'

The white knickers dangle in the air like a provocation. When Yola recruited him to her strawberry-picking team,

there had been a twinkle about her that had seemed to suggest she was inviting him to . . . well, more than just to pick strawberries.

'What do you mean, *what is the meaning?*' asks Vitaly in Russian, mimicking Tomasz's Polish accent. 'Most of what women do is completely meaningless.'

Vitaly is vague about his origins and Tomasz has never pressed him, assuming he is some kind of illegal or gipsy. Despite himself, he is impressed by the way Vitaly can slip easily between Russian, Polish and Ukrainian. Even his English is quite good. But what use are all those languages, if you have no poetry in your soul?

'In the poetry of women's undergarments, there is always meaning. Like the blossoms that fall from a tree as the heat of summer approaches . . . Like clouds which melt away . . .'

He can feel a song coming on.

'Enough,' says Vitaly. 'The Angliskis would call you a soiled old man.'

'I am not old,' protests Tomasz.

In fact he has just turned forty-five. On his birthday he looked in the mirror and found two more grey hairs on his head, which he at once pulled out. No wonder his hair is beginning to look thin. Soon, he will have to surrender to the greyness, to cut his hair short, put away his guitar, exchange his dreams for compromises, and start worrying about his pension. What has happened to his life? It is just slipping away, like sand through an hourglass, like a mountain washed to the sea.

'Tell me, Vitaly, how has life turned you into a cynic at such a young age?'

Vitaly shrugs. 'Maybe I was not born to be a loser, like you, Tomek.'

'Maybe there is still time enough for you.'

How can he explain to this impatient young man what it has taken him forty-five years to learn – that loss is an essential part of the human condition? That even as we are moving on down that long lonesome road, destination unknown, there is always something we are leaving behind us. He has been trying all morning to compose a song about it.

Putting down the binoculars, he reaches for his guitar, and begins to strum, tapping his feet in time to the rhythm.

*'There once was a man, who roamed the world o'er.
Was he seeking for riches, or glory, or power?
Was he seeking for meaning, or truth or . . .'*

This is where he gets stuck. What else is that wretched man seeking?

Vitaly gives him a pitying look.

'Obviously he is looking for someone to fuck.'

He picks up the binoculars, turns the knob for focus and gives a soft whistle between his teeth.

'Hey, black man,' he calls to Emanuel in English, 'come and see. Look, it's just like the little panties that Jordan is wearing in my poster. Or maybe . . .' – he adjusts the binoculars again – '. . . maybe it is one of those string nets they use to package salami.'

Emanuel is sitting at the table, chewing a pencil for inspiration as he composes a letter.

'Leave him, leave him,' says Tomasz. 'Emanuel is not like you. He is . . .' He strums a couple of chords on his guitar as he searches for the right phrase. 'In this box of fibreglass, he is searching for a gem.'

'Another loser,' snorts Vitaly.

*

Dear Sister

Thank you for the money you sent for with its help I have now journeyed from Zomba to Lilongwe and so on via Nairobi into England. I hope these words will receive you for when I came to the address you gave in London a different name was written at the door and nobody knew of your whereabouts. So being needful of money I came into the way of strawberry-picking and I am staying in a caravan with three mzungus here in Kent. I am striving with all my might to improve my English but this English tongue is like a coilsome and slippery serpent and I am always trying to remember the lessons of Sister Benedicta and her harsh staff of chastisement. So I write hopefully that you will come there and find these letters and unleash your corrections upon them dear sister. And so I will inform you regularly of my adventures within this rainstruck land.

From your beloved brother Emanuel!

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The women's caravan is already in sunshine, but the sun hasn't yet reached the bottom of the field, where Andriy

is standing at the kitchen end of the men's caravan, trying to light the gas to make some tea. The coarse banter from the sleeping room irritates him, and he doesn't want the other three to notice the agitation that has come over him since yesterday. He lights another match. It flares and burns his fingers before the gas will catch. Devil's bum! That girl, that new Ukrainian girl – when their eyes met, did she smile at him in a particular way?

He replays the scene like a movie in his head. It is this time yesterday. Farmer Leapish arrives as usual in his Land Rover with the breakfast food, the trays of empty punnets for the strawberries and the key to the prefab. Then someone steps out of the passenger door of the Land Rover, a pretty girl with a long plait of dark hair down her back, and brown eyes full of sparkle. And that smile. She steps into the field, looking around this way and that. He is there standing by the gate, and she turns his way and smiles. But is it for him, that smile? That's what he wants to know.

He made a point of sitting next to her at dinner.

'Hi. Ukrainka?'

'Of course.'

'Me too.'

'I can see.'

'What's your name?'

'Irina.'

He waited for her to ask – 'And yours?' – but she didn't.

'Andriy.'

He waited for her to say something, but she didn't.

'From Kiev?' he continued.

'Of course.'

'Donetsk.'

'Ah, Donetsk. Coalminers.'

Did he detect a hint of condescension in her voice?

'You been to Donetsk?'

'Never.'

'I came to Kiev.'

'Oh yes?'

'In December. When demonstrations were going on.'

'You came for demonstrations?' A definite condescending lilt.

'I came to demonstrate against demonstrations.'

'Ah. Of course.'

'Maybe I saw you then. You were there?'

'Of course. In Maidan Square.'

'In demonstration?'

'Of course. It was our Orange Freedom Revolution.'

'I was with the other side. White and blue.'

'The losing side.'

She smiled again. A flash of white teeth, that's all there was to it. He tries to picture the face, but he can't get it into focus. No, there was more to it than teeth; there was a crinkling round the nose and eyes, a little lift of the eyebrows and two infuriating dimples winking below the cheeks. Those dimples – he can't get them out of his mind. Was it just a smile, or did it *mean* something?

And if it *means* something, does it mean I've got a good possibility here? A good possibility of a man-woman

possibility? Should I take things further? Or should I just play cool? A girl like that – she’s too used to men running after her. Wait for her to show the first card. But what if she’s shy – what if she needs bit of help with that first card? Sometimes a man must act to bring about a possibility.

But then again, isn’t this wrong time and place, Andriy Palenko, to be involving yourself with another Ukrainian girl? What about the blond-haired *Angliska rosa* you came all this way to England for, the pretty blue-eyed girl who is waiting for you, though she doesn’t know it yet herself, packed with high-spec features: skin like smetana, pink-tipped Angliski breasts, golden underarm hair like duckling down, etc. And a rich Pappa, who at first may not be too happy about his daughter’s choice, because he wants her to marry a banker in a bowler hat like Mr Brown – what father would not? – but when he gets to know you will soften his heart and welcome you into his luxurious en-suite-bathroom house. For sure, he will find a little nice job for his Ukrainian son-in-law. Maybe even a nice car . . . Mercedes. Porsche. Ferrari. Etc.

Yes, this new Ukrainian girl has some positive features: nice looking, nice smile, nice dimples, nice figure, nicely rounded, plenty to get hold of, not too thin, like those stylish city girls who starve themselves into Western-type matchsticks. But she’s only another Ukrainian girl – plenty of those where you came from. And besides, she’s a bit snobbish. She thinks she’s better than you. She thinks she’s a high-culture type with a superior

mentality, and you’re a low-culture type. (And so what if you are? Is that something to be ashamed of?) You can tell by the way she talks, being so stingy with her words, as if it’s money she’s counting out. And the ridiculous plait, like that crow Julia Timoshenko, fake-traditional-Ukrainian. Tied with an orange ribbon. She thinks she’s better than you because she’s from Kiev and you’re from Donbas. She thinks she’s better than you because your dad’s a miner – a dead miner, at that.

Poor Dad. Not the life for a dog let alone a man. Underground. Down below the mushrooms. Down with the legions of ghost-miners, all huddled up in the dark, singing their eerie dead-men’s songs. No, he can’t go down there any more, even if it’s the only way he knows how to live, how to put bread on the table. He’ll have to find another way. What would his father have wanted him to do? It’s hard enough living up to your parents’ expectations when you know what they expect. But all Andriy’s father ever said to him was, ‘Be a man.’ What is that supposed to mean?

When the pit-prop gave way and the roof fell in, Andriy was on one side of the fall and his father was on the other. He was on the living side; his father was on the side of the dead. He heard the roar, and he ran towards the light. He ran and ran. He is still running.

*

I AM DOG I RUN I RUN FROM BAD MAN CAGE I
HEAR DOGS BARK ANGRY DOGS GROWL ANGRY

DOGS BARK THEY WILL FIGHT THEY WILL KILL I
SMELL DOG-SWEAT MAN-RAGE MAN OPENS CAGE
MAN PULLS COLLAR MEN SIT SMOKE TALK DOGS
BARKLIGHT TOO BRIGHT BIG ANGRY DOG SNARLS
SHOWS TEETH HAIRS BRISTLE ON HIS BACK
HE WILL KILL I AM NOT FIGHTING DOG I AM
RUNNING DOG I JUMP I RUN I RUN TWO DAYS I
EAT NO MEAT HUNGER PAINS IN BELLY MAKE ME
MAD I FEEL HUNGER I FEEL FEAR I RUN I RUN
I AM DOG

*

The women's caravan was small, but so cosy. I fell in love with it straightaway. I put my bag down and introduced myself.

'Irina. From Kiev.'

OK, there was some unpleasantness upon my arrival. Yola, the Polish supervisor, who is a coarse and uneducated person with an elevated view of her own importance, said some harsh words about Ukrainians for which she has yet to apologise. OK, I was a bit dismayed at the overcrowded conditions, and I may have been a bit tactless. But then the Chinese girls very kindly told me I could share their bed. I wished I hadn't finished the poppy-seed cake, for a small gift can go a long way in these circumstances, but I still had a bottle of home-made cherry vodka for emergencies, and what was this if not an emergency? Soon, we were all firm friends.

We ate our dinner sitting out on the hillside all together, drinking the rest of the vodka and watching the sun set. I

was pleased to discover there's another Ukrainian here – a nice though rather primitive miner from Donetsk. We chatted in Ukrainian over dinner. Poles and Ukrainians can understand each other's language, too, though it's not the same. But of course I have come to England mainly to improve my English before I start my university course, so I hope I will soon meet more English people.

English was my favourite subject at school, and I had pictured myself walking through a panorama of cultivated conversations, like a painted landscape dotted with intriguing homonyms and mysterious subjunctives: *would you were wooed in the wood*. Miss Tyldesley was my favourite teacher. She even made English grammar seem sexy, and when she recited Byron she would close her eyes and breathe in deeply through her nose, trembling in a sort of virginal ecstasy, as though she could smell his pheromones wafting off the page. Please, control yourself, Miss Tyldesley! As you can imagine, I couldn't wait to come to England. Now, I thought, my life will really begin.

After dinner I went back to the caravan and unpacked my bag. On a patch of wall below the head-level locker I stuck my picture of Mother and Pappa, standing together in front of the fireplace at home. Mother is wearing pink lipstick and a ghastly pink scarf tied in what she thinks is a stylish bow; Pappa is wearing his ridiculous orange tie. OK, so they wear terrible clothes, but they can't help it, and I still love them. Pappa's arm is around Mother's shoulder, and they're smiling in a stiff uncertain way, like people whose hearts aren't in it, who are just

posing for the camera. I looked at it while I drifted off to sleep, and a few pathetic tears came into my eyes. Mother and Pappa waiting for me at home – what's so weepy about that?

Next morning, when I woke up, the caravan was flooded with sunlight and everything seemed different. The gloomy thoughts and fears of yesterday had fled like ghosts into the night. When I went out to the tap to have a wash, the water splashing on the stones caught the sunbeams and broke them into hundreds of brilliant rainbows which danced through my fingers, cold and tingly. In the copse behind me, a thrush was singing.

As I bent towards the tap, the orange ribbon slipped off my plait, swirling in the water. For a moment I remembered the orange balloons and banners in the square, the tents and music, and my parents, so excited, gabbling like teenagers about freedom and other such stuff. And I did feel a stab of sadness. Then I picked up the wet ribbon, shook it out, and hung it over the washing line. As I looked down over the valley, my heart started to dance again. I took a deep breath. This air – so sweet, so English. This was the air I'd dreamed of breathing; loaded with history, yet as light as . . . well, as light as something very light. How had I lived for nineteen years without breathing this air? And all the cultured, brave, warm-hearted people that I'd read about in Chaucer, Shakespeare, Dickens (OK, I admit, mostly in translation). I was ready to meet them.

In fact I was particularly looking forward to meeting a gentleman in a bowler hat like Mr Brown in my *Let's Talk English* book, who looks supremely dashing and romantic, with his tight suit and rolled-up umbrella, and especially the intriguing bulge in his trouser-zip area, which was drawn very realistically in black ink by a previous owner of that textbook. Who wouldn't want to talk English with him?! Lord Byron looks romantic, too, despite that bizarre turban.

English men are supposed to be incredibly romantic. There's a famous folk-legend of a man who braves death and climbs in through his lady's bedroom window just to bring her a box of chocolates. Unfortunately, the only Englishman I have met so far is farmer Leapish, who doesn't seem to fit into this category. I hope he is not typical.

Please don't think I'm one of those awful Ukrainian girls who come to England only to ensnare a husband. I'm not. But if love should happen to come my way, OK, my heart is open and ready.

*

The kettle starts to whistle. Andriy pours the water onto the teabag, adds two spoonfuls of sugar, and cradling the hot cup in his hands, he wanders down to the gate, where he sometimes stands when he has an idle moment, observing the passing cars and looking out for his *Angliska rosa*. Leaning on his elbows, he drinks slowly, enjoying the heat in his throat, the cool breeze

blowing up the Downs, and the noisy chatter of birds doing their early morning stuff. The sun has come up over the hill and although it isn't yet eight o'clock, he can already feel its warmth on his skin. The light is as sharp as crystal, marking out the landscape with hard crisp shadows.

He likes to come down here, to look out at this England which, despite being just beyond the gate, still seems tantalisingly out of reach. Where are you, *Let's Talk English* Mrs Brown, with your tiny waist and tailored spotted blouse? Where are you, *Vagvaga Riskegipd*, with your bubblegum and ferocious kisses? Since he came to England two weeks ago he hasn't met a single *Angliska rosa*. He has seen them drive past, so he knows they exist. Sometimes he waves, and once one of them even waved back. And yes, she was blonde, and yes, she was driving a red open-top Ferrari. She was gone in the twinkling of an eye, before he could even vault over the gate to see the rear spoiler disappear round the bend in the lane. But for sure she lives somewhere nearby, so it is only a matter of time before she reappears. OK, so his last girlfriend Lida Zakanovka went off with a footballer. Good luck to her. There are better women waiting for him over here in England.

He blows on the hot tea to cool it down, and thinks about his last visit to England. How long ago was that? It was about eighteen years, so he must have been seven years old. He was accompanying his father on a fraternal delegation to visit the mineworkers' union in the city

of Sheffield, which is twinned with his home town, Donetsk. Learn, boy, his father had said. Learn about the beauty of international solidarity. Though it didn't do him much good when he needed it. Poor Dad.

He doesn't remember much about Sheffield, but three things stand out in his memory from that visit. First, he recalls, there was a banquet, and a sticky pink dessert, of which he ate so much that he was later horribly, messily, pinkily sick in the back of a car.

Second, he remembers that the renowned visionary ruler of the city, who had welcomed them warmly with a long-long speech about solidarity and the dignity of labour (the speech had so impressed his father that he repeated it many times over), who had sat next to them at the banquet and kindly pressed more and more of that treacherous pink dessert on him, and in the back of whose car he had later been sick – this man was blind. The man's astonishing blindness, the fearsome all-excluding wall bricked up behind his visionary eyes, had fascinated Andriy. He had closed his eyes tight and tried to imagine what it would be like to live behind that wall of blindness; he went around bumping into things, until his father slapped him and told him to behave himself.

The other thing he remembers is his first kiss. The girl – she must have been a daughter of one of the delegates – was older and bolder than him, a long-legged girl with white-blond hair and a sprinkle of freckles on her nose. She smelt of soap and bubblegum. While the fraternal

speeches droned on and on in the hall, the two of them had played a wild game of chase along the echoing corridors of the vast civic building, racing up and down stairs, dodging in doorways, shrieking with excitement. She had pounced on him at last and wrestled him down on the stone stairs, pinning him to the ground, pressing her strong body on top of him. They were both out of breath, panting and laughing. Suddenly she had swooped down on him with her lips and kissed him – a wet, insistent kiss, her tongue pushing against his mouth. It was a kiss of subjugation. He'd been too young and too astonished to do anything but surrender. Then she'd given him a bit of paper with her name scrawled on it, the 'T's dotted with little hearts. Vagvaga Riskegipd. An incredibly sexy name. And a telephone number. He still has it, tucked into the back of his wallet like a talisman. At school, when the other boys chose to study Russian language or German, he chose English.

He tries to conjure up her face. Fair hair. Freckles. The smell of bubblegum is vivid in his memory. An incredibly sexy smell. Does she still remember him? What does she look like now? She would be in her early thirties. What would she do if he suddenly appeared on her doorstep?

They say Angliski women are incredibly sexy. According to Vitaly, who knows these things, Angliski women are as cold as ice to touch, but once they start to melt – once the passion heats them and they melt inside – it's just like a river bursting its banks. There's no stopping these Vagvaga women; these Mrs Brown women. A man has

to keep a cool head or he could drown in the torrent of their passion. But getting them to melting point – there's a real skill in that, says Vitaly. The Angliska woman is attracted to dashing men of action, men who are bold enough to make hazardous journeys and climb in through bedroom windows bearing boxes of chocolates, etc. This type of behaviour melts the Angliska woman's icy heart. Will strawberries be OK as a substitute for chocolates? For all other acts in this drama he's prepared. He's ready for anything. He feels the life-blood pulsing through his body, and he wants to live – to live more sweetly, more intensely.

'Be a man,' his father had said.

*

One of the annoying things about my mother is the way she always classifies people according to their level of culture. It's as if she carries a perfectly defined hierarchy of culture in her head.

'It doesn't cost anything to be cultured, Irina,' she says, 'which is just as well, because if it did, teachers would be among the least cultured people in Ukraine.'

The worst thing is, I seem to have picked up her habit, even though I know you shouldn't judge people by appearances, but sometimes you can't help it. Take us strawberry-pickers, for example.

Although they are Chinese, the Chinese girls are definitely cultured types. One is a student of medicine and one is a student of accountancy. I can't remember which is which, but medicine is more cultured than

accountancy. The Chinese Chinese girl has her hair cut short like a boy's, and she's quite pretty, but her legs are too thin. The Malaysian Chinese girl is also pretty, but she has a perm, which looks stupid on that type of hair. Maybe it's the other way round. They are friendly towards me, but they talk and giggle together all the time, which is annoying when you don't know what they're giggling about. Their English is terrible.

Next come Tomasz, Marta and Emanuel. Tomasz is some kind of boring government bureaucrat, though he has taken leave of absence from his job because he says he can earn more money picking strawberries – stupid, isn't it? He claims to be a poet, which of course is extremely cultured, though there is little evidence of this, unless you count those dreary songs he sings whenever Yola is around. And besides he is quite ancient, he must be in his forties, and he has a pathetic little beard and hair almost down to his shoulders like a hippy. *Koshmar!* And there's a dire smell about him.

Marta is educated, and she even speaks a bit of French, but that Roman Catholic-type education is full of rules and mysteries and lacking practical content – like Western Ukrainians. Anyway, Mother says that Catholic is less cultured than Orthodox. Marta is nice and friendly, but she has a big nose. Probably that is why she's still unmarried at the age of thirty.

Emanuel is adorable, but he is not quite eighteen and also a Catholic, though he appears to be an intelligent

type, and he wears a horrible green anorak even when it's not raining. Of course he is black, but this does not make him any less cultured, because as any cultured person knows, black people are just as cultured as anybody else. He often sings as he picks strawberries in the field, and he has a beautiful voice, but he only sings religious songs. It would be nice if he sang something more amusing.

Vitaly is mysterious. He never gives you a straight answer. Sometimes he disappears, no one knows where. He is clearly intelligent because he speaks good English and several other languages, but his manner is rather coarse and he wears a gold chain with a silver penknife dangling round his neck. His eyes are dark and twinkly with cute curly eyelashes, and his hair is black and curly. In fact he is not bad-looking in a flashy curly sort of way. I would give him seven out of ten. Though he is not my type. Maybe he is a gipsy.

Near the bottom is Ciocia Yola (strictly speaking she is only Marta's aunt, but we all call her Ciocia). She is a vulgar person with a gap between her front teeth and obviously dyed hair. (My mother's hair is dyed too, but it's not so obvious.) She claims she was once a nursery school teacher, which is not a proper teacher at all, and she also claims to be the supervisor, and puts on airs which are unwarranted and extremely irritating. She likes to sound off about her opinions, which are generally not worth listening to.

Right at the bottom is Andriy, the miner's son from Donbas. Unfortunately miners are generally primitive types who find it difficult to be cultured, however hard they try. When he works in the field I can smell his sweat. He takes his shirt off when it gets too hot and shows off his muscles. OK, they may even ripple a bit. But he is definitely not my type.

As for me, I'm nineteen, and everything else about me is still to-be. Fluent English-speaker to-be. I hope. Romantically-in-love to-be. Are you ready, Mr Brown? World-famous writer to-be, like my Pappa. I have already started to think about the book I will write when I get back home. But you have to have something interesting to write about, don't you? More interesting than a bunch of strawberry-pickers living in two caravans.

*

Yola's eyes narrow as she watches the Ukrainian girl wander along the strawberry rows as if she had all the time in the world to fill those punnets. Out in the strawberry field it's the hierarchy of the check-in that matters. Several times a day, the farmer counts the trays of punnets, checks them in, stacks them on pallets in the prefab, and notes down who has earned what. The women generally earn less. The men earn more. The supervisor of course earns the most.

Yola is both the gang-mistress and the supervisor. As a former teacher, she is a person of natural authority and a woman of action. It is her belief that maintaining a

pleasant sexual harmony within the picking team is the key to success, and for this reason she encourages the men to take their shirts off in the sun.

She doesn't want any griping or unpleasant comments behind her back, especially from those Ukrainians, now there are two of them. Not that she has anything against Ukrainians, but it is her belief that the high point of Ukrainian civilisation was its brief occupation by Poland, though the civilising effects were clearly quite short-lived and superficial. To be fair, this Ukrainian boy Andriy is quite a gentleman as well as a good picker, but he is inclined to moodiness, and he thinks too much. Thinking is not good for a man. He is quite nice-looking, though of course he is much too young for her, and she isn't the type of woman to seduce a boy half her age, though she knows some who are in Zdroj, which she will tell you about later.

Yes, if only there were more good pickers like that. Nobody understands the problems she faces, for her pay depends not just on her own efforts but on the performance of the good-for-nothing team she supervises in the field. She tells them – but will they listen? – to pick strawberries just right. Too white and farmer will reject. Too ripe and shops complain. And you have to handle correctly, and drop gently – don't throw – into punnet. She tells them, and they just carry on exactly the same as before. Really, she is getting too old for this game.

This is her second summer as a supervisor, her seventh summer in England, and the forty-seventh summer of her life. She is beginning to think she has had enough. During those seven summers she has picked almost fifty tonnes of strawberries for the Dumpling, and the income from this, added to the extra sums paid for additional services of a private nature, have allowed her to buy a pretty three-roomed bungalow on the outskirts of Zdroj with half a hectare of garden that leads down to the Prosna River where her son Mirek can potter around to his heart's content. She has a photo in her purse of Mirek in the garden sitting on a rope-swing that hangs from the branch of a cherry tree in full blossom. Ah, those little smiling eyes! When he was born, she had to make a difficult choice – give up her job or put him in an institution. Well, she has seen those institutions, thank you very much. Then someone at the school said they were recruiting strawberry-pickers for England, and her sister said she would look after Mirek for the summer, so she seized the opportunity. And what woman of action but of limited choices would not do the same?

Last autumn she invested some of her strawberry money in a pair of Masurian goats and this year there are two snow-white kids running about in the garden, bleating, jumping over each other, nibbling at the dahlias and generally causing mayhem. She was thinking of those kids as she lay on the straw in the back of the Dumpling's Land Rover last night looking up at the swaying roof, while he toiled and puffed away above her. And she

smiled to herself and let out some delightful bleating noises, which the Dumpling mistook for cries of pleasure.

Usually Yola brings a team of pickers she has recruited locally in Zdroj, for there were always people desperate for a bit of cash since they closed the millinery factory, but this year nobody wants to come, because now Poland is in Europe marketing why should they work for that kind of money when they can earn better money legally? Three friends who were supposed to be coming let her down at the last minute, and she has brought only Marta and Tomasz to England with her. The Dumpling has had to find additional labour through other agents of a more shady character, and has even hinted that he will not renew her contract. Just let him dare – we will see what the wife has to say.

Being a supervisor is not as easy as you think. You have to deal with all types of personality. That Tomasz, for instance, has been hanging around making eyes at her, well, that is in itself not so surprising, as she is generally thought to be an attractive woman, but at the end of the day he has come to England to pick strawberries, not for any activities of a more carnal nature, for which there are plenty enough opportunities back in Poland, Lord help us.

Or take Marta, her niece – her religious airs are enough to put anyone off sainthood.

'Are you OK, Ciocia?' she asked, the first time she

saw Yola lying on the ground with her shapely legs stretched in front of her, breathing deeply with her eyes closed.

'I am letting the sun enter my body to warm me from inside like a good husband. Why don't you do the same, Marta?'

'Why would I want the sun for a husband?' Marta said sniffily. 'I will let the spirit of the Lord warm me from inside.'

Probably her excessive piety is not her fault. She could only have learnt it from her mother, Yola's sister, who although very kind when it comes to looking after Mirek, can be extremely irritating. Well, it's one thing to go to church and ask for forgiveness for your own sins, but quite another thing to rub other people's noses in theirs.

And while we're on the subject of noses, it is of course not Marta's fault that hers is so big, but maybe it is why she has so little discrimination when it comes to men, for she seems to be drawn to the most unsuitable types and obvious sinners, like Vitaly, for example. Yes, Yola has observed the way Marta's eyes follow him about the field, and she doesn't want the poor girl to be taken advantage of. She knows that type of man. She was married to one, once.

As for this new girl, Irina, she is far too free and easy with that dimply smile of hers, and Yola has noticed the way the Dumpling's eyes linger on her longer than is strictly necessary. She picks strawberries that are more white than red, and answers back when Yola politely

draws this to her attention, and sniffs when Yola tries to teach her the correct handling technique, which is like this, you have to cradle them in your palm from below, never more than two at a time, like a man's testicles. Don't squeeze them, Irina!

*

OK, I admit I wasn't the fastest strawberry-picker, but I didn't need that bossy Polish auntie to point it out to me in that vulgar way.

This was my fourth day here, and I still couldn't believe the pain in my back and knees every time I bent down to strawberry level. When I stood and straightened up, my bones creaked and groaned like an old woman's.

The Ukrainian boy would slip fruit into my punnets when the men's rows and the women's rows came together, which was nice of him, but I wished he wouldn't stare at me like that. Once when I sat down for a rest, he came and sat beside me and popped a strawberry in my mouth. Well, I could hardly spit it out, could I? But he'd better not start getting any ideas, because I haven't come all this way to spend my time fending off the advances of a miner from Donbas.

I had enough of it fending off advances from the boys at school. They were generally primitive types who just wanted to grab all the time – not very romantic – and they had no idea whatsoever about tender words and gallant gestures. In my opinion, everyone should read *War and Peace*, which is the most romantic book ever

written, as well as the most tragic. When Natasha and Pierre come together at last, it gives you a feeling inside that is quite fiery in its intensity. That's the sort of love I'm waiting for – not a quick thrash behind the bushes which is what all the boys seem to be interested in.

'Love is like fire,' Mother used to say. 'A treasure, not a toy.' Poor Mother, she is getting very middle-aged. Her mouth would pucker up in a disapproving lipsticky pout when we passed those girls on Kreshchatik wearing skirts that were just a little strip of cloth between their navels and their knickers, laughing with their mouths open as the boys splashed them with beer. Although it is more romantic if a girl saves herself for *the one*, still there was something unsettling, something knowing about those open-mouth smiles. What was it they knew and I didn't? Maybe here in England, away from my mother's prying eyes, I would be able to find out. Watching the ripple of that miner's arms as he lifted the pallets of strawberries got me wondering about all that again. *Just wondering, Mother. Nothing more.*

*

There is a lay-by further up the lane that forks to Sherbury Down, sheltered by a row of poplars, from where you can look down over the field through a gap in the hedge. From this vantage point Mr Leapish the farmer sits in his Land Rover and surveys the rustic scene with satisfaction. The men, he observes, like to race each other along the strawberry rows, while the women are attentive to each other, and don't want anyone to get

left behind. Mr Leapish is mindful of this difference, and has given the men new rows to pick, while the women he assigns to go over the rows that have already been picked by the men. The women earn less, of course, but they are used to that where they come from, and they don't complain. Thus by working with the grain of human nature, he maximises both productivity and yield. He is pleased with his skill as a manager.

Today is Saturday, pay day, and he will have to fork out for their wages later, so his mind is particularly focused on issues of arithmetic. Eight punnets per tray, half a kilo per punnet, eighty kilos per picker per day on average, six days a week, over a twelve-week season. His brain ticks over effortlessly in mental-arithmetic mode. When this field is picked out, they'll move on to another one down in the valley, then back up here again after the plants have re-berried. Pickers are paid 30p a kilo, before deductions. And each kilo sells at £2. Not bad. All in all, it's not a bad little business, though he doesn't make as much as that newcomer Tilley up the road with his acres of polytunnels. He could get more if he sold to the big supermarkets, but he doesn't want the inspectors poking around in his caravans, or asking questions about the relationship between Wendy's business and his business. The beauty of it is that half of what you fork out in wages you can claw back in living expenses. And he's helping these poor souls make a bit of money that they could never get their hands on back where they come from. So that's a bonus.

At one o'clock precisely, he will drive up to the gate and honk the horn and watch the strawberry-pickers pick up their laden trays of punnets and make their way down the field. He should really pick up the trays more often in the warm weather, and get the fruit into the cold store. That's what you have to do to sell at £2.50 a kilo to the big supermarkets. But the local petrol stations that are his outlets don't ask questions.

Maybe the Ukrainian boy will already be down there, waiting to open the gate. Keen. Good picker. Hard worker. Wish they were all like that. This new girl seems a bit of a dead loss, but maybe she'll speed up a bit when she picks up the rhythm. Nice-looking, but not very forthcoming – at his age, he needs someone who knows what she's doing to get the old motor started. Don't know why Vulk sent her – he'd asked for another man. Now Vulk wants her back. Maybe he'll put her to work in another of his little businesses. Well, he'll have to see how she performs at the check-in. If she's useless, he might have to let Vulk take her off his hands.

After the check-in he'll let the poor souls have half an hour for lunch, which he has brought in the back of the Land Rover. As always, it's sliced white bread, margarine and cheese slices. Today he's particularly pleased because he's found a new supplier that sells a white sliced loaf for 19p. He was paying 24p a loaf before. Eight loaves a day – two for breakfast, which they eat with jam, two for lunch, which they have with cheese slices, and four for dinner which they eat with sausages – over several

weeks – it all adds up. The new girl is small, and he reckons she won't eat much, so he hasn't deemed it necessary to increase the provisions, except for an extra loaf of bread. This feeding regime, he has calculated, provides a perfectly balanced diet at minimum cost, with carbohydrate, protein, sugars and fats, all the essential energy-giving nutrients they need. The fruit-and-vegetable requirement is present in the strawberries, which they eat naturally during the course of the day, and which also help to keep them regular. Some farmers let their workers buy their own food, and don't let them eat the strawberries, but Leapish reckons his system is more cost-effective. They soon get sick of the strawberries. Yes, even with the commission he pays Vulk for living expenses, he reckons he can still make on it.

Each worker pays £49 per week for food, including tea, milk, sugar and as many strawberries as they can eat (where else could you live like a lord for less than fifty quid a week?), and £50 per week rental for their caravan bunk, which in this part of the country and at the height of the summer holiday season is extremely reasonable. In fact maybe too reasonable. Maybe he should be charging £55. At least, in the men's caravan. The women's caravan, admittedly, is rather small. But it has a special place in his heart.

He looks at it, perched there at the top of the field like a fat white hen, and his eyes go a bit misty. This is the caravan that he and Wendy went off in for their honeymoon, more than twenty years ago – a Swift Silhouette,

latest model, with bags of storage space, built-in furniture and fully equipped kitchenette complete with two neat gas rings, a miniature stainless-steel sink and drainer with a lift-off worktop, and a compact gas-powered fridge – how Wendy had loved it. That caravan park above the cliffs at Beachy Head. Spaghetti bolognese. A bottle of Piat d'Or. They had certainly given that fold-out double bed some hammer.

When they had gone into the strawberry business, seven years ago, Wendy had been in charge of the caravans. She had set up a separate company to provide the accommodation, food and transport for the pickers – that's how you get round the red tape that restricts how much you can deduct from wages. This is what's crippling the country, in his humble opinion – red tape – as though making a profit is a dirty word – he has twice written to the *Kent Gazette* about it. Yes, it had been more than a marriage, it had been a real partnership. Of course things were different now. Pity, really, but women are like that. Jealous bitches. Anyway, not his fault. What man wouldn't do the same? No point in being sentimental about it. Yes, it was a good size for two people, could fit four at a pinch. Five? Well, they'd managed all right, hadn't they? But the men's caravan – it's a static Everglade in pale green, the sort you can hire ready-sited in scores of windswept caravan parks on cliff tops overlooking the English Channel – that had once been an abode of great luxury, with ruched pink satin curtains and quilted velvet seats, now admittedly more brown

than pink, and propped up on bricks since one of the wheels had gone missing. Probably those New Zealand sheep-shearers, though heaven only knows what they wanted a spare caravan wheel for. Acres of room in it. An extra £5 each – that would bring in £20 per week. He needn't tell Vulk. And that would be £20 a week nearer to achieving his dream.

Yes, although Mr Leapish is a practical man, he too has a dream. His dream is to cover this whole sweet south-sloping sun-bathed strawberry hillside with polytunnels.

*

At six o'clock the shadows were lengthening across the field. When the horn of the Land Rover sounded again down by the gate, I picked up my tray of strawberry punnets and carried it down to the prefab.

'How many you got, Irina?' asked Ciocia Yola, sticking her nose into my tray. OK, I admit I had only filled twelve trays all day. Marta had filled nineteen. Yola and the Chinese girls had filled twenty-five each – you should see the way they go at those berries. Anyway, they're smaller than me, and they don't have to bend so far. The men had filled fifteen trays each that afternoon, and another fifteen in the morning. Each tray carries about four kilos of strawberries. I could see the farmer was annoyed. His face was red and lumpy like a strawberry. Or maybe, according to Yola, like a testicle. Anyway, I kept my face absolutely expressionless as he told me that today I'd earned £14, barely enough to cover my

expenses, and I was going to have to do better. He spoke slowly and very loudly, as though I was deaf as well as stupid, waving his hands about.

'NO GOOD. NO BLOODY GOOD. YOU'VE GOT TO PICK FASTER. ALL FILL UP. FULL. FULL.' He swept his arms wide, as if to embrace all his pathetic punnets. 'DO YOU UNDERSTAND?'

No, I didn't understand – the shouting was flustering me.

'OTHERWISE YOU'RE DOWN THE ROAD.'

'Road?'

'ROAD. DOWN THE BLOODY ROAD. YOU GET IT?'

'I get blood on road?'

'NO, YOU SILLY COW, YOU GET ON THE ROAD!'

'I get silly cow on road?'

'OH! FORGET IT!'

He slammed my tray onto the pallet, dismissing me with both his hands in a way that was quite uncivilised. I could feel tears pricking at the back of my eyes, but I certainly wasn't going to let him see that. Nor Yola, who was standing behind me in the queue with her full tray and her smug gap-tooth smile. And behind her was Andriy, gawping at me with a grin. Well, he could go to hell. Nonchalantly, I sauntered up the field to the women's caravan and sat down on the step. They could all go to hell.

After a while, I heard the farmer's Land Rover pull out of the gate and putter away down the lane. A pleasant

stillness descended on the hillside. Even the birds were taking a break. The air was warm, and sweet with honeysuckle. An evening like this is a gift to be treasured, I thought, and I wasn't going to let anything spoil it. The sky was pale and milky, with shining streamers of silvery clouds over in the west – a real English sky.

Vitaly and Andriy were relaxing on the back seat of Vitaly's car enjoying a can of lager – apparently the rest of the car is disintegrating in a hedge somewhere on the Canterbury bypass. Typical Vitaly. Tomasz had disappeared into the next field to check his rabbit traps. Emanuel was sitting on a crate outside the men's caravan with a bowl of strawberries beside him, writing a letter. The Chinese girls were curled up on Marta's bunk, reading their horoscopes. Marta had already lit the gas under the pan of sausages, and our little cabin was filled with a smell that was both mouth-watering and disgusting at the same time. Yola was having a shower. I stretched out on her bunk just for a moment. I was feeling so tired, every muscle in my body was aching. I would just have a little rest before dinner.

*

I AM DOG I RUN I RUN I KILL RABBIT I EAT ALL I
LICK BLOOD GOOD BLOOD MY BELLY IS FULL
GOOD BELLY-FULL FEELING I FIND RIVER I DRINK
GOOD WATER I DRINK SUN IS ON ME WARM I
REST I LAY MY HEAD ON MY PAWS IN THE SUN
I SLEEP I DREAM I DREAM OF KILLING I AM DOG

*

It is Marta's belief that our daily food is a gift from God, to be prepared with reverence, and that eating together is a sacrament. For this reason she always tries her best to make a pleasing evening meal for the strawberry-pickers, but tonight is Emanuel's eighteenth birthday and she has made a special effort to rise to the challenge of the unpromising ingredients provided by the farmer.

In the pan, the sausages have already turned bright pink and a greyish gelatinous fluid is oozing out of them and soaking into the bread, which Marta has cut up into strips and put to fry with the sausages and some potatoes that Vitaly found by the roadside. There are some wild ceps, and some green leaves of wood-garlic waiting at the side of the pan, which she will stir in at the last minute. The remainder of the bread she has pressed into dumplings with a sprinkling of mauve thyme-flowers and a pair of pigeon's eggs which Tomasz found in the woods. They are boiling merrily in a pan. Marta is cooking up all the sausages – the men's as well as the women's. Why? Because Polish women are proper women, that's why.

Ciocia Yola is taking a shower, preparing herself for another sinful night of love with the farmer. The sun must have warmed the water in the barrel to a pleasant temperature, for Ciocia Yola is singing as she rubs herself with perfumed soap, a tuneless wordless song. Ciocia Yola is not a good singer.

Then there is a tap-tapping on the side of the caravan and a man's voice speaking in Polish. 'Lovely ladies, I

have here a small offering with which you may enhance our supper.' It is Tomasz, with the bloodied body of a rabbit in his hands. 'Maybe the lovely Yola would accept this small token of my affection.'

'Leave it on the step, Tomek,' Ciocia Yola calls from the shower. 'I'll be ready in a minute.'

'Maybe you would like me to skin it for you?' He looks hopefully towards the shower. There are some holes in the plastic screen, but they are in the wrong places.

'It's OK. You can leave it. I know how,' says Marta.

She takes the dead rabbit from him with a sigh, and strokes its fluffy fur. Poor little creature. But she has already worked out a nice recipe in her head to send it to the next world. Tomasz is still hovering on the doorstep, and a moment later is rewarded by the sight of Yola emerging, wrapped only in a towel.

'Go away, Tomek,' she says briskly. 'Why are you hanging around here like a bad stink? We will tell you when dinner is ready.'

He slopes off down the field.

In Marta's opinion, her aunt would be better off with a decent serious chap like Tomasz, even if he does have some oddities, than with some of these ex-husbands and would-be husbands she seems to go for. But Ciocia Yola has her own ideas about men, as about everything else.

Marta picks up the rabbit, and with a sharp knife makes a deft slice up the creature's furry belly. She skins it and cuts it up into small pieces which she tosses in the pan

with some fat from the sausages, and some leaves of wood-garlic and wild thyme. A delicious aroma floats down the field. At the last moment, she throws in the fried sausages, ceps and potatoes, and adds a can of Vitaly's beer to make a mouth-watering sauce. She tastes it on the tip of her tongue, and closes her eyes with sheer good-Polish-woman pleasure.

Andriy and Emanuel have built a fire in a grassy spot at the top of the field. Although there is plenty of dry wood in the copse, and small twigs for kindling, it still seems to take them a lot of huffing and puffing and flapping of branches to get it going. When it has caught, and the smoke has drifted away, they arrange a circle of logs and crates and the old car seat to sit on. The Chinese girls have set out the plates and cutlery (there are only six sets, so some people will have to share or improvise). Emanuel has picked a huge bowl of strawberries, and Marta sets them to marinate in cool tea, with sugar and some wild mint leaves. She finds she is increasingly having to modify or disguise the taste of the strawberries to make them more palatable to the pickers. These she will put into a bowl lined with slices of white bread, and this will be turned out onto a dish as a birthday pudding instead of a cake for Emanuel, of whom she is especially fond. There are no candles, but later there will be stars.

Emanuel is watching as Tomasz tunes his guitar. Then Tomasz passes him the guitar and starts showing him some basic chords. Vitaly gets out his stash of lager and his cash box. Ciocia Yola has put on her clean mauve-

ribboned knickers from the washing line, a short frilly skirt and a low-cut blouse. No doubt this is all for her lover's benefit. Marta doesn't know what her aunt sees in the farmer. Dumpling, she calls him. He is more like a suet pudding. If you're going to commit fornication with a man, you may as well choose one who is nice-looking. But no doubt God will forgive her. He's good that way.

Then Chinese Girl One bangs the side of a pan as though it were a gong, and they all take their places around the fire in anticipation of Marta's feast.

Down in the valley, a summery haze shimmers over the treetops and shadows are already gathering. The cut-crystal brilliance of the light becomes soft and muted, as though shining through layers of silk. The silver streamers of clouds have turned to pink, but the sky is still bright, and the sun has an hour or so to go before it touches the treetops. It is almost midsummer. A thrush sits on the branch of an ash tree in the copse, singing his heart out, and from the far side of the copse his mate calls back. It is the only sound to break the stillness, apart from the sound of a dog barking in the woods far away.

An evening like this is a gift from God, thinks Marta, as she gives thanks and prepares to celebrate.

*

Only Irina is missing. Andriy goes to look for her, and finds her still curled up asleep in the caravan. Her hands

are folded together under her chin, and two circles of colour have fallen like rose petals on her cheeks. Her lips are slightly parted. Her orange ribbon has come loose and the stray strands of dark hair are streaming on the pillow. He gazes for a moment. Really, for a Ukrainian girl, she has some quite positive features.

'Wake up. Dinner's ready.'

He has it on the tip of his tongue to say, 'Wake up, sweet one.' But why would he want to say a thing like that? Fortunately the words get stuck in his mouth before they can emerge to embarrass him. Irina yawns, stretches and rubs her eyes. She rolls off the bunk, still a bit wobbly from sleep. He takes her hand to help her step down from the caravan, and she rests her weight on him briefly before drawing it away.

The strawberry-pickers have seated themselves in a circle and are passing round the steaming plates of food: dumplings, rabbit and sausage stew with fried bread, garlic, mushrooms and potatoes. The delicious smell of each dish strikes him like a miracle; his body shivers with readiness; he is incredibly hungry. After Marta has said grace, Vitaly sells everyone a can or more of excellent lager at a special discounted price. At first they all eat in silence, listening to the birdsong, watching the magical shifts of light as the sun slips towards the horizon. After a while, conversations break out in a babble of languages.

He is sitting next to Irina on a low log, watching her from the corner of his eye. He likes the way she eats, tucking into the food with enthusiasm, only stopping

from time to time to flick back her long hair when it slips down over her face.

He leans and whispers into her ear, 'Have you got a boyfriend back home, then?'

She turns her head, giving him a hard look.

'Yes I have, of course. He is two metres tall and he is a boxer.'

'Really?'

'Of course.'

'What is his name?'

'His name is Attila.'

She doesn't look the type to have a boxer boyfriend, but women are notoriously unpredictable, and he has heard that sometimes the most refined types are drawn to the roughest of men. So maybe he stands a chance with her after all.

To his left, Tomasz is trying a similar approach. He sits up close to Yola on Vitaly's car seat and murmurs, 'Is there someone waiting for you back in Poland, beautiful Yola?'

'What business is it of yours?' Yola replies briskly.

'Only that if there is, he is a lucky man.'

'Not so lucky as you imagine. What do you know about luck?' she snaps. 'Better to keep your mouth shut, Mister Poet, unless you know what you're talking about.'

On the other side, Emanuel and Chinese Girl Two are each trying to find out where the other comes from. Emanuel discovers that she is not from China, which seems odd, while she discovers only that he is from Africa, which everyone knows already. Then Vitaly

presses another can of beer on them and Marta intervenes, chiding him gently for taking advantage of Emanuel, who is too young and has clearly had enough already. Chinese Girl Two starts to giggle uncontrollably, and soon they are all giggling, even Marta.

Now Tomasz takes up his guitar and starts to sing a terrible rhyming song he has composed himself about a man who sets out to find the woman of his dreams. Yola tells him to shut up. Andriy turns to Irina.

'Will you sing something for us, Ukrainka?'

She gives him another hard look.

'Why don't you ask Emanuel?' She sinks her teeth into a piece of rabbit.

Hm. He doesn't seem to be getting anywhere with his girl.

*

Dear Sister

I wish you were here for in Kent the strawberries are even more delicate than the strawberries of Zomba.

Today being my eighteenth birthday we have enjoyed an outstanding party. My mzungu friend Andree and I made a big bonfire which we lit upon much fevered flapping and smoking and there was a delicate feast prepared for us by a good Catholic Martyr though she is not yet ascended and after feasting we sat upon the hillside to behold the beauteous sunset (though not as beauteous as the sunsets of Zomba) with the sun setting like a firey disk

and the first star of the ferment twinkling like a diamond in the sky and the hills cool in their darkening. And when our hearts were opened everybody began to sing.

The Poland mzungu named Toemash has a guitar which is of extreme interest to me and he sang a ballad of a man with a tambourine and his many jangly followers. Then the two China girls sang in high soprano an ineffable song of great beauty. The Ukraine girl also sang sweetly with choral accompaniment from Andree who eyed her eagerly. Then the Catholic Martyr sang a song of praise with assistance from her auntie. And I sang my song Oh come Oh come Emanuel which I learnt from Sister Theodosia. And at the end everybody sang Happy Birthday Dear Emanuel and it came to pass that this outstanding song is available not only in English but also in Ukrainian Polish and Chinese!!! And so united in song we enjoyed the Radiance of the evening.

*

I had drunk two cans of lager, which is more than I'm used to. Whenever anyone poured a drink, Mother always used to put on her preachy voice and say, 'Irina, a drunken woman is like a blighted rose.' In fact everyone, even Marta, had drunk too much. Marta was doing the washing up now. Yola was supposed to be helping, but she had disappeared. The Chinese girls had drunk two lagers each and had gone back inside the caravan – they are very sensitive to midges. Emanuel had drunk eight, and had fallen asleep, stretched out in front of the embers.

Tomasz had drunk six, moaning all the while that he would much rather have a glass of good Georgian wine, and now he was strumming another miserable dirge about how much the times are changing. Vitaly was gathering up the empty cans and counting his takings for the evening. Andriy had drunk at least eight, I noticed, and when I pushed his hand away from my knee he wandered off a bit unsteadily down the field. A drunken miner is not very appealing.

As the sun went down the air started to turn cool, nipping my bare arms and legs, so I went back inside the caravan to find my jumper and jeans. Yola was sitting there, combing her dyed hair and daubing on cheap pink lipstick in preparation for her date with that podgy farmer. She kept jumping up to look out of the window like an over-excited poodle dog. Suddenly she yapped, 'Look at that, girls. We have a visitor.'

She pointed out of the window. Instead of the farmer's Land Rover, a huge black mafia-machine was pulling up at the bottom of the field. My heart thumped. It was like a fist punching my chest. The car door swung open, and a bulky black-clad figure emerged. Even at that distance I recognised him.

Vulk looked around, then he started walking clumsily up the field, treading on the clumps of strawberries. I didn't stop to think. I jumped up and dashed out of the door without looking behind me. I slipped through the gap in the hedge into the copse. My heart was thumping away. Keeping my head down, I crept along the other

side of the hedge, away from the caravan and back into a thicket of trees. Behind a dense evergreen bush I crouched down and listened. I could hear voices, men's and women's, but I couldn't hear what they were saying. The blood was beating so loud inside my head I couldn't hear my own thoughts. It was like one of those bad dreams where the beating of your own heart wakes you up. Thump thump. I dug my nails into my palms, but the pain was real.

After a while, Yola came out into the field and called my name.

'Irina? Irina? Come, girl, there is a handsome-man visitor for you.'

That woman is so dire. Why doesn't she go off with Vulk herself if she likes him so much? He's probably just her type. I sat motionless, holding onto my breath, until Yola gave up and went back to the caravan. Then I let my breath out. But still I sat tight. This was a waiting game between us, him and me. On a branch, a few inches from my nose, a spider was spinning its web, working away furiously. I watched as it dropped down onto a lower twig, then clambered back up its silky ladder, heaving its fat body on its spidery little legs. Then it sat in the centre of its web and waited for its prey to pull at the threads.

After some time I heard Vulk's voice. He was by the hedge. He started calling,

'Little flovver! Come, little flovver! Come!'

That sludgy voice. My stomach turned. I couldn't see

from my hiding place, but I could imagine the ponytail flicking from side to side.

'Come! Come!'

I breathed in and held my breath. My heart was thumping so loud I was sure he must be able to hear it as he wandered up and down beside the hedge, his footsteps heavy on the ground. -Crunch crunch. 'Little flover! Little flover!'

Then a horrible familiar smell hit my nostrils. He had lit a cigar. He must be standing in the field by the hedge, smoking. Puff. Stink. I couldn't see him but I could smell him nearby. My whole body was tense, my breathing fast and shallow, like when you're trying to run in a nightmare but your limbs are locked. I couldn't tell how much time had passed. The light was fading from the sky. After a while the smell of the cigar faded, too. Was it safe to come out? I was just about to move when I heard voices again. He was back at the caravan. I strained my ears. I couldn't catch what he said, but I heard Yola's vulgar laugh, then after another eternity the sound I'd been waiting for - the engine of the mafia-machine starting up.

The gate closed with a *clack*, and the engine noise dissipated into the stillness.

It was twilight when I finally dared to emerge from my hiding place, back into the brightness of the caravan.

'Oh, here you are!' cried Marta. 'I was so worried.'

'Here you are!' Yola's voice had a scolding edge. She

looked me up and down, and winked in a vulgar way. 'You hev secret lovver.' She said it in English, for the benefit of the Chinese girls. 'Good-looking man looking for you.'

'Not so good-looking.' I wrinkled my nose.

The Chinese girls laughed.

'Good-looking enough,' said Yola. 'Not a baldie. Plenty good hairs.'

'Too long. Looks like woman hairs,' said Chinese Girl One. 'Like Toh-mah.' They both giggled like mad.

'He had flowers,' said Yola.

'Flowers? What for?' The thought of him bringing me flowers made me feel sick.

'A flower in hand for you. Hee hee.' Chinese Girl Two cupped her chin in her hands laughing with glee. 'Pink flower. Pink. Flower of love.' As though pink would make all the difference. They all thought it was a big joke.

'I do not want those flowers,' I said nonchalantly. I was still elated at my escape, and the last thing I wanted was to remember that terrifying journey, the cold chips, the nausea, the fear. 'The man is not only old, but he is rather ugly, with minimum culture.'

'We are all God's creatures,' said Marta reproachfully. I suppose no one has ever given her flowers, on account of her large nose. She is a very kind person, but sometimes I think she takes her religion too far.

*

Andriy has drunk at least eight cans of lager, and now he has his back towards the field and is concentrating on

the pleasurable sensation of aiming a warm torrent of piss at a stubborn nettle growing out of the hedge. It wavers under the stream, but bounces back. He takes aim and hits it again. It bends but doesn't break. Its sharp leaves glisten cheekily as he zips up his fly. I'll be back to get you later, he promises the dogged little plant.

As he returns towards the caravan in the fading illusory dusk, his eyes light on a vision of incredible beauty. Is he drunk or dreaming? Generously proportioned, sensuously curved, beautiful yet mysterious, ferocious yet pliant, monstrous yet perfectly crafted. He stretches out his hand, his fingers trembling to touch. Yes, she is real. He strokes the gleaming body of black and chrome. He walks around her. Yes, from every angle, she is perfect.

And inside? He tries the passenger door. It is not locked. He climbs in, clambers across to the driver's seat, sinks into the soft but firm tobacco-fragrant leather. What height. What power. He fondles the leather-cased steering wheel. He runs his hands over the dashboard. What an array of controls. He depresses the clutch. He shifts through all the gears. The transmission glides like butter. He tries out the brake and accelerator pedals. They are firm but yielding. He searches for the ignition key. It is not there. He tries the glove compartment. He feels inside. Something is there – something bulky and cold. Not keys. A gun. Devil's bum!

He takes it out, holds it, turns it over in his hands. His fingers close around it. Its menace is palpable. He opens

it up – why are there only five bullets in the barrel? What happened to the sixth? Not quite knowing why, he takes the gun and slips it into the pocket of his trousers. The weight pulls against his belt. He likes the feeling of its presence, close to him but out of sight. He climbs down from the vehicle and quietly closes the door.

By the time he gets back to the bonfire, he finds that all the women have gone inside. Emanuel is asleep. Vitaly has disappeared. Tomasz is still singing sadly to himself. He decides to have one more go at that wretched nettle before turning in for the night. He is standing in the shadow between the hedge and the men's caravan when he sees the owner of the black four-by-four come down the field and climb into the driver's seat. Even in the dusky light, Andriy can see that he is an unprepossessing man. What a waste. And then there's the little matter of the gun – what does he need a gun for?

The events that follow take place so quickly, and in such a confusion of dazzle and darkness and too much lager, that afterwards, he is never quite sure exactly what happened.

Just as the twilight swallows up the tail-lights of the four-by-four, the sound of another engine rips through the stillness of the valley. At first he thinks it is the farmer's Land Rover running rough, but the sound is louder, deeper, with an exciting throbbing under-beat. He steps out, hoping to catch a glimpse as it races by. But the engine stops at the gate, the gate swings open,

and in roars the red Ferrari, hood down, headlights blazing. He feels his head start to spin. Twice in one night. This must be a dream. And then out of the Ferrari steps the blonde.

She is perhaps more mature than he imagined, but the confusing light can play all sorts of tricks. She is tall, too, taller than him, with blond hair pinned in an untidy nest on top of her head. She is wearing tight white trousers that catch the dazzle of the headlights, revealing a shape that is not as shapely as he dreamed, maybe more sedan model, but still definitely the blonde blue-eyed *Angliska rosa*. She steps forward without noticing him lurking by the caravan, and strides up into the field.

'Lawrence!' she shouts, in a voice that is sharp and resonant with fury. 'Lawrence, where are you? Come here, you bastard!'

Her words echo around the valley, and are met with silence.

Despite his initial disappointment, Andriy thinks he should seize the moment, if only for the sake of the Ferrari. This is after all a night of magic, in which two amazing things have already happened, and all sorts of mysteries and transformations may be possible. He steps out of the shadows opening his palms in a gesture of appeasement.

'Lady . . .'

She swings round to face him.

'And who are you?' she barks. Really, her voice is not as he had imagined it either.

'Lady . . .'

Suddenly his English deserts him. So stepping forward he does something he has seen older men do in Ukraine, but has never done before in his life, something that would normally make him cringe with embarrassment to think of; but now it just seems the right thing to do. He takes her hand, lifts it to his lips and kisses it.

The effect is instantaneous. The *Angliska rosa* grabs him in both her arms, and kisses him ferociously on the mouth. This is a pleasant surprise. He knows he is quite attractive to women – well, he's had some successes in the past – but never before has the magic been so immediate. Leaning back on the bonnet of the Ferrari, she pulls him down on top of her and kisses him vigorously. Her lips are warm and taste of whisky. Her body, like the upholstery of the four-by-four, is firm but yields to his touch.

'You'll do, poppet.' She rips open the buttons of his shirt. What's going on here? Is this a typical English display of passion? He notices with another small stab of disappointment that the sports car is not a Ferrari at all but a Honda (still, it is a sports car, and a red one) and her *Angliska rosa* mouth is insistent and dominating in a way that reminds him strangely of . . . yes, his first kiss. Vagvaga Riskegipd sitting astride him on the steps of Sheffield City Hall, forcing her determined little tongue between his lips. These Angliski women!

Then he hears the engine-roar of another car pulling into the field, but when he tries to take a look, she

yanks his head down firmly, his mouth on hers. Her tongue is working hard. The next thing he hears is Yola's voice, shrieking from the top of the field, 'Dumpling! Dumpling! Watch out!'

Fighting back against the blonde's embrace, he lifts his head and sees the farmer standing by the Land Rover, staring back at him. He doesn't look very pleased. Pinned to the bonnet of the sports car in the grip of the blonde, Andriy is starting to wonder whether it was wise to surrender to the passion of this unpredictable *Angliska rosa*.

'What the hell . . . ? You bitch! You bloody bitch!'

The farmer strides towards them. The *Angliska rosa* looks up over Andriy's shoulder and with her free hand, not the one that is fumbling with his fly zip, she gestures at the farmer with two fingers. Andriy tries to seize the moment to escape, but the blonde holds him fast, and now the enraged farmer runs forward with a roar, and flings himself onto Andriy's back. Holy whiskers! This is not turning out at all according to plan. He is trapped between the two of them like the meat in some mad sandwich. The farmer's weight is crushing the breath out of him. As the farmer thrashes about, his rough hands grappling with Andriy's throat, the blonde wriggles out from underneath them, clambers back into the sports car and turns the engine on. The car lurches forward and the farmer slides off the bonnet onto the ground with a thud.

'Watch out, my Dumpling!'

Andriy, still hanging onto the bonnet, hears Yola's

shriek at the top of the field, and looking round he sees her tottering down between the clumps of strawberries in her flimsy high-heeled sandals. The farmer sees her too as he picks himself up.

'Go back, Primrose!' He waves her away.

The car reverses, revs up a bit, then suddenly accelerates forward. There is a horrible crunch. The farmer falls writhing to the ground. The car reverses and revs up again. Andriy is hanging onto a windscreen wiper with one hand and hammering on the glass with the other.

'Stop! Stop!'

'My Dumpling!'

He hears Yola's cry behind him, but he can't quite see what's happening. As the car lurches forward again, he flings himself off and lands on top of the farmer, who is rolling on the ground twisted up in agony, his mouth open as if in a scream, though only faint gurgling noises are coming out. Andriy disentangles himself shakily and stares in horror. The bones of the farmer's left leg are sticking out all over the place. The car is reversing and revving up again.

'My poor Dumpling!' Yola stumbles down the field and diving forward, tries to drag the farmer free. But he is too heavy for her. The car is heading at them. Andriy staggers to his feet and the two of them manage to heave the writhing farmer out of the way, missing by inches the front bumper of the car, which has picked up some speed, the blonde *Angliska rosa* grinning like a maniac behind the wheel.

Crash! With a horrible rip of metal, it ploughs into the rear end of the men's caravan, which topples off its pile of bricks and lands at a crazy angle on its axle.

The *Angliska rosa* gets out to inspect the damage to her car. Then she walks over to the farmer squirming on the ground in the glare of the headlights, and gives him a kick.

'You sleazy bastard. Next time it's curtains.'

'Wendy,' he groans, 'it was nothing. Just a bit of slap and tickle.'

Yola has been keeping out of the blonde's way, but self-control is not her strong point.

'Slapping ticker! What is slapping ticker? Eh?' She lays into him with her fuchsia-tipped toes. 'I am primrose, not slapping ticker!'

'Yola, please . . .' Andriy struggles to restrain her, but she breaks free and takes a run at the farmer.

'Get off him!' shouts the blonde. 'He may be a sleaze-ball, but he's my sleaze, not yours!' She dives at Yola, catching her off balance with one foot poised for a kick, and grabbing her round the waist she wrestles her to the ground. They are both panting and tearing at each other's hair.

'You all sleazes!' Yola writhes and thrashes, but the blonde is bigger and stronger than she is. 'Let me go!'

'Stop! Please! Be calm!' cries Andriy, grabbing the blonde and holding her fast in his arms. 'Lady, please . . .'

Seizing the moment, Yola scrambles away and takes cover in the men's caravan. He grasps the blonde's hand, which is clenched into a fist, and tries to raise it to his

lips, but she wrenches it free, swings wide and lands it on his jaw with a crack.

Stars appear in the black space behind his eyes.

*

The Chinese girls are staring out of the window, trying to work out what is going on in the field below. Shifting between the blaze of headlights and the pools of darkness, the action is disjointed and confusing. They see the car reversing and driving forward. They see Yola launch herself at the body on the ground. They hear the smash as the car ploughs into the caravan. They see Irina standing with Marta, a little way below the caravan, watching the events at the bottom of the field. At some point in all the chaos, Vulk's four-by-four pulls in through the open gate and drives silently up round the margin of the strawberry rows to the women's caravan, headlights off. Irina looks round and sees him appear out of the darkness. She screams and makes a dash for the copse, but this time he chases and catches her. The Chinese girls witness the abduction, but they are unable to stop it. Vulk bundles Irina struggling and yelling into the back of his vehicle, and drives off into the night.

sector contracts, there would be no fees to fund her English university education. Don't worry, I'll wait for you, said Zia Ismail.

Her English medical school place was conditional on her achieving a Grade 7 in the International English Language Test, and her parents thought it best to get her out of the way at once. She signed up with a college for overseas students in London. Within two weeks of her departure for England, Soo Lai Bee learnt that Zia was engaged to someone else.

At first she was sad, then she was furious, then she was glad to be away from home, and in a new country where nobody cared what race you were. At the college, she made friends with Song Ying, another Chinese girl, who wasn't even studying but just needed a work permit. They talked for hours about mothers, fathers, boy-friends, brothers, sisters, Poles, Ukrainians, Malays and Englishes. They laughed and cried together. They went off to pick strawberries together. They went off to Amsterdam together.

Buttercup Meadow

The Majestic Hotel at Shermouth might have been considered luxurious in the 1950s, compared with hotels on the Baltic, but it has seen little by way of refurbishment or even basic maintenance since then. Among its many discomforts are the fact that the lift is broken (Yola and Marta's room is on the fifth floor), the water in the communal bathrooms is turned off after 9 p.m. (en suite? You must be joking) and it is infested with cockroaches. They do, however, have a very nice view of the sea.

But the worst thing about the Majestic Hotel is that inside its massive redbrick-Gothic cockroach-crawling walls are housed some two hundred people, not travellers or holidaymakers, but people trying to live their lives here – migrant workers like themselves, asylum-seekers from every strife-torn corner of the world, homeless families from city slums in England – stacked one above the other like souls in hell, jostling in the queues for the filthy toilets, stealing each other's milk from the mouldy communal fridges, keeping each other awake with their arguments, celebrations and nightmares.

There are no communal meals, and 'guests' have to take their meals in cafés or forage for themselves and eat in their own rooms – nice for the cockroaches. And though

there is no birdsong, neither is there ever silence; for even in the dead of night there is always someone getting up for an early morning shift or returning from a late one, playing music or having a fight or making a baby, or comforting a crying child, so that the only way to stay sane is to cut yourself off, to block out the crush of humanity pressing in through the walls, the floors and the ceilings. Yola sums it up in three words: 'Too many foreigners.'

If this was really Hell, though, there should be devils with pitchforks, thinks Yola. Instead, they have been assigned to share a room with two Slovak women, who are not particularly welcoming to the newcomers, having previously had it to themselves, and who have spread their stuff out and hung their wet knickers to dry all over the place, making the room steamy as well as cluttered. Of course they are not to be blamed that the hotel has no proper laundry facilities, but even worse, in Yola's opinion, is the type of knickers they choose to wear, which are of thong design. The uncontrolled way these Slovak women's hefty buttocks bounce around beneath their thongs is deplorable, and Yola cannot for the life of her understand why any woman should choose to inflict such discomfort on herself when generously cut knickers of the white cotton style are universally available, inexpensive, and known to have hygienic advantages, and moreover, contrary to what might be supposed, are considered to be extremely seductive by men of a more refined nature, of whom, she can only suppose, there are precious few in Slovakia.

Marta also views the thong knickers with abhorrence, though for different reasons.

*

When Yola and Marta were dropped off at the hotel, Tomasz was told to stay in the van, as he was needed at the Sunnyside Chicken Farm and Hatchery in Titchington. He protested vehemently that he only wanted to be with Yola, and he didn't care about this new job, he would be happy just to sit with his guitar and sing to her. But the van was already on its way, Yola and Marta waving and disappearing through the rear windows.

'No worry. Not far,' said the minibus driver. 'You come back when you have good pay in you pocket, then you make good possibility. Heh heh.'

For some reason, all the seats of the minibus had been taken out, so the passengers had to squat on the floor. From this position, he couldn't see much of the surroundings, but there were fields, woods, and at one point a glimpse of the sea. Then they were negotiating speed bumps on a long tarmac drive, and they had arrived.

The minibus pulled up in front of a pair of small brick-built semi-detached houses, standing in a ragged overgrown garden behind a wooden fence. They should have been charming but, even at first sight, Tomasz felt there was something seedy and forbidding about them. The curtains were drawn, although it was late morning, and

there were several overflowing black rubbish bags by the front doors which tainted the air with a vile smell.

'Here,' said the driver, indicating the house on the left. 'You stay here.' Then, as if to reassure him, he pointed to the house on the right. 'And I am stay here.'

Tomasz picked up his bag and slung his guitar across his shoulder. Well, to stay in a house at last would be a good change, he thought, and at night at least he could close his eyes and close the door.

'When you ready, you go to office there.'

The driver pointed across to a double gate behind which was a wide yard and a low redbrick building with a few vehicles parked outside. Beyond that, up another drive, were several huge green hangar-like buildings, some twenty metres apart. That, Tomasz realised, was where the smell was coming from.

*

I AM DOG I AM SAD DOG MY GOOD STRONG-
FEET-SMELL MAN IS GONE MY PUT-OINTMENT-
ON-FOOT FEMALE IS GONE MY GOOD-UNDER-
SKIRT-SMELL FEMALE IS GONE ALL GONE AWAY
GOODBYE DOG THEY SAID GOODBYE GOOD DOG
I AM GOOD DOG I AM SAD DOG I AM DOG

*

The smell from the farmyard was bad enough, but Tomasz was not at all prepared for the stench that would hit him as he opened the front door of the little house: it was a smell of dead air, sweat, urine, faeces, semen, unwashed hair, stale breath, bad teeth, rotten

shoes, dirty clothes, old food, cigarettes and alcohol. It was the smell of humanity. And even though he himself was more immune than most to these smells, still it made him gasp and cover his nose and mouth with his hand.

There were two rooms downstairs. One, which had its door open, had six chairs around a table on which the greasy remains of a meal were waiting to be cleared away. The other room was at the front, and Tomasz opened the door to a wave of hot stinking breathed-out air. Inside were six – no, it was seven – sleeping figures curled up on mattresses on the floor, surrounded by their pitiful possessions spilling out of holdalls and carrier bags – a jumble of shoes, clothes, bedding, papers, cigarette packets, bottles and other human debris. There was a gentle chorus of snoring and snuffling. He backed out quickly and closed the door.

Upstairs was the same. In one room, the smaller of the two, there were four mattresses laid out on the floor, so close that you had to walk over them to get to the other side of the room, and on each mattress was a prone sleeping figure. In the other, larger room, there were six mattresses and six sleeping figures. No – one mattress over in the far corner was unoccupied, and Tomasz realised with a terrible sinking feeling that this was the mattress allocated to him.

He went back downstairs into the dining room, pulled up a chair, and with a feeling of despondency so intense

that it was almost pleasurable, he got out his guitar. So this was to be his condition, now. What was he but a fragment of broken churned-up humanity washed up on this faraway shore? This was where his journey had brought him.

There must be a song in this.

*

I was woken up by birdsong, so sweet and close that for a minute I thought I was back at the caravan. I opened my eyes and looked around. Where was I? Sunlight was streaming in low through a dusty window. Then I remembered: at some point in the night, I'd abandoned the three-legged chair and rolled myself in the plastic sheet on the floor. I must have slept like that. My clothes were still damp. No wonder I felt stiff. I stood up and stretched myself, straightening each arm and leg painfully. *Ujjas!* What a night. I remembered that I'd had a dream – one of those terrifying dreams where you're running and running, but you can't move. One of those dreams that makes you glad to wake up to a sunny morning.

My stomach was rumbling again – the effect of yesterday's chips had worn off. I eased the door open and stepped outside. The rain had passed and the sky was clear, but there were still puddles on the ground. In Kiev, when it rains in the night you wake up to see all the golden domes of the churches washed clean and glitter-

ing in the sunlight, and the pot-holes in the roads full of water. 'Mind the puddles, Irina,' Mother would say as I set off for school, but I always got splashed.

I was in somebody's garden. The old garage was at the bottom of a long gravelled drive. At the end, behind a screen of trees, I could see the chimneys of a big house. My feet crunched on the gravel and somewhere not far away a dog started to bark. Was it on a chain? Was it fierce? I stood still and listened. The barking stopped. Then faint and far away I heard another sound – the drone of a car engine, getting closer.

A few minutes later, I saw the vehicle. It was a white van. I stepped forward and waved. The driver slowed down and waved back. Stupid man – couldn't he see I wasn't just waving for fun? I jumped directly in front, so he had no choice but to screech to a stop. The driver wound his window down and yelled,

'You crazy! What you doing?'

That homely accent! That round face! That dire shirt! I could tell at once that he was Ukrainian. For some stupid reason, I felt tears pricking at the back of my eyes.

'Please,' I said in Ukrainian. 'Please help me.'

He opened the passenger door.

'Get in, girl. Where you want to go?'

I tried to speak, but I found myself sniffing, which was pathetic, because after all I was alive and nothing terrible had happened.

'OK, girl. You don't cry,' said the van driver. 'You can come with us.'

As the van moved forward I heard voices in the back. I turned in my seat and saw there were about a dozen people, men and women, crouching or squatting on the floor. They were all young. Some were chatting quietly. Some seemed half asleep. They looked like students – they looked quite like me, in fact.

'Hello,' I said in Ukrainian. There was a chorus of hellos, some in Ukrainian, some in Polish and a couple of other Slavic languages I couldn't place.

'Strawberry-pickers,' explained the driver.

'Ah, that's lucky! Me too.'

I started to explain about the caravans and the strawberry field, and then suddenly there it was, just flashing past on the right, the little copse, and the gate, and the lovely familiar south-sloping field. But what had happened to our caravan?

'Stop, please!' I cried. The driver pulled to a halt, shaking his head.

'Stop. Go. Stop. Go. Typical woman.'

'Wait. Please. Just one moment!'

I ran back down the lane and opened the gate. The women's caravan had gone – vanished completely. Only the shower screen was still standing, the black plastic flapping forlornly. The men's caravan was there, leaning at an angle. I tiptoed up and peeped through the window. It was empty. No one was around. The field was full of

ripe strawberries. At the top of the field I could hear the thrush still sitting there in the copse singing its early morning song.

I climbed back into the van.

'Stop? Go?' said the van driver.

'Let's go.'

*

After the Chinese girls have gone with Mr Smith, and Vitaly has taken the Poles to their rendezvous with the van driver (whom he refers to as the 'transport manager'), Andriy, Emanuel and Dog go off for a consolatory ice cream to get away from the heat. They arrange to meet Vitaly at a pub in town.

Andriy hopes that Vitaly, with his new mobilfon wealth, will stand them a round of drinks, but when he comes back it turns out that unfortunately he has no cash on him, so from what is left of his two weeks' wages Andriy has to pay for two small beers for himself and Emanuel and a double Scotch with Coke for Vitaly.

They take their drinks through a door marked Beer Garden into a dank courtyard full of empty beer barrels where the sun barely peeps above high brick walls that are covered with dismal sooty ivy. They are the only people there. Dog finds the remains of a sandwich wrapped in a paper napkin under one of the tables, and gobbles it up, spreading crumbs and shreds of paper

everywhere. Emanuel and Andriy sip their beers slowly to make them last.

At once Vitaly wants to know what has become of Irina, and there is an annoying presumptuousness about the way he talks, moving seamlessly between Russian and English.

'I thought you and she would be making possibility by now. I could find her very nice job in London. Dancing. Can she dance? Good pay. Luxury accommodation.'

When Andriy tells him about the night-time abduction, he whistles between his teeth.

'That Mr Vulk is a no-no-good. He brings bad reputation to profession of recruitment consultant.'

'He is recruitment consultant?'

'Yes, of course. But not same like me. Not employment solution consultant with capacity for advance meeting flexi. He is more interested to make overseas contact. My contact is to find work for people when they arrive on ferry. Dynamic cutting solution to all organisation staffing.'

'And he is living here in Dover?'

'In some hotel, not far away I think.'

'Can you take me to him?'

'Aha! I see you are still thinking of making possibility with this Ukrainian girl.'

Andriy gives a studied shrug. 'Well, of course I would be interested to know where she is. But she already has boyfriend I think. Boxing champion.'

Vitaly gives him a funny look. 'Boxing? This is unusual for high-class girl. Angliski?'

'Maybe. I think so.' He too has his doubts about this boyfriend.

He feels unaccountably furious with Vitaly. Where did he get these clothes, these sunglasses, this phone? And how all the women were dancing around him at the ferry terminal! It couldn't have been just the mark-up on the beer at the caravan, could it? And why did he keep it all to himself? The strawberry-pickers shared everything, but Vitaly had been secretly keeping something aside for himself all the time. And how quickly this transformation from equal to superior had taken place. Devil's bum! It had happened overnight. Of course he had lived through a time like this in Ukraine – one day they were all comrades, next day some were millionaires and the rest had . . . coupons. How had it happened? No one knew. It left a bad taste in the mouth.

And what can you do with coupons? You can't eat them. You can't spend them. All you can do is sell them. But who will want to buy? Suddenly, the millionaires were all billionaires, and the rest had enough for a load of coal to see you through the winter and that was it, bye-bye end of story. Now the whole country was run by mobilfonmen.

And this Vitaly – if he finds this Irina, will he ring you on mobilfon and say, hey Andriy, my friend, come and make possibility? Unlikely. And what would she think of this new recruit-consult mobilfonman Vitaly? She considers herself so superior – the new high-spec

Ukrainian girl – maybe the new Vitaly will just be in her category. Hello, mobilfon businessman – this is Irina calling – can we make a possibility? And if she makes a possibility with Vitaly, what does it matter to you, Palenko? Now he feels irrationally, fumingly angry with Irina as well as with Vitaly.

‘And I have an Anglika girl,’ he adds pointedly to Vitaly. ‘Vagvaga Riskegipd! In Sheffield. I am on my way to find her.’

Vitaly gives him another odd look.

‘Listen, my friend, if I see Vulk, I will ask him what happened to this Ukrainian girl.’

He almost hopes that Vitaly will offer him a job – good pay, luxury accommodation, etc – just so that he can have the pleasure of turning it down. But he doesn’t, and Andriy’s pride won’t let him ask. They arrange to meet in the same pub at the same time tomorrow. As Vitaly strolls away, he takes his mobilfon out of his pocket and starts to talk, waving his free hand up and down for emphasis. Andriy tries to make out what language he is talking.

The sun is blazing at full heat, cutting short hard shadows onto the cracked pavements. He wanders back towards the caravan with Dog and Emanuel, still feeling irritable and resenting the money he spent on Vitaly’s double Scotch. Worse than that, he feels shabby, poor and unattractive. Is he jealous of Vitaly? How shameful it is to be jealous of someone who is inferior in every way, except that he has a mobilfon and better trousers. This

is what Vitaly has done to him. This is what Vitaly and Irina between them have done to him. Yes, he thought Vitaly was his friend, and all the time he was taking a bit on the side. Well, here are his true friends. Hey, Dog! But Dog is off on a trail of lamp posts. Hey, Emanuel! Emanuel has found a half-full packet of smoky-bacon flavour crisps in the beer garden, which he shares with Andriy, shaking out the last bits into his hand. The artificially flavoured salt dissolves on his tongue, tasty and toxic.

‘Hey, Emanuel. You like fishing? Maybe we have big luck.’

‘Sikomo. Fishing is very interesting. But where will we attain good nettings?’ Emanuel starts to sing, ‘*I will make you fishers of men.*’

They stroll down to the pier together. The Bulgarian lad who sold him the fish yesterday said this was the best way in town of making quick money. Down a side street, in a maze of car and lorry parks not far from where they left their caravan, they find the entrance to the Admiralty Pier. It must have once been quite a grand structure, but now the ornate cast iron is decrepit and grimy, covered in pigeon-droppings, and a few dead pigeons fester where they have dropped behind the barriers. The stench hits you as you come in.

A couple of men are hanging around at the entrance with a selection of rods and buckets, some blue, some yellow.

‘You wanna buy or rent?’ asks the older of the two, who is wearing a black woolly hat pulled down over his

ears, despite the heat, and a black vest which reveals arms and shoulders covered with an incredible array of tattoos. 'Rent is five quid a day. Or you can buy it for twenty-five quid. Superior tackle. Great investment. Pays for itself in five days, and from then on it's sheer profit. Are you gonna be here for a few days?'

The man is talking too fast. It is stretching Andriy's English to its limit. What is the price, he wonders?

'What it is?'

'Quality tackle. As used by all the top competitive fishermen. Fella caught a twenty-five-pound cod off of here the other day. Got fifty quid for it. Cash in hand.' He looks Andriy and Emanuel up and down, as if appraising their fishing potential.

'Put food on yer table every night, and the surplus you can sell to us. A quid a kilo. Easy money. No tax. No questions asked. Yours to spend as you wish. Just five quid for the day. Try it out.'

Andriy picks up a rod and examines it. He hasn't been fishing since he was a kid, but it can't be so difficult – that Bulgarian lad didn't look particularly bright.

'Five quids? Five pounds?'

'That's it, mate. Big shoal of mackerel coming in with the tide. You'll cover the cost in no time, and then all the rest's yours to take home to the missus.'

Andriy hands over his five pounds. The man gives him a rod and a blue bucket.

*

As the Ukrainian driver pulled in through the gate, I saw the gleaming white field that I'd spotted from the hillside

yesterday. It had looked as though it was covered with plastic, and it turned out to be just that – rows upon rows of tunnels made out of polythene sheeting stretched over metal hoops. Down the centre of each tunnel was a row of straw bales, with bags of compost on them, planted with strawberries. It was like a whole garden under cover. The air was humid and warm, sweet with the scent of ripe strawberries, and another sickly chemical smell that clung to the roof of my mouth. Despite the smell, I was so hungry I couldn't help myself – I reached out and started cramming the strawberries in my mouth. The others laughed.

'You can't be a real strawberry-picker, Irina! We're not allowed to eat them. They'll sack you if they catch you,' said Oksana, who seemed to have taken me under her wing. Oksana was from Kharkiv, a bit older than me, and nice, though not very cultured – but all that seemed much less important now.

The supervisor, Boris, was also Ukrainian. He was a bit fat, and not too bright, with a thick Zaporizhzhia accent. He kept looking at me and saying if I proved myself today he'd put in a good word for me, and sort out my paperwork when we got back to the office. He was sure they'd take me on, because the warm weather had caused the strawberries to ripen early and – this was the third time he'd said this, what was the matter with him? – he'd put in a good word for me.

When he told me the wages, I couldn't believe it. It was twice what we got in the other place, and I started

thinking about all the things I would buy – some lovely scented soap, nice shampoo, new knickers – little sexy ones that Mother would detest – a massive bar of chocolate, some strappy sandals, and I needed a hairbrush, a new T-shirt, maybe two, a warmer jumper, and don't forget a present to take back for Mother. And the picking was so easy; no bending, no lifting. Yes, I thought, I'm lucky to get this chance, and I'd better make the most of it, so I picked like crazy, because I had to prove myself.

At the end of the shift, when we went back to the strawberry farm, Boris came up and said it was time for me to prove myself. Then he pushed himself up against me in a disgusting way and kissed me on the mouth, with wet slimy kisses. I wasn't frightened – Boris just seemed stupid and harmless – so I made myself go limp and let him kiss me, because I really really wanted this job. His gaspy breathing on my face made me feel cold inside. On the scale of sex appeal I would give him zero. OK, it's a transaction, nothing more, I told myself. I tried to imagine Natasha and Pierre kissing, lost in each other. Were men different in those days? When he'd finished, I wiped my mouth on my T-shirt, and followed him up the stairs to the office.

*

Andriy walks down the Admiralty Pier with his rod and blue bucket in his hands and Emanuel at his side. The pier is a bleak span of concrete almost a kilometre long, reaching like a crooked dog-leg out into the sea, and every metre seems to be occupied by a fisherman, bucket

at his feet, rod or line pitched over the water, staring out over the waves. In some of the buckets there are a few small fishes, but nothing to speak of.

About halfway along the first leg, Andriy and Emanuel come across the Bulgarian lad who sold Andriy the fish. He introduces his two friends, who are Romanian and Moldovan.

'Usually two or three of us here,' says the Bulgarian. 'Next few metres is Baltics. Fish fryers. Up there' – he points for Andriy's benefit – 'Ukrainians and Byelorrussians. Beetroot-eaters. Over there' – he points for Emanuel's benefit – 'we even have Africa. God knows what they eat. Down that end are Balkans – Serbs, Croats, Albanians. Best steer clear of those. Too much fighting.'

'And Angliski fishermen?'

The Bulgarian lad points at the end of the pier.

'That's where all Angliskis go. Right up to end. Past Balkans. You can tell which is Angliski. Every one wears woollen hat. Even women. Pulled down over ears. Even in summer. Very good at fishing.'

'You get good fishing?'

'Plenty. Plenty fish everywhere. Easy money.'

Andriy glances down into the lad's bucket. There are a few tiddlers. Who does he think he's kidding?

'How long you been doing this fishy thing?'

The lad looked shifty. 'Few days.'

'Where you get this fish line and bucket?'

'Man by pier. Same like you. Easy money.'

'Easy for him.'

The Bulgarian lad looks away and fiddles with his fishing rod. Andriy feels like thumping him, but what's the point?

'He says plenty plenty mackerel coming this morning,' the lad calls plaintively to Andriy's disappearing back. Poor mutt, doesn't even realise it's the afternoon.

'I go find Africa!' Emanuel heads off towards the two black figures hunched over their rod near the angle of the dog-leg.

Andriy picks up his bucket and rod and goes off to find the Ukrainians. They are two thin-faced youths, one with a shaven knobby head, one with a sticking-up Klitschko-style crew cut.

'Hi, lads.'

'Hi, mate.'

'Any luck?'

'Not much.'

In fact, judging from the content of their buckets, none at all.

'Where you from?'

'Vinnitsa. You?'

'Donetsk.'

Andriy positions himself in the small gap beside them and takes a look at his rod – he's paid for it, so he'd better try to get his money's worth. Then realises he didn't get any bait. He asks the lads if he can borrow some.

'No need for bait. Just stick feather. Mackerel go for feather. They think it's fish,' says the knobby-headed one.

'Must be bit stupid.'

'Yeah. Huh huh huh,' the lad sniggers.

'Does anyone ever catch anything?'

'Yeah. Course. They must do.'

'I mean, enough to pay for rod and bucket?'

'Yeah, I reckon somebody must. Why d'you get blue bucket?'

He notices their bucket is yellow.

'Blue, yellow. What's the difference?'

'Blue is you rent. You give back at end of day. Yellow is you keep. Use every day.'

'You mean I give back bucket at end of day? Even if I catch nothing?'

'Maybe you are his fish, and he has caught you.' The knobby-headed lad grins. 'Not even with any feather. Huh huh huh.'

'Devil's bum!'

Andriy looks up and down the pier. There are mostly yellow buckets, a few blue ones, and some buckets of other colours, red, green, black, grey. Really you've got no one but yourself to blame, Andriy Palenko, for listening to that moon-faced cretin. He counts the yellow and blue buckets and tries to calculate how much profit Mr Tattoo has made in a day. Easy money.

Over in Africa, Emanuel seems to have been abandoned by the others and left in charge of their fishing gear. What's going on? There is something about Emanuel that brings out a protective impulse in Andriy: he too is an innocent soul lost in this mobilfon world. Andriy gives him a thumbs-up sign, but Emanuel doesn't notice. He is staring intently at the sea.

Andriy also stares down at the waves, their dismal unpromising churning, their slap and gurgle against the concrete, the obscure and disgusting-looking bits of debris that come to the surface from time to time. The sea is very overrated, he thinks.

The next time he catches Emanuel's eye, Emanuel is looking agitated and beckons him over. He seems quite distressed.

'Africa Mozambique men say please look after our fishy things, we go for toilet. One hour. Two hour. Still not coming back.'

What on earth is he talking about?

'No problem, friend.' Andriy lays a soothing hand on his arm. 'Everything normal.'

This is strange, he thinks. Why is this bucket red?

After a couple of hours, the Mozambicans have still not come back and the two Ukrainian lads, having caught four fish between them, are celebrating with a roll-up cigarette and a bottle of beer and then a few more bottles. They offer him a bottle, but he shakes his head. He likes a beer as much as the next man, but there's something desperate about the way these lads are drinking. He's seen it on the Donets often enough – a lad has a beer, then a few more, then for a laugh he jumps into the river to cool off, and that's it: bye-bye, body never found, end of story.

A cool breeze has sprung up, and those that have brought jackets zip them up; those that haven't, including Andriy

and Emanuel, start to shiver. The slap and gurgle of the sea gets stronger, and sometimes a spray of water splashes over them. The tide has come up. At one point there is a ripple of excitement along the pier. A shoal of mackerel has been spotted, and is definitely on its way. But it never seems to arrive.

As evening approaches, most of the fishermen are ready to call it a day. There have been a few bigger fish caught up at the Angliski end; the Balkans, too, have had a run of luck, and a fight has broken out over who gets what. Andriy still hasn't caught anything.

'Hey, pal,' says the Klitschko-crew-cut Ukrainian, 'you should keep on to that rod and bucket. Why give it back to Mr Tattoo? Then at least you get something for your money. Five quids is robbery. Better get yellow like us next time. Investing for future.'

Hm. There seems to be some logic in what the Ukrainian is saying.

'But Tattoo man waiting for us at end of pier?'

'You can get past him easy. Look, Ukrainian boy, we help you a bit. We put your blue bucket inside our yellow one.' He takes the bucket and with a quick slop transfers the four little fishes. 'See? We take one rod each. We meet you at pub – over there.' He points. 'You buy us pint of beer, and rod and bucket will be for you to keep.' He gives a big toothy grin. 'OK?'

'OK.'

Andriy wonders if there's a catch, but if you can't trust a fellow Ukrainian, who can you trust?

Suddenly he hears a shout from the Africa sector of the pier.

'Reel it in! Turn the reel!' A big man in a woolly hat is instructing Emanuel, who is wrestling with a rod that is bent right over into an arc. He tries to turn the reel, but it seems stuck and he starts to tug and jerk.

'Steady, steady,' says the woolly-hat. 'Wind her in gently.'

Emanuel starts to wind again; then something great and silver breaks the surface of the water, thrashing and splashing against the waves. There is a stir of excitement from the other fishermen, and suddenly everyone has gathered round to watch. The creature is massive, wild, and fighting for its life. Carefully, Emanuel reels it in, then with an incredible flip lands it on the pier, where it bucks and slaps against the concrete.

'Get it in the bucket!' someone shouts, but it is too big for the bucket.

'Haven't you got a net?' someone else shouts.

'Or a knife? Get a knife to it!'

'No!' cries Emanuel.

He puts the still-trembling fish into the Mozambicans' red bucket, nose down in a few inches of water, its huge tail bent sideways and quivering above the rim. Andriy pushes through the crowd to pat him on the back.

'Good job, my friend. We sell this fish make good money.'

Several woolly-hats have arrived on the scene, and everyone is talking excitedly about how much the fish

will weigh, with the highest bid coming in at twelve kilos.

Mr Tattoo is waiting at the exit, stopping people with blue buckets as they come out. His sidekick has a spring scale and they are weighing the puny catches and doling out puny amounts of money. His eyes light up when they see the giant fish in Emanuel's bucket.

'Nice bit of cod you got there, mate. Big as a nigger's dick,' says Mr Tattoo. 'Unusual for this time of year. Want to stick it on the scale?'

'This fish is not for selling. Is for me,' says Emanuel with emphasis. 'I catch. I keep.'

Mr Tattoo's eyes narrow. The mermaid on his bicep seems to frown.

'Fair enough, mate. Catchers keepers. It's a free country. But you got to give your rod and bucket back now.'

He reaches for the rod. Emanuel grips it tighter.

'No! This is rod and bucket of Mozambique Africa men.'

A small crowd has gathered. Andriy loiters on the edge of the crowd, trying to make himself invisible.

'What about the gear we hired you?' Mr Tattoo can't take his eyes off the fish. 'You got to give it back now, chum. Givee backee bucketee. Or givee fishee. Comprenday?' He has raised his voice.

'No!' Emanuel is getting flustered. 'This bucketee is of my Mozambique friends go toilet.'

Mr Tattoo grimaces. 'Yuk! That's disgusting. Don't

you black-boys get potty-trained? There's toilets at the end of the pier.'

Pleased with himself, he looks around the crowd for approval. Andriy is keeping his head down. He is waiting for the moment to melt away and get out of the quay unnoticed, but the sidekick spots him and makes to grab him.

'There he is. That's him what got the gear off of us.'

'That was not me. That must be other Ukrainian.' Andriy sidesteps quickly. 'The one that was with dog.' He wants to make a run for it, but he can't abandon Emanuel.

From the corner of his eye he can see that the other Ukrainians have cleared the quayside and are making their way over the roundabout, his blue bucket cunningly concealed inside their yellow one.

Another woolly-hat fisherman steps forward from the crowd and challenges Mr Tattoo.

'Let him have the fish, Bert. A fisherman's got to keep his catch.'

'You keep out of it, Derek,' says Mr Bert Tattoo. 'The bugger's trying to nick off with me tackle. And he's been using the bucket for a toilet.'

He looms over Emanuel menacingly and grabs the handle of the bucket.

'Give me the tackle or give me the fish. Tidge, sort him out.'

Tidge steps forward menacingly.

'Hang on a minute, Bert. That ent your bucket. It's a red one. It must be one of Charlie's.'

The Bulgarian lad, who has been waiting for his catch to be weighed, is getting impatient, and now he pushes forward and tries to slip his three measly tiddlers on the scale. But Mr Tattoo is having none of it.

'Dogfish. No use to me. I told you yesterday. Are yer thick, or what? Eat 'em yerself. Or give 'em to the dog.'

As if summoned, suddenly Dog appears across the road, wagging his tail.

Andriy sees Dog. He also sees that the two Ukrainians have walked right past the pub, and are heading off up the road. They have broken into a trot. Devil's bum! The thieving rat-faced scoundrels!

He breaks out of the crowd, grabs Emanuel's fish out of the bucket, and starts to run after them.

'Here, give me that fish!' yells Mr Tattoo, dropping the bucket and lunging forward. He grabs hold of its tail. It slithers out of Andriy's hand, and then, as if alive, it skips out of Mr Tattoo's hand too and slides across the ground flapping its tail. A dozen hands reach for it at once.

'Let the fisherman keep his catch! It's a lawful size!' shouts Derek.

'That red bucket must be one of Charlie's. Before 'e kicked it. God rest his soul!' cries another woolly-hat.

Bending and shoving like a rugby scrum, they try to grasp the fish, which is still thrashing about between their feet. Dog watches with interest from the sidelines. It seems as though Mr Tattoo has it at last, but he can't get a grip on it. Then suddenly, like the cavalry charging

in, Dog launches himself from the edge of the action, makes a low tackle between the legs, grabs the fish in his jaws, and he's off.

*

I AM DOG I RUN I RUN WITH FISH FOR MY MAN
BIG LIVE FISH FLAP FLAP I HOLD IT TIGHT IN
MOUTH TAKE CARE NO BITING GOOD DOG MY
MAN LIKES FISH I WILL BRING THIS FISH TO MY
MAN I RUN MEN RUN AFTER ME BIG PISS-ON-
TROUSER MAN RUNS AFTER ME HE SHOUTS I RUN
FASTER I RUN ON ROAD I RUN ON SMALL STONES
BESIDE BIG-WATER RUNNING MEN ARE FAR
BEHIND HERE IS ONLY BIG-WATER I SLOW I
TURN I WALK I WILL BRING THIS FISH LIVE TO
MY MAN I WALK BESIDE BIG-WATER THIS WATER
IS BAD IT JUMPS AT ME WITH SNAKE NOISE
SSSS FEET WET I BARK WOOF OFF I BARK MOUTH
OPEN FISH JUMPS OUT OF MOUTH INTO BIG-
WATER FLAP FLAP SSSS WOOF FLAP SSSS
BIG-WATER SWALLOWS FISH ALL GONE I HAVE
NO FISH FOR MY MAN I AM SAD DOG I RUN HOME
I RUN I AM DOG

*

Andriy is sitting on the step of the caravan by the beach waiting for Emanuel and Dog. His forehead is covered in sweat. He is drinking water out of a bottle and brooding darkly on the events of the afternoon. He caught those lads; he ran all the way up the hill after them, and he caught them and asked for his gear back. And they just

laughed at him. Rat-faced thieving Ukrainian scum. And when he made a grab for the bucket, the lad with the Klitschko crew cut drew a knife on him. Well, he backed off, of course. He wasn't going to risk his life for a stolen blue bucket. But the incident left him feeling depressed. What's happening to his country? What's happening everywhere? His dad is dead and all his dreams and ideals are dead with him: solidarity, humanity, self-respect. All the things he believed in have turned to dust, and the new world is run by mobilfonmen.

Later, when Emanuel comes back with the Mozambicans' rod and bucket, he brightens up a bit.

*

Dear Sister

I am now in Dover. All the mzungus expecting Andree have departed and in place of picking strawberries I am now a fisherman. This stirs me up with memories of our happy childhood days beside the Shire River and I wonder what has become of you my sister and whether we will ever meet again. If my letters receive you please come to Dover where you will find me always on the pier for I have become like one of the Disciples of Our Lord at Galilee but our fishing here is not with netting but with rods.

When we came upon the pier we met a mzungu who had an outstanding tattoo on his arm it was a picture of a woman who was half a fish combing her hair and looking in a mirror shaped like a heart. The fulsome wavings of the woman's hair obscured her nakedness

and down below were modest fish scales which glimmered as the mzungu moved his arm. And a story fizzed into my memory told by some fishermen who adventure on the Mozambican shore of our lake of a beautiful woman whose bottom half is fish who sits on a rock and lures sailors to their deaths. Could this be the same one!!!

And on this pier I fell into the company of some Mozambican fishermen who were friends of our cousin Simeon's brother-in-law in Cóbucé. And after some chatter they confided their rod and bucket to me and went away. When they did not return I was confounded for I could not leave their things having in memory the Chichewa saying *a man's rod is his dearest treasure* and I prayed for their return. After some whilings a great fish came upon my rod which made me tremble for this fish resembled the beautiful woman of the story and it was an outstanding big job to lift her from the sea with all the mzungus crowding round and shouting in their languages. As her flappings became weaker I put her in a bucket of water for she was tormented in breathing and I wondered again about the Mozambicans was she my fish or theirs??? For she was the most resplendent fish I have ever met and reminded me of the woman in the story.

And this question was subtly resolved by the dog who grabbed the fish in his jaws and put her back in the sea. And every day since then I have come to the pier with the bucket and rod of the Mozambicans but neither they nor the fish have ever returned.

*

The office was through a door across the courtyard. Tomasz thought at first that there was no one there, then a tall skinny man with a terrible rash of acne on his cheeks popped up behind the desk. He looked delighted to see Tomasz.

'Yes, mate, right. You've come at the right time. I'm Darren Kinsman, the foreman. We've got another bloody supermarket promotion starts next week – buy one get one free – and we're short of hands for the catching team. We usually do it at night, but the team's got another job at Ladywash and they've got to get going. It's easy. All you got to do is catch the birds and load them onto the lorries. Nothing to it. My boy Neil'll show you the ropes. Start in half an hour.'

'No problem.' Tomasz wondered when would be the right moment to raise the question of his accommodation.

'Then all you have to do is scrub out the barn for the next crop. Nothing to it.'

'How many chicken?'

'Plenty. Forty thousand.'

'Ah.' Tomasz tried to imagine forty thousand chickens, but his imagination failed.

'Where you from, pal? Ukraine? You got papers? SAWS? Concordia?'

'Poland.'

'Poland, eh? You won't need papers then. Don't get many from there now. Not since they joined Europe. Listen, pal – what's your name?' He glances down at the passport Tomasz has pushed across the desk. 'Tomasz? – you work for the agency, not for us, if anybody asks

you, OK? You get six quid an hour, but for every hour you work you do another voluntary, OK?’

‘So is six quids for one hour, or two hour?’

‘No, six quid an hour. The other hour is voluntary, like I said. You don’t have to do it. There’s always plenty that do. Ukrainians, Romanians, Bulgarians, Albanians, Brazilians, Mexicans, Kenyans, Zimbabweans, you lose track. Jabber jabber jabber round here. Day and night. It’s like United bloody Nations. We used to get a lot of Lithuanians and Latvians, but Europe ruined all that. Made ’em all legal. Like the Poles. Waste of bloody time. Started asking for minimum wages. Chinesers are the best. No papers. No speekee English. No fuckin’ clue what’s goin’ on. Mind you, some folk do take advantage. Like them poor bleeders down at Morecambe. Jabber jabber jabber into the mobile phone, tide comin’ in, and nobody’s got a clue what they’re on about. What’s the point of having foreigners if you got to pay ’em same as English, eh? That’s why we went over to the agency. Let them take care of all that.’

Darren finished the paperwork and with a flourish thrust the passport back across the desk to Tomasz. Tomasz understood from this that he was now in some oblique way employed by Vitaly. He was getting a bad feeling about this job.

‘And accommodation is provided?’

‘By another agency. Well, it’s the same really. They’ll deduct that from your wages, so you don’t have to worry about it. Health. Tax. Insurance. Transport. They take care of all that for you.’

‘And the house is this one . . .’ He pointed across the road.

‘That’s it, pal. On the left. Didn’t Milo take you there?’

‘Yes, I saw. It was very full.’

‘Don’t worry about that. They’ll all be gone by seven o’clock. They’re the night shift. We bus ’em off to Shermouth.’

*

‘I’ll put a good word in for you, Irina.’ Boris led me up the steps to the office at the Sherbury strawberry farm. Obviously he thought I’d proved myself sufficiently. Next time he tried anything, I’d put a knee in his gut.

The first thing the woman at the desk asked was, ‘Have you got your papers? I need your passport and a valid Seasonal Agricultural Worker’s certificate.’

I explained that all my papers had been stolen. She raised her eyebrows, if you can call them that, though they were really just two little arches drawn in pencil.

‘The agent who brought me here. He tried . . . He wanted . . . He took me . . .’

I didn’t know the English words to explain the horror of it. ‘He kept my papers.’

The woman nodded. ‘Some agents do, though they’re not supposed to. We’ll have to sort it out if you want to work at Sherbury. We don’t do illegals here. Some supermarkets get a bit funny. Leave it with me. I’ll have to make some phone calls. Do you remember the agent’s name?’

'Vulk. His name was Vulk.' Just saying it made me shudder.

'I think I've heard the name. And the farmer?'

'Leapish. Not far away from here.'

The little bald eyebrows bounced up again. In my opinion, people should leave their eyebrows alone.

'The one who was run down by his strawberry-pickers? Did you have anything to do with that?'

'Oh, no. I had no idea. It must have happened after I left.'

OK, so it was a lie, but only a small one.

'So why did you leave?'

'Not enough ripe strawberries to pick. I wanted to earn more money.'

OK, two small lies. The woman nodded. She seemed happy with my answer.

'You'll earn good money here. After expenses.' That word again! 'Mind you, I wouldn't be surprised if they used a bent agent. There was some funny goings-on on that farm.' The woman dropped her voice. 'They say that Lawrence Leapish was having it off with one of the pickers, and Wendy Leapish had a Moldavian toy boy.'

What on earth, I wondered, was a Moldavian toy boy?

'They say that after her husband came out of hospital, she sat him in the wheelchair and let him watch their carrying-ons. Can you believe it – here in Sherbury?'

'That also must have happened after I left.'

The arch-eyebrow woman scribbled some notes. I have seen a number of eyebrow disasters in Ukraine, including Auntie Vera's, but these were among the worst. She

gave me a temporary number, until my paperwork was sorted out, and assigned me to an empty bunk in caravan thirty-six, with Oksana. There were two other Ukrainian girls there too, all ex-factory workers from a closed footwear factory at Kharkiv that used to supply boots to the Soviet army, and they all had certificates from the same non-existent agricultural college as me.

'Welcome to the crazyhouse,' said Lena, who was the youngest of us four, with very dark sad eyes and hair cropped like a boy's. She produced a bottle of vodka from her locker and passed it round. I was going to say 'No thanks', but instead I said 'What the hell' and took a large gulp.

See, Mother, Pappa? I'm OK. Everything's OK. As soon as I could get to a phone, I'd ring them. I wondered what had happened to the picture of them that I'd stuck on the wall of the caravan. I wondered what happened to the caravan, and the people – the Chinese girls whose bed I'd shared; Marta who was so kind; the nice-looking Ukrainian miner from Donetsk. Would I ever see them again?

*

Tomasz is finding it hard to imagine what forty thousand chickens would look like, and even after he has seen them with his own eyes, he still can't quite believe what he has seen.

When Neil opens the door of the barn for him to look inside, a wave of heat and stench hits him, and in the

half-darkness he sees just a thick carpet of white feathers; then as Neil turns up the light, the carpet seems to be moving; no, crawling; no, seething. They are so tightly packed you can't make out where one chicken ends and the next begins. And the smell! It hits him in the eyes as well as the nose – a rank cloud of raw ammonia that makes his eyes burn, and he coughs and backs away from the door, his hand over his mouth. He has seen paintings of the damned souls in hell, but they are nothing compared with this.

'Plenty of chickens, eh?' says Neil, who has been assigned to look after him. He is Darren's son, seventeen years old, skinny and tall like his father, and with the same acne problems. 'So that's all you got to do – grab 'em by the legs, four or five at a time, and stuff 'em in these cages. That's all there is to it.' He slams the door of the barn.

'Plenty. Too much plenty.'

'Yeah, too much plenty. Heh heh heh.' The lad chuckles. 'That's good. It's because they grow too fat. They start off as little yeller chicks, and in six weeks they're like this – too fat to walk around on their own two feet. Mind you, you see people like that, don't you? Fat bastards. Did you read about that woman who had to have two seats on a plane, and they charged her double fare?'

'Double fare?' Tomasz wishes the lad wouldn't talk so fast.

'You can get some overalls at the office.'

'But this is normal?'

Tomasz still cannot take in what he has seen. Just in the area in front of him – in about a square metre – Tomasz counted one, two, three . . . twenty chickens, all jostling together desperate to get out of the way of the men. Yes, they call them chickens, but their bodies look more like a misshapen duck's – huge bloated bodies on top of stunted little legs, so that they seem to be staggering grotesquely under their own weight – those of them that can move at all.

'Yeah, they breed 'em like that to get fat, like, quicker.' Neil pulls a packet of cigarettes out of his pocket, puts one between his lips, and offers one to Tomasz. Tomasz shakes his head. Neil lights the cigarette with a match, puffing lots of smoke out, and at once starts coughing and sputtering. 'It's the supermarkets, see? They go for big breasts. Like fellers, eh?' Cough cough. 'Did you see that woman on *Big Brother*?'

'Who is big brother?'

'Don't you know *Big Brother*? What do they have on telly where you come from? It's where they lock 'em all up together in a house, and you can watch 'em.'

'Chickens?'

'Yeah, yeah, just like chickens. I like that.' The lad chuckles again. Actually, he's quite a nice lad, thinks Tomasz. Friendly and talkative. About the same age as Emanuel, with the same gawky innocence. 'And there's this voice that's like telling 'em like what they've got to do. And they're not supposed to have sex, but one of 'em did – that one with the big, like, knockers I was telling you about.'

'Big like knocker?'

'Yeah, massive.'

'But how can they walk when the breasts are so large? How can you tend so many?'

The lad gives him an odd look.

'Is that like . . . what 'appens . . . like . . . in your country?'

'In Poland everybody . . .'

'Poland?' There is a note of awe in the lad's voice. 'Wow. Never been there. So the women've all got big knockers?'

'Yes, many people has. Keep it in shed at side of house.'

'Oh, you mean chickens.' A flush of enlightenment creeps over his youthful face.

'Of course. We have to look after it.'

'Oh, it's all taken care of, in here.' The lad looks oddly disappointed. 'See them pipes? That's where the water comes in, see? And the food comes in down there. As much as they can eat, cos they want to fatten 'em up fast. Fast food, eh? Geddit? They keep the lights on low, so they never stop for a kip – just keep on feeding all night. Bit like eating pizza in front of the telly. The low lights calm 'em down. That's why they usually catch 'em at night. It's all scientific, like.'

'But so many together – this cannot be healthy.'

'Yeah, it's all taken care of. They mix the feed with that anti-bio stuff, like, to stop 'em getting sick. Better than't National Elf, really, everyfink provided. Best fink is, when you eat the chicken, you get all the anti-bio, so it keeps you helfy, too, if you fink about it. Prevention is better than cure, as my Nan says. Like Guinness.'

'And cleaning up mess?'

'Nah, they don't do that. Can't get to the floor. Too many birds. Can't get in. Just leave it. They just have to walk about in it. Chicken shit. Burns their arses, and their legs. Who'd be a chicken?' As he talks, he is zipping himself into a blue nylon overall. 'You don't want to get it on your shoes. Go right over the top. Burn yer socks off. After they've gone, that's when you go in to clean it all out, ready for the next crop.'

'Crop?'

'Yeah, it's what they call 'em. Funny, innit? You'd fink it was vegetables or somefink. Not somefink alive. But vegetables is alive, ent they? Are they? I dunno.' He scratches his head and takes another drag on his cigarette. 'Vegetables.' Cough, cough. 'One of life's great mysteries.'

Then he stubs out the cigarette, and carefully returns the unsmoked half to the packet. 'I'm just taking it up, like, steady, a few puffs at a time,' he explains. 'Building up to full strengf. Anyway, you'll need some overalls, pal. What's your name?'

'Tomasz. My friends call me Tomek.'

'Tom – Mick . . . whatever. Mind if I just call you Mick? You'll need some overalls, Mick. Let's go see if there's any left.'

They walk across to the office. At the back is a store-room, and there is a pair of blue nylon overalls hanging on a peg above a bench on which is scattered a jumble of male clothing.

'We're in luck,' says Neil.

Tomasz zips himself in. The overalls are too short in

the leg and nip around the crotch. Neil looks him up and down critically.

'Not bad. Yer a bit big for 'em. Here, you'll need these.' He passes Tomasz a ragged pair of leather gauntlets, and puts a pair on himself. 'And some boots.'

There is only one boot left, a green one, though fortunately it is the right size.

'One's better than none,' says Neil. 'Count yer blessings . . . D'you remember that song? My Nan sings that all the time. When she's not singing hymns. She's very, like, Christian, my Nan. Always says a prayer for the chickens. But she likes her Guinness. You'll have to meet her.'

'I would very much like to.'

Neil hunts around and eventually finds a black Wellington boot under the desk in the office, which is a smaller size. This is becoming quite a regular thing with me, thinks Tomasz, stowing his odd-sized trainers under the bench and putting on the odd-sized boots. Maybe it is a sign of something.

He walks back to the barn stiffly because of the tightness in the left boot and crotch.

'Ready?' says Neil. 'You'll soon get the hang of it. We'll have a practice before the team gets here. In we go.'

He opens the barn door and they wade into the roiling sea of chickens. The chickens squawk and screech and try to flap out of their way, but there is nowhere for them to go. They try to flutter upwards but their wings

are too weak for their overgrown bodies and they just scramble desperately on top of each other, kicking up a terrible stinking dust of feathers and faeces. Tomasz feels something live crunch under his foot, and hears a squawk of pain. He must have stepped on one, but really it is impossible not to.

'Grab 'em by the legs!' yells Neil, through the inferno of screeching and feathers and flying faecal matter. 'Like this!'

He raises his left hand, in which he is holding five chickens, each by one leg. The terrified birds twist and flap, shitting themselves with fear, then they seem to give up, and hang limply.

'See, it calms 'em down, holding 'em upside down.'

There is a snap, and one of the five flops and sags, its thigh dislocated, its wings still beating. At one end of the barn is a stack of plastic crates. Neil slides one out, thrusts the birds in, and pushes it shut. Then he wades into the melee for another five.

Tomasz steels himself and reaches down into the seething mass of chickens, holding his breath and closing his eyes. He grabs and gets hold of something – it must have been a wing – and the bird struggles and squeaks so pitifully in his hands that he lets go. He grabs again, and this time he gets the legs and hoists the poor creature up into the air, and not wanting to risk losing it, stuffs it straight into a cage. Then another. Then he manages to get two at a time, and then three. He can't hold more than that, because he cannot bring himself to hold them

by just one leg. After about half an hour he has filled one cage, and Neil has filled four.

'You'd better get a move on,' says Neil, 'when the catching team gets here.'

As if on cue, the barn door opens and the rest of the team arrives – they are four short dark-haired men, who are speaking in a language that Tomasz can't understand. They spread out along the length of the barn, and now the screeching and flapping intensify and the whole vast barn is a storm of feathers and dust and stench and din as they work furiously, grabbing the chickens five at a time and bundling them into the cages.

'Portugeezers,' shouts Neil to Tomasz above the racket. 'Or Brazil nuts! Respect!'

And he raises a gauntleted hand. Tomasz does the same. What is the lad talking about? Fired up by the other men's example, he grabs at the chickens with a renewed energy, and even manages to get four in one hand, holding them each by one leg. And again. And again. And again. It is exhausting work. Inside the hot nylon shell of his overall, he feels his skin running with sweat. His eyes are burning. His hair is stiff and matted with excreta. Even his nose and mouth seem clogged with the disgusting stuff.

The cages are filling up; the captive chickens, exhausted with terror, tremble and cluck hopelessly, covered in the excrement of the newly captured birds still flapping and struggling above them. After a couple of hours enough of the chickens have been caged that they can begin to

see the floor of the barn. It is a reeking wasteland of sawdust, urine and faeces in which injured and ammonia-blind birds are staggering around.

At his feet he sees a bird with a broken leg dragging itself through the muck, squawking piteously, weighed down by its monstrous breast, and he realises with a stab of remorse that it was probably he who broke the creature's leg by stepping on it.

He reaches down for it, gets it by both legs and hoists it into the air, and as he does so it swings round and he feels the other leg break, and the bird hangs there limply from its two broken legs staring at Tomasz in terror.

'I'm sorry, little chicken,' whispers Tomasz in Polish. Should he put it in a cage? He catches Neil's eye.

'Yeah, don't worry, Mick. They're always doing that.' He moves round towards Tomasz, waving four chickens in the air. 'Brittle. No strengf, see? They can't move around to build their legs up. Should get 'em playing football, eh? Chicken football. Of course some of 'em do, but the chicken's the football. Who'd be a chicken, eh?' Tomasz picks up the broken bird and puts it into a cage, where it collapses beneath a pile of other chickens that scramble on top of it. He is beginning to feel sick.

'Time for a break, pal,' says Neil.

Outside in the sunshine, they take deep gulps of air and splash themselves with water from a tap at the side of the barn. Then they slump in a line on the ground along

the wall. Neil takes out his half-cigarette and has a few puffs, coughing away with a determined look on his face.

'Getting there, getting there,' he says.

The Portuguese, or the Brazilians, light up cigarettes too. They have unzipped their overalls, and Tomasz can see that they are wearing nothing but underpants underneath. In fact one of them doesn't even seem to be wearing underpants. That is sensible, he thinks. Then he thinks about the too-tight-in-the-crotch overall that he is wearing. Who wore it before? He turns to the young man who is sitting next to him. He is a bit shorter than Neil, and probably about the same age, with curly hair and beautiful teeth.

'Portuguese?'

'Yes,' says the young man.

'Brazilian?'

'Yes.'

Tomasz points at himself.

'Polish. Poland.'

'Ah!' The young man beams. 'Gregor Lato.'

'Pele,' says Tomasz. They shake hands.

'You like football?'

'Of course,' says Tomasz, for the sake of friendship, even though it is not strictly true, as he finds all sport tedious, but if anything would prefer to watch Juvenia Krakow play rugby. It is one of those little areas of dissent he has carved out for himself, like drinking wine instead of beer and listening to foreign music.

'Later we play.' The young man's teeth flash in a smile.

'Later we play bagpipe.' The other man sitting next to him has a mad glint in his eye.

'Scottish?' Tomasz asks.

He winks at Tomasz. 'Scottish.'

As they are finishing their cigarettes a huge lorry trundles up, and the four men jump to their feet and go across to talk to the driver, who also seems to be Portuguese. Or Brazilian.

'They are from Portugal or Brazil?' Tomasz asks Neil.

'Yeah. One or the other. Some are Portugeezers pretending to be Brazils. Some are Brazils pretending to be Portugeezers.'

'They pretend to be Brazil?'

'Yeah, mad, innit? Yer see Brazils are illegal, so they get in by saying they're Portugeezers. But the Portugeezers are legal now, wiv that Europe like marketing fing, and some of 'em've been making trouble, so nobody wants to take 'em on any more. That's what me dad says.'

'They making trouble?'

'Yeah, trade unions. Minimum wage. Elf and safety. Brazils don't cause trouble, see, 'cause they're illegal. So if the Portugeezers want a job, they have to pretend to be Brazillers – Portugeezers pretending to be Brazillers pretending to be Portugeezers. Mad, innit? It's a mad mad mad world. Did you see that film? Went to see it with my Nan at Folkestone. Best film I ever seen.'

'Very.' Tomasz shakes his head.

'You ever been to Folkestone? My Nan used to take me there when I was little. They call it Folkestone

pleasure beach. Pleasure my ass. I wrote it on the road sign. If you go to Folkestone you'll see it. Pleasure Beach my ass. Yeah, I wrote that.'

'Interesting.'

'Yeah, I made my mark.'

'What is minimum wage in UK?'

'I dunno. Not much. Do you have that where you come from? Poland?'

'We have one very famous trade union. Its name Solidarnosc. You know it?'

'Sounds like something you could get yer teeth into. Solid-er nosh. Heh heh. Geddit? Yeah, I reckon I'm going to Brazil.' He throws in this bit of information so casually that Tomasz, who is still thinking about trade unions, almost misses it. He looks at the lad with renewed interest.

'So you make voyage of discovery?'

He had been like that at Neil's age, always looking for a way out. Of course, when he was seventeen, that had been in communist times, and the only journeys to be made were the inward ones. He remembers how one of his friends had got hold of a pirated tape of Bob Dylan and they had sat, four of them, in his father's car locked inside the garage, the windows misted up with their spellbound breath, listening to the music as though it was the chimes of freedom. In every life there is a moment when you can break free of taken-for-granted situations and strike out in a different direction. That evening had been a turning point in his life. He had taught himself English in order to understand the words, and a few months later he bought a second-hand guitar

from a Czech gipsy who happened to be passing through Zdroj. And he made himself a promise: one day he would come to the West.

'Voyage of discovery? Heh heh. I like that,' said Neil. 'One day, when I save up enough, I'm going to Brazil. It's my dream. Everybody's got to have a dream. That's why I'm learnin' to smoke.' He looks across at the four Portuguese-Brazilians, who have zipped up their overalls and are making their way back to the barn. 'Maybe their dream was coming to England. Come to England and work up to yer ankles in chicken shit. Funny dream, eh?'

The four Portuguese-Brazilians have started to load the crates of chickens onto the back of the lorry. They beckon to Tomasz and Neil, who reluctantly go across to join them. They have made a line and are passing the cages along to the truck, the tightly packed chickens screeching with panic as they fly through the air and land on the back of the truck with a thump. It is amazing how many cages they have filled, and yet the number of chickens in the barn hardly seems to have diminished.

After the lorry has gone, it's back into the barn for more catching and caging. The day drags on, tedious, dirty and gruelling. Tomasz's arms are aching so much he thinks they will drop off. His legs and forearms are bruised from the pecking and thrashing of the struggling birds. But worse, his soul is bruised. He is already losing his sensibility of the chickens as living sentient creatures and, through the same process, of himself also. At one point he finds himself thrusting five birds at a time into

a cage with such force that one of them breaks a wing. What is happening to you, Tomasz? What kind of a man are you becoming?

By the end of the afternoon, the floor is littered with dead and dying birds, some trodden into the sawdust and excrement, some still flapping and struggling to stay alive. Tomasz feels his own soul is like a dying bird, fluttering in the mire of . . . of . . . Maybe there is a song in this, but what chords could be plangent enough to express such desolation?

'Did we kill so many?' he whispers to Neil.

'Nah, don't worry, pal,' says Neil. 'Most of them was dead already. See if they break a leg, or if they're a bit weak, they can't make it to the feeding line, so they die of hunger. Mad, really, when there's all that food there for 'em, but they just can't get through to it. Anyway, they only live five weeks from hatchin' to catchin'. Five weeks! Not much time to develop a personality, eh?'

'Personality?'

'Yeah, that's what I'm trying to develop – a personality.'

Another lorry arrives, and trundles away into the leafy lanes with another load of screeching misery. It is time for another break. Neil carefully smokes another half-cigarette. The Portuguese-Brazilians race to the tap and splash around, laughing and wrestling each other's heads under the water. Tomasz drinks gulp after gulp from the tap, then washes his hair and face under the cold running water. To have longish hair and a beard in this situation

is definitely a disadvantage. If only he had some of Yola's nice scented soap.

'Uh-oh.' Neil looks over towards the Portuguese-Brazilians, who are becoming increasingly raucous. 'Bagpipes. Yer'd better not look at this, Mick.'

But Tomasz is transfixed.

One of them, the one with the manic eyes, has seized a bedraggled broken-legged chicken, and tucking it under his arm, its head poking out backwards behind his elbow, he is sneaking up on his friend, who is bending down to close a cage. As he straightens up, the other man squeezes the chicken hard with his elbow, like a bagpipe, and a torrent of excrement flies out of the chicken's tail end and hits the man in the face. The chicken squawks and struggles to free itself, excrement still dribbling from its behind. The victim bellows in fury, wiping his face with his hands, which just spreads it around even more. Then he grabs another chicken, sticks it backwards under his arm, and squeezes it hard at his friend with a rough pumping action. The chicken lets out a long screech of pain. Excrement flies. The older man comes rushing across, shouting at the other two to stop, skids in the slime and ends up wallowing on the ground in all the muck. The fourth man just stands and watches, clutching his sides and weeping with laughter. Neil also stands and laughs, whooping hysterically, tears pouring down his face. To his horror, Tomasz finds that he is laughing too.

The foreman pulls himself up and fires off a stream of abuse in Portuguese. Sulkily, they resume their work.

There is an edge of barely suppressed excitement as the number of birds diminishes, and catching the remaining ones becomes more challenging. It is incredibly hot, the shit on the floor steaming like a manure heap, but they still can't leave the doors of the barn open. These last few chickens are the survivors, the tough ones. They are all having to run around more, shouting and swearing, as they skid in the muck trying to corner and grab the birds.

In the end, there is just one chicken left, a large canny bird that dodges and sidesteps with amazing skill as they try to close in on it. Then one of the Portuguese-Brazilians – the football enthusiast with the beautiful teeth – catches the fleeing chicken with the tip of his boot, sending it up into the air. Its wings are too weak to carry its weight, and as it flops down the second Portuguese-Brazilian runs up and gives it a mighty kick, sending it up into the air again. It is spinning and screeching. Feathers are flying everywhere. The older man is shouting to them to stop, but the game is too exciting. The first one boots it right across the feeding trough and raises his arms in the air shouting, 'Goal! Goal!' The bird, dazed and dishevelled, picks itself up and starts to run again, limping. It is running towards Tomasz. Suddenly it stops and looks at him, its strange round eyes blinking. He looks back. They stand and face each other, man and bird. Then with a quick swoop, he bends down, grabs the bird, and holding it in both hands, dashes across the barn, opens the door and runs outside. Still holding the chicken against his chest, he sprints through the yard to

a low wire fence beyond which is a dip with a hedge at the bottom. He leans and puts the chicken down on the other side of the fence. It stands there, bewildered, blinking in the bright light. He leans over, gives it a shove and whispers in Polish, 'Run, chicken, run!' The bird hesitates for a moment, then suddenly it dashes towards the hedge as fast as its stunted little legs will carry it, and disappears into the undergrowth.

The others have followed him outside, with puzzled looks on their faces.

'What yer doing, Mick?' asks Neil.

Tomasz turns to face them with a mad grin.

'Rugby. I score.'

By the time they have finished, he is so burnt out with exhaustion that he longs for that filthy mattress with five other sweaty exhausted bodies stretched out alongside. The four Portuguese-Brazilians have gone off somewhere with the lorry driver. Tomasz is too tired to go with them, and decides instead to stretch his legs and walk down to the village to see whether he can buy something to eat. Their pair of houses is on the outskirts of Titchington, which turns out to be no more than a cluster of quaint steep-gabled cottages with gardens full of roses, clustered around a pretty medieval church. He wonders whether the villagers know the horror that is happening on their doorstep. It was said that the villagers who lived near Treblinka had only a hazy idea of what was happening behind the barbed wire fence a few kilometres away. They, like the villagers of Titchington,

must have been bothered by the smell when the wind blew in a certain direction.

There is no shop or pub. He realises with dismay that he has nothing to eat, and there is nowhere to buy anything. When he gets back to the house, it is empty. The sleepers have all disappeared – there is nothing but their lingering smells and their shabby holdalls and overflowing carrier bags lined up against the walls to remind him they were there. He hunts around in the cupboards and finds some slices of stale bread and a tin of tomatoes. In a drawer in the kitchen there is a tin opener. He eats the tomatoes just like that, out of the tin, mopping out the juice with stale bread. At the end, he still feels hungry. If only there were some pilchards. Or some chocolate biscuits. And a nice glass of wine. Chianti. Rioja. He wonders where Yola and Marta are, and what they are eating. Rabbit maybe. Or fish. He imagines he can smell the dish, fragrant with herbs, and Yola, smelling of soap, passing a plate to him and smiling. *Come, eat, Tomek.*

Then there is a knock on the door and, without waiting for him to open it, Neil walks in. He has changed out of his overalls into jeans and a black leather jacket, and he has a motorcycle helmet under his arm. In his other hand, he is holding something in a paper bag.

'Here, Mick. I got this for you. Solid-er nosh.'

The bag is warm. Tomasz opens it. Inside, in a foil container, is a small chicken-and-mushroom pie.

'Thank you.' He starts to unwrap it. The smell is

penetrating and delicious. It must be the tiredness, or all the pent-up horror of the chicken barn, or maybe just loneliness that makes the tears spring into his eyes. 'Thank you. You have saved me from desolation row.'

'Desolation row.' Neil nods. 'That's good. Is it a film?'

'It is song.'

'I like that.'

'And good luck with your voyage.'

'Yeah.' The lad shuffles his feet backwards towards the door. 'Yeah. I'm getting there.'

There is a full moon that night, which shines in through the open curtains of the upstairs bedroom, lighting up the five sleeping figures curled on their mattresses on the floor – five strangers, who arrived at half past midnight and made such a noise when they came in that they woke Tomasz, who had gone to bed three hours earlier. Now, despite his weariness, he can't get back to sleep. He listens to their deep, rhythmic breathing, and stares at the moon. He is thinking about the chicken – the one that ran away. Is it sleeping in the hedge tonight, under the moonlight? Is it enjoying its freedom? What is freedom?

'Yer'll be on chicken-shit clear-up for a few days. Then they're sending yer to the slaughterhouse,' Darren had said, and Tomasz had shuddered.

'Is there not another job I could do?'

'Nah, pal. Yer've got to go where they send yer.'

'Where black is the colour and none is the number.'

Darren gave him a funny look.

Is he freer here in the West today than he was in Poland in the years of communism, when all he dreamt of was freedom, without even knowing what it was? Is he really any freer than those chickens in the barn, packed here in this small stinking room with five strangers, submitting meekly to a daily horror that has already become routine? Tormentor and tormented, they are all just damned creatures in hell. There must be a song in this.

*

Yola was in a foul mood. She had discovered that morning, don't ask how, that the Slovak women who shared their hotel room had no pubic hair. How could this be permitted? Presumably they were not born this way – well, presumably they were, but acquired it in the natural course of things, and had taken unnatural steps to remove it. There are many bad things that can be said about communism, but one thing is certain, in communist times women did not abuse their pubic hair in this way – a practice which is unnatural, unsightly, undignified and, without being too specific, potentially dangerous.

Brooding on the abuses that women perpetrate on themselves and each other, Yola arrived at Buttercup Meadow Farmfresh Poultry near Shermouth already spoiling for a fight. And her mood darkened even more when she discovered that she, a woman of action with two years of supervisory experience and an advanced knowledge of Angliski way of life, and of life in general (which she will tell you about later), was not immediately appointed to a supervisory post within the plant. Instead

the supervisor of her section was a rather coarse and disagreeable Romanian woman called Geta, who spoke appalling English and had difficulty in communicating with her workforce, who were mostly Slavs and who had no conception of the importance of sexual harmony in maintaining a pleasant atmosphere in the workplace. She had a distasteful habit of spitting onto her fingers as she reached for the chicken pieces coming down the line, and Yola supposed it could only be her blond hair, which anyone but a fool could see was dyed, and her shameless bosom, which was clearly held up with latex foam and underwiring (an abomination on which Yola also has some strong opinions which she will tell you later), and her Diploma in Food Hygiene from the Polytechnic Institute at Bucharest, which anyone but a fool could see was a forgery, which had secured for her this enviable position.

Anyway, this underwired fake-diploma fake-blondie starts trying to show Yola how to put two pieces of chicken onto a polystyrene tray, which anyone would think from the way she goes on you would need a polytechnic certificate for, when all you have to do is grab two bits of breast from the conveyor belt which has all kinds of chopped-up chicken meat on it, and you don't have to spit on your hands like that fakie-Romanian does, and when Yola points this out to her she gets huffy and says, you Polish women now you legal you think you know everything but you don't know anything, and you put your two bits of breasts on tray like this, and you tuck all loose bits of fat and skin underneath to make breasts look nice and plump, which when you

think about it is just what latex foam does to fake-blondie's underwired bosom, in fact fake-blondie discloses that these chickens also have water, salt, pork meat and other stuff injected in to make them look plump, which is even worse than latex when you think about it, because you have to eat it, which you don't with latex – though things what men do nowadays nothing would surprise her – and then you just cover them with bit of cling film from this big roll, and then you send them down belt to women who do weighing and stick labels on, yellow labels for one supermarket, blue labels for another, and so on. You don't need a certificate for that, do you?

*

Marta's job is even less challenging.

When she arrived at Buttercup Meadow she made it clear that the job she wanted was feeding the chickens. But her supervisor, a nice friendly Lithuanian chap who had no front teeth, but in spite of – or maybe because of – this spoke quite good Polish, explained that there was no longer such a job, because the feeding of chickens was now completely automated on account of the mixture of hormones and antibiotics they get, and in any case the poultry barn is very smelly and is not a suitable place for a young woman of her sensitivity.

Instead, she was assigned to the part of the plant where chickens are graded. They come through from the slaughterhouse on a belt, and all Marta has to do is

examine the chickens, select those which are plump and undamaged, and place them on another belt – these are the ones which will be packaged and sold as whole birds. The birds which are a little bruised, or just have, say, a leg broken, or ammonia burns on their hocks, are left on the line, and they go through to another part of the plant where they are chopped into chicken pieces and then go through for packaging, where Ciocia Yola is doing her bit. The chickens which are very badly bruised and mangled go into a huge plastic tub, from where they will be taken and processed for the catering industry – pies, restaurants, chicken nuggets and school dinners.

At first, Marta is too engrossed in spotting and selecting the whole and undamaged birds to think very much about the process, and she doesn't question why so many birds are coming through those folding rubber doors in such a terrible state. The chickens she selects, although unfortunately dead, have a pleasant and peaceful look about them as well as good plump breasts, and she passes the time thinking up delicious recipes through which they could pass into the next world with dignity. For instance they could be stuffed with oatmeal, tarragon, lemon and garlic, or with cranberries, brown sugar and belly pork – that is her mother's favourite – or with breadcrumbs, butter and dried fruits, or with chestnuts and . . . actually chestnuts are quite nice by themselves. And they can be coated with a tasty marinade of paprika and yoghurt, or honey and horseradish, but not too much horseradish, that can be a bit strong, maybe just pepper, cracked black peppercorns that crunch when

you bite, and a sprinkle of marjoram, which is always nice with white meats.

She would like to ask the supervisor, who is quite nice for a Lithuanian, whether she could take a chicken home with her one day, to try out that horseradish recipe – of course she would pay for it – but then she remembers that they are no longer in the caravan, and there is nowhere to cook in their cramped hotel room. Well, that is one more thing that will have to wait until she gets home.

She finds that when she is not thinking of recipes or the deeds of the saints, which can get rather repetitive after a while, she is thinking increasingly of her home in Zdroj, of her older brother, who is still living with them, her mother, who is a teacher, and her father, who works at the town hall and is a colleague of Tomasz's – what, she wonders, has become of him? – and little Mirek, who is often part of their family too, when Yola is in pursuit of a new husband. And though Yola's ways are sometimes rather sinful, it is not for us to judge her, because none of us is without sin, and who knows what we would do in that situation, and it was a disgrace that the baby's father left her, walked out and left her with a Down's syndrome baby to bring up on her own.

*

'When are we going home, Ciocia?' Marta asks Yola, as they stand in the sunshine outside the plant, counting their first week's wages.

'When? When we are millionaires.' Yola smiles grimly

at her niece. Surely there has been a mistake. The wages are about a quarter of what Vitaly promised. There is a slip of paper in the envelope with them, with all kinds of incomprehensible letters and numbers. There was never any of this nonsense with old Dumpling. Just cash in hand.

'Deductions – what is this mean?' she asks Geta, who is standing nearby, also counting her wages, which look considerably more than Yola's, even though she does nothing but strut around and stick her nose into everything. At least when Yola was a supervisor she set an example through her own hard work.

'Deductions is everything what you paying,' squawks Geta in her appalling English. 'See – transports, accommodations, taxes, superannuations, Nis.'

'Nis?'

'In England, everybody paying. Is law.'

'And this one – TR. What is this?'

'This is mean trenning ret. You no skill you must hevva trenning.'

'Trenning? What is it?'

'Trenning is learn. You must learn how to do this job.'

'This job every idiot can do. How I am learn?'

'I teach, you learn. I teach you to put chicken on tray.'

'And for this I pay?'

'After two week will be normal ret.'

'And you are pay more?'

'Of course.-I supervisor ret.'

Yola feels a red-hot pressure building up inside her as though she is about to explode, and Marta has to hold

her back, and who knows what might have happened at this point were it not for the intervention of an incredibly handsome young man with long blond hair and muscles in his calves the size of prize-winning marrows such as most women can only dream of – and yes, he is wearing shorts, which most men cannot get away with but in this case it is acceptable, in fact it is excellent, because the legs are suntanned and covered with fine blond hairs, and have muscles the size of – yes, we know that already. Anyway, this godlike man steps forward and says,

‘Do you need any help with your payslip?’

Well, in this situation what woman would not?

And marrow-legs explains everything, how the superannuation is for her pension when she retires, but since she will be retiring in Poland not in England she will not see a penny of this, and she will probably not see a penny anyway because these bloodsuckers will not pay the money into any pension fund, but will put it into their own pockets to spend on Rolls-Royce cars and luxury yachts, and yes, since she has mentioned it, probably they will also buy uncomfortable underwears for their sluttish wives, and the same is with this National Insurance, and maybe the tax too – if the taxman sees any of it he will be lucky, and the deductions for transport and accommodation are not strictly illegal, but they are excessive, and he will look into it if she likes. And at the end he asks her whether she would like to join the Poultry Workers’ Union. Well, in this situation what woman would not?

★

Tomasz, too, has been recruited to the Poultry Workers’ Union by a young man wearing shorts who accosted him on the way in to work, though the young man’s legs were not a factor in persuading him – it was a deep unaccountable anger with Vitaly, and everything that he represents. That Vitaly, he is too impatient – he is so much in a hurry to get rich that he has forgotten the basics of how to be a human being. And Tomasz felt angry with himself, too: he should never have got involved in Vitaly’s schemes. He had come to England to hunt for some rare Bob Dylan numbers and see a bit of the world before he got too old, and yes, maybe even find love if it should come his way. Yet somehow he had allowed himself to be degraded to the point where he could inflict suffering on other living creatures without so much as a quiver of sentiment. He had become a pawn in their game.

It was only seven o’clock in the morning, and already two terrible things had happened to him today. When he had gone down at dawn into the squalid eating room of the house to stuff his mouth with a few slices of bread, margarine and jam – yes, he had invested in some apricot jam – before the white van came for him at six o’clock, he sat down to work on the song which he had been composing in his head during the night. And that’s when he discovered that his guitar was missing. He couldn’t believe it at first. He hunted everywhere, under the table with its debris of food scraps and crumpled wrappings from last night’s meals, in the mouldy kitchen cupboards, through the bedrooms still clogged with the

over-breathed air of exhausted sleepers, in the grimy understairs cupboard. That was it. There wasn't anywhere else to look. Someone had stolen it. One of these desperate anonymous men from some impoverished or war-blasted region of the world had stolen his guitar, and by now had probably traded it for – for what? A bottle of vodka? A chicken-and-mushroom pie?

This time he didn't even cry. What was the point?

Milo let him sit up front in the passenger seat of the van, because he was the first to be picked up. As he climbed in, he remembered with a stab of regret that he hadn't even said goodbye to Neil, his only friend. He was being taken to new accommodation in a seaside boarding house on the outskirts of Shermouth, closer to the slaughterhouse of the processing plant where he was due to begin work at six-thirty. If he'd been sitting in the back, he probably wouldn't have seen it; but up there in the front seat, he couldn't miss it: there, right on the bend in front of them, the squashed remains of a white chicken that had been killed on the road. So that's where its freedom had ended. Milo put his foot down and ran right over it. There must be a song in this, thought Tomasz; then he remembered about his guitar.

But if there was one thing which brought home to him how much he and the chickens really had in common, it was what happened later that morning: the incident of the Chinese slaughterman's thumb.

When the chickens arrived at the slaughterhouse, Tomasz's job was to hang them up by the feet in shackles suspended from a moving overhead conveyor, where they dangled, squawking hopelessly, especially those with broken legs (though by now he was immune to the squawking), as the conveyor despatched them, head first, through a bath of electrified water, which was supposed to stun them, before their throats were cut with an automatic blade. But just in case the water didn't work or the blade missed, which was often enough, there were a couple of slaughtermen standing by to slit their throats before they were sent through to the steam room, where they were plunged into the scalding tank to loosen the feathers. Then they were mechanically de-feathered and de-footed before being eviscerated by another team of slaughtermen.

The slaughtermen were Chinese, skilled with the knives, but they were a bit short for the height of the overhead belt, so they couldn't always see what they were doing; and it just so happened that one of them grabbed at a bird that had got stuck in the automatic foot-cutter, and somehow managed to slice off the end of his thumb, just above the first joint. At first you couldn't even hear him screaming because of the noise of the chickens. Tomasz stopped the line and rushed off to find the supervisor, who immediately got onto his mobile phone and started shouting for another slaughterman to be sent, while the rest of them hunted around for the bit of thumb among the blood, droppings and feathers on the slaughterhouse floor; but it had disappeared, and all the while the man

was yelling and moaning and clutching his hand in a fist to try and stop the bleeding. In the end, they gave up on finding the piece, and somebody just drove him to the hospital to be stitched up as best they could.

Then the supervisor started shouting at Tomasz for stopping the line: 'We're losing money, yer twat, just get the bloody line moving, so we can get some bloody chickens coming through. What d'yer think this is, bloody Butlins?'

He looked only a few years older than Neil, without the acne, but also without the charm.

'Here.' He handed Tomasz the slaughterman's knife, still covered with blood, though whether it was his or the chickens' he couldn't tell. 'You'd better take over, 'til the replacement gets 'ere.'

If I were to lose my finger, Tomasz thought, I could no longer play the guitar.

'Gloves. I need leather gloves.'

The supervisor looked at Tomasz with narrowed eyes.

'Are you some kind of troublemaker?'

'Same gloves we had in chicken catching. Without such gloves this work is dangerous.' For some reason, he still felt angry not so much with the supervisor, nor the owners of the plant, but with Vitaly.

'Listen, mate, people been doin' this work without gloves for nearly two years.'

'And?'

'We've only lost three fingers. Well, four if you count this thumb.'

'Without gloves I will not do it.'

'Where're you from?' asked the supervisor.

'Poland.' Tomasz smiled, knowing it was not the answer the man wanted.

'Oh, I should've guessed. Effin' troublemakers. You'll be wantin' bleedin maternity pay next. Here, wait. You keep shacklin' while I find some friggin' gloves.'

'No,' said Tomasz. 'Even for shackle work is need gloves.'

The supervisor went a horrible purple colour.

'Listen, yer bloody Polish big girl's blouse, next time I get any lip from you, it's down the road. It's only because we've lost this chuffin' Chinaman, else yer'd be down the road now.'

But he went and found a pair of gloves.

Tomasz pulled them on slowly, pensively, one finger at a time. There was another phrase that nasty supervisor had used that got him thinking about Yola: where was she? What was she doing? Was she thinking of him?

*

In the rest of the plant, the sudden stillness of the conveyor belt created a welcome break. Yola sighed and looked around. She hadn't realised how noisy that conveyor was until it stopped. The narrow windows of the packing room were too high to look out of, but shafts of sunlight were angling in up there, with their bright reminder of summer. How had she become trapped in this place? The pressure in her bladder was becoming more insistent, but the thought of asking Geta's

permission to use the lavatory was just too humiliating. She held on. All around her people were taking the opportunity to relax, chat to their neighbours. Two of the Slovaks even tried to nip outside for a cheeky fag break, and Geta rushed out after them yelling, 'No smok! No fudigin!'

Yola thought this would be a good time to sneak out through the door unnoticed, but Geta spotted her and insisted on accompanying her, claiming it was her responsibility to make sure that the toilet opportunities were not abused, especially by Poles and Ukrainians, the devil only knows what they get up to in there, sometimes you could see the smoke coming out under the door. How can you be expected to relax and enjoy a nice toilet break when this underwired harridan is standing outside and trying to hurry things along by rapping on the door and telling you to get a move on? Yola stayed firmly locked in for an unnecessarily long time, and made all kinds of toilet noises, just to annoy her.

'And don't forget to wash hand after,' snapped Geta.

'Why you say this to me?' hissed Yola, from behind the still-locked lavatory door. 'I am a teacher not a piggy.'

'I am fudigin qualify you not,' squawked Geta.

'I piss on your certificate.'

'Not certificate, diploma.'

'I defecate on your diploma.'

She farted noisily.

*

Marta, meanwhile, went round and chatted to the young women on the other side of her belt, who turned out to

be Ukrainians from the west, and one of them had been to Poland though not to Zdroj. So, like many people all around the plant, she was away from her position when suddenly the belt started up again with a judder, and she had to race round to catch the first chickens going through. She picked them up off the line; there was something repulsively solid and wooden about them – in fact it was just as if they had been cooked – boiled – complete with their feet still on and their innards inside them. While she was wondering what to do with these horrible whole-boiled birds, another bird came through that was definitely not boiled alive, in fact though it had lost most of its feathers it seemed fairly intact, as though it had bypassed foot-cutting and evisceration altogether. As she reached for it, the poor, limp, featherless thing started to struggle in her hands. It was still alive. Then the next one came through, and to her horror, it was alive, too. Or half alive. And then another. The line had picked up speed now, and was going at its usual pace. What should she do?

She grabbed the three half-alive birds off the line, and started to scream.

The Lithuanian supervisor was the first to arrive. He laid a soothing arm round her shoulder and offered her a handkerchief. Geta, having abandoned her thankless toilet vigil, was next on the scene. The live birds had by now recovered from their shock and were scuttling around the factory floor. The boiled birds had moved on down the line, and there were more half-alive birds

coming through, faster and faster. Geta started shouting at Marta, and at the featherless chickens that were scurrying here and there between everybody's legs, and at the Lithuanian supervisor, who shouted back that Marta was a sensitive type, and should not be upset.

'Polish is not sensible, is lazy bastard!' Geta shouted, which was too much for Marta, who burst into tears. Then one of the chickens made a dash through the door which Geta had left open, and the others followed, straight through into the packing room. At the far end of the packing room another door opened, and Yola, having realised that the live audience for her toilet noises was no longer listening, was sauntering back into the plant. Seeing the chickens darting towards her, she naturally held the door open for them. And they were gone.

'Sack! Sack! You sack!' shouted Geta, her face blotched with fury, and gave Yola a little shove.

'Sack yourself!' Yola shouted, and shoved her back.

Yola was not without friends in the breast area, and friends of friends in drumsticks and thighs, and Marta was not going to stand by and let her aunt be insulted, so Geta suddenly found herself surrounded by an angry crowd demanding that she apologise and reinstate Yola at once.

*

Meanwhile, news of the Chinese slaughterman's thumb had spread like wildfire around the plant. In the eviscer-

ation room, it was his whole thumb that had been cut off; by the time it reached drumsticks and thighs, the poor man had lost his whole hand; and in weighing and labelling, his arm had had to be amputated above the elbow. The Chinese were marching around stamping their feet and chanting incomprehensibly, their pockets bulging with chickens' feet, while others were unshackling the chickens, which were tumbling dead and half-dead onto the belt and the floor.

All at once several doors of the plant flew open, and out into the bright sunshine of the yard poured the workforce. The three naked chickens were still there, clucking around and wondering what would happen next.

Tomasz noticed that the blond man with impressive calf muscles who had recruited him to the union was still hanging about by the gate. He looked as though he had been about to get on his bike and call it a day, but turned back when he saw the commotion in the precinct. Then Tomasz spotted Yola. She came bursting out of one of the doors, rushed up to the union man in a dramatic manner and threw her arms around him. So Tomasz's joy at finding her was tempered with desolation at finding her in the arms (well, almost) of another man.

'She say sack! She say you sack!' she was wailing.

'Hold on, hold on.' The union man's voice was calm, but with a nervous edge. 'Let's establish a procedure. Is anyone from management here?'

Geta came forward at once. 'Is Polish no good working. Too much toilet. Chicken run away.'

The three liberated chickens clucked wildly, as though to prove her point.

'Hold on,' said the union man, his voice now sounding more nervous than calm. 'Let's just get the facts. What chickens are we referring to here?'

Now the slaughterhouse supervisor, the one who had argued with Tomasz about the gloves, pushed his way through the crowd.

'Listen, mate, I don't know who you are or what you're doing here, but you can bugger off. OK?' He turned to Geta. 'Shut up. Don't talk to him. This wanker's a nobody. We don't want him on the premises.'

'Hold on. I'm the representative of . . .'

'Bugger off or I'll call the police.'

Suddenly the Chinese men from the evisceration room arrived on the scene, and they were still carrying their fearsome-looking knives. They started shouting and waving the knives in the air, and though no one could understand what they were saying, you could see that they were pretty mad. The supervisor got his mobile phone out, but one of them knocked it from his hand onto the floor, and stamped on it again and again until it was completely smashed.

'Hold on!' The union man held up his hand. 'No violence, comrades. I'm sure we can resolve this through peaceful negotiation.'

The supervisor looked only fleetingly grateful.

'Listen, matey, the only negotiation I'm interested in is getting these dossers back to work.'

'Hold on. Hold on. First we must hear their grievances.'

There was a clamour of voices and squawks. Everybody seemed to have a grievance, even the chickens.

'Every minute that line's stopped, we're losing money. It's all very well sayin' hold on friggin' this, hold on bleedin' that, but the soddin' supermarkets don't hold on, do they? Buy one get one free, mate. That's what we got to give 'em. By Friday. Otherwise we lose the supermarket contract and it's bye-bye Buttercup Meadow, and all these friggin' tossers that's shoutin' for workers' rights can say bye-bye to their bleedin' jobs.'

'Well, all the more reason to resolve matters speedily. Now . . .'

'OK, tell 'em if they get back to work now we'll meet all their demands.'

Tomasz could see that this union man was getting nowhere, and that the supervisor was out to trick them. He jumped onto an upturned crate and cupped his hands around his mouth.

'This is no matter for negotiation! It is violation of human dignity! And chicken!'

Yola spun round. 'Tomek!'

*

One of the annoying things about men, Yola has observed, is that you spend years looking for a good one, then two come along at once. This blond-haired man with calf muscles like prize-winning marrows would be any woman's dream, and those blond hairs on his legs, what woman wouldn't like to . . . But let's be realistic,

he is in England and probably you will not be able to persuade him to come to Poland, and even if you did, what would he do there? Only make trouble. And this Tomasz, although he has certain defects he is getting better, and she is confident that if she could scrub him up with a bit of nice-smelling soap and get rid of those socks which are probably nylon and replace them with some nice wool or cotton ones, which are more comfortable and don't make your feet sweat unnecessarily – whoever invented nylon socks should be castrated – and get rid of those sports shoes which do nothing for a man and replace them with some nice leather shoes, there are many excellent shoes made in Poland and quite wide-fitting, then the problem would be all but solved, and a pleasing sexual harmony might develop.

And she can see that he is a kind-hearted man, and he has already expressed some interest in becoming a father to little Mirek. And although she has not yet told him of Mirek's difficulty, and she wishes her God-prattling niece would shut up and not let the cat out of the bag too soon, she is sure that when he sees him there in the flesh and sees what a darling he is, what a little darling, he won't just walk away – like the last one did.

And besides now this Tomasz is becoming quite a hero. See how he jumps up and shouts in a big manly voice, 'How many years must these persons exist before they learn to be free?'

'Hold on, hold on,' says marrow-legs, with a panicky sound in his voice. 'We must concretise the demands.'

Really, these men, even the nice ones, do talk some rubbish.

And now a large silver car arrives, exactly like the Rolls-Royce that marrow-legs has described, and a middle-aged man with silver hair, a very respectable-looking type, could even be a doctor, definitely not a type to have wife in sluttish underwear, mistress maybe, comes over to find out what is going on, and marrow-legs explains that one man had to have his arm amputated and a woman was wrongful dismissal for spending too long in toilets. Rolls-Royce says, 'Hm. Hm,' and rubs his chin, and marrow-legs says she must be reinstated and the man must get compensation, then that bossy Romanian cow butts in unnecessarily and says they are all taking advantage, especially no-good Polish who think now they in Europe they can do what they like, and Rolls-Royce says, 'Hm. Hm' again. Then the senior supervisor, an inferior type given to unnecessary bad language and degenerate behaviour, who pinches the girls' behinds and says they must make sex with him if they want to have a job ('No one wants to make sex with you, you poky-penis dog,' said Yola), this supervisor arrives and says that Polish man with long hair is a troublemaker – could it be Tomek he is referring to? Everyone looks for Tomasz but he is disappeared, and where is Marta? She is disappeared too, though nobody could say that Marta is a troublemaker. And then they have another thing to worry about because suddenly the whole yard is full of chickens running and flapping everywhere, except some which have broken legs can only crawl, really these

chickens are in very poor condition, and one of them makes poopie-poo on Rolls-Roycie's shoe, and he says, 'Where did these fucking birds come from?' Really it is quite surprising when a gentleman of such refinement uses a bad language. But where did these birds come from? It is a mystery.

*

Andriy and Emanuel turned up for their meeting with Vitaly at the pub and spent an hour and a half sitting there drinking their half pints of beer, but Vitaly didn't arrive. What should they do? Emanuel wants to head for Richmond near London – he has found his friend's address – but Andriy still feels reluctant to leave. That girl – maybe she is here, and Vulk, who knows where she is, is definitely here. And Andriy has heard what can happen to Ukrainian girls in England. So even if there is definitely nothing between them, and even if he has definitely decided that he will go and search for Vagvaga Riskegipd, is it not his responsibility first to find this girl and return her to her parents? Because if he doesn't do this, who will? Not those other good-for-nothing Ukrainians who think only of looking after themselves and drinking beer; no, he is not that type of man.

They agree to spend a few more days in Dover, parking their caravan up at the carrot-field and travelling in daily by Land Rover. Emanuel says he wants to develop his fishing skills, now that he has established his rights over the red bucket, and the Mozambicans have vanished without a trace – the rumour on the pier is that they have been deported – and though he never repeats

his luck of the first time, he manages to provide dinner every day, and even to sell some to Mr Tattoo, who seems to have completely forgotten about their previous disagreement.

Andriy spends his days combing the streets and hotels of Dover. One day he finds the shop with the Indian shopkeeper. Now her sari is blue, and she seems to have got smaller and plumper since his last visit. Although he has only a little money left from the two weeks' wages he earned at the strawberry farm, and he really must put petrol in the Land Rover, he buys some more bread and margarine. He considers buying some pilchards, too, but he doesn't want to offend Emanuel, who takes his fishing role very seriously.

'You are not eating balance diet,' she chides gently.

'Yes, yes. Also we eating fish.'

'You must have vitamin. Otherwise you will be getting diseases of poor nutrition. Lemon is good. Here, on your right. Not expensive. After you cook fish you squeeze some drops.'

He takes a lemon.

'And you need roughage to establish a good bowel habit. You must eat vegetable.'

'We eating plenty carrot. Every day carrot.'

'Carrot is a first-class source of roughage and essential vitamin A. Make sure you wash it good.'

'Thank you, lady, for your advice.' He tries not to stare too obviously at the appealing brown bulge at the top of her sari. Really, plump women can be rather sexy.

'You know in this town is too many poor people eating bad diet. Drunken sailors. Out-of-work miners. She' – she points to the picture of the lady in the blue hat above the counter – 'is perfect example of how with good diet you will ripen into old age.'

He learns from the Indian shopkeeper that here too, not far away, there were once coal mines, which closed after the great strike of 1984. Now he understands why this town has a feel of the Donbas about it. Although he was only five years old, he remembers vividly the solemnity with which his parents donated their gold wedding rings to buy food for the British miners. What happened to all that money? The Ukrainian miners could certainly do with it now.

'I am looking for man named Vulk. Gangster-type. Dressed up in black.'

The shopkeeper shakes her head. 'In this town now is too much gangster. But I am pleased to say none of it has ever come into this shop, for if it did I would chase it away.'

'And one Ukrainian girl. Long dark hair. Very . . .' Very-what? Is she pretty? Is she beautiful? 'Very . . . Ukrainian.'

'Ah, Ukrainian girls also we have plenty. Every night you see them on street and on beach making sex for money.'

'Not this girl.'

The shopkeeper smiles diplomatically, and he leaves the shop in a foul mood.

Back at the pier he is surprised to find Emanuel surrounded by a small crowd, and at the heart of the crowd is Vitaly. Vitaly grabs Andriy by both hands, and embraces him like a brother, elbowing Emanuel out of the way.

'My friend. Good you are here. We have excellent business opportunity. Good work. Good money. You will be rich. You will return to Ukraina millionaire.'

Andriy disentangles himself from Vitaly's embrace.

'What is this opportunity?'

'In factory. Twenty kilometres only. Good work good money. All these people' – he waves his arm to include the dozen or so unsuccessful fishermen he has recruited – 'can have good employment. You and Emanuel also. Twenty pound an hour for you. Supervisor rate. You have transport. You bring caravan, put all inside, take to factory.'

He must have read the doubt on Andriy's face.

'I give you money for petrol.'

Still Andriy hesitates.

'And transport. How much you want?' He pulls a wad of notes out of his pocket. They are all twenties.

'But I have only Ukrainian licence. To take so many people maybe I need special licence.'

'Is no problem. Only if vehicles is with seats for more than eight people you need passenger licence. Now all modern transport is without seats.'

This seems an odd arrangement.

'The caravan is not here.'

'No problem. You fetch it. We will wait here.'

By the time Andriy and Emanuel have returned with the caravan, the crowd has grown. Vitaly climbs into the front of the Land Rover beside Andriy, with Dog at their feet. Emanuel and three other passengers sit in the back, and some fourteen hopefuls squeeze themselves into the caravan. Those that cannot fit onto the bunks sit on the floor hugging their knees. Andriy notices that the Bulgarian lad and his friends are among them. He waits until Vitaly has peeled off five twenty-pound notes from his wad and handed them over before he will even turn the engine on.

It is money well earned, for with such a weight on board, the caravan bucks and swerves all over the place and he has a job keeping it on the road. He has to drive mostly in first gear, with one-hundred-per-cent concentration, to avoid overturning on a bend. They have been driving like this for almost an hour, down roads which are becoming increasingly narrow and difficult, before at last Vitaly directs him down a lane with a sign saying Buttercup Meadow Farmfresh Poultry and a picture of a little blond-haired girl, holding a bunch of buttercups in her hand and clasping a fluffy brown chicken to her chest, with a slogan beneath: *Partnership in Poultry*. It all looks very nice.

But as they approach the entrance, a scene of wild commotion unfolds before them. What's going on here? The iron gates are open and police in riot gear are holding back a screaming battling mob which is surging towards them, while a flock of crazed chickens is run-

ning round and round the yard squawking and flapping frenziedly.

'What is this, Vitaly? Where have you brought us?'

He puts the Land Rover into first and starts to nose his way forward through the gate. Suddenly he hears a high terrifying howl and a wild Chinese man wearing blood-spattered clothes and wielding a knife bursts through the police cordon and hurls himself onto the bonnet of the Land Rover, chicken feet spewing out of his pockets.

Who is this man? What does he want? His mad black eyes meet Andriy's for a moment through the windscreen, his mouth jabbering urgently, then two policemen throw themselves on top of him and drag him struggling away. By the gate, two more policemen are wrestling with a big blond man wearing shorts, forcing his arms up behind him and bundling him into a van. This is definitely not a good situation.

'Why does this Chinese want to kill us? What is all this police, Vitaly?'

'Is OK. Police on our side.'

'But why police is here? What is going on?'

'All is because of troublemakers. Lazy Chinesees refusing work. Police defend you right to work. We will show them good Ukrainian-type work. Good work, good money, eh, friend?'

Andriy is beginning to feel uncomfortable. To drive the overloaded caravan through this throng with all these police watching, when he is perhaps an outlaw on the run, and definitely has no passenger licence, and still has that five-bullet gun hidden in his backpack – is this a

good idea? But it's not just that holding him back, it's something his father had said that had stuck in his memory, repeating the words of the visionary blind man of Sheffield in his speech all those years ago. He's trying to recall – it was something about solidarity, the essential fellow-feeling of man – his father had drummed it into him – something about self-respect. Be a man – is this what he meant? That there are some things a man should not do, not for any amount of money?

He puts the Land Rover into reverse and starts to inch backwards.

'No, no. Go on! Go forward!' Vitaly jumps up in his seat waving his hands, and inadvertently steps on Dog's tail. Dog lets out a yelp, leaps from the Land Rover and, drawn by a powerful smell of chicken, dives into the melee.

'Dog! Come back!' Andriy hits the brakes. 'Come here! This chicken is not for eating!'

But Dog, seeing the challenge of the situation, wants to show them his true colours, and weaving in and out of the crowd with a few courteous woofs he soon has the chickens neatly rounded up in a corner of the yard, where they stand looking a bit surprised and clucking obediently.

Suddenly there is a bloodcurdling shriek and a small fierce figure, petite but voluptuous, breaks out of the crowd and hurtles towards them, arms flailing.

'Yola!' cries Andriy. 'What you doing here?'

'I want home to Poland! This place is hell! All is cheating and lies!'

Then she spots Vitaly sitting in the front of the Land Rover and turns on him with her fists, pulling at him through the door, howling, 'This is the one! This is root consul flexi dynamo!'

A policeman tries to drag her off, but she holds fast and fights like a fiend, biting and scratching, struggling against the policeman's grip and kicking him so hard in his sensitive parts that he is forced to let go. Emanuel grabs her by the arm from the back of the Land Rover and pulls her in. Then Marta runs towards them, and Tomasz, and they are hauled in too, and all the time the Land Rover and caravan are backing up gently and Vitaly is shouting, 'No, stop! Stop!' until they come to a place where it is wide enough for them to swing round, and at the last minute Dog comes bounding up too, leaps into the back, and Andriy puts his foot down and they're away.

By the time they get back to Dover, Marta, Yola and Tomasz have told Andriy and Emanuel about everything that happened to them, Vitaly has tried unsuccessfully to get Andriy to give the money back, and most people in the back of the caravan have been sick.

*

Marta regrets that she didn't manage to bring a chicken with her for their supper, but her views about food have changed in the last few days. After dropping off their

passengers in Dover they make their way back to their favourite spot by the carrot-field, where she manages to improvise a delicious supper from white bread, margarine and cold fish, supplemented with carrots and garnished with lemon slices and roadside herbs.

Yola and Tomasz are helping to peel the carrots, and Yola is telling Tomasz about her disagreements with Geta. Tomasz gazes with fascination into Yola's eyes, asking her to repeat the sounds she made in the toilet, which she does in her typical vulgar way, and they both fall about laughing like children. And Marta thinks, here we go again.

She remembers the last time this happened, when Yola met a nice man, a plump greengrocer, and it was all holding hands and giggling and stolen kisses. And then Yola took the man back to her house in Zdroj, and as soon as he met little Mirek, as soon as he took one look at the boy, he was out through the door again like a cornered tomcat. He didn't even take off his hat. He didn't even let go of the box of liqueur chocolates in his hand.

'I piss on your cabbages!' Yola shouted at his retreating back, but the words slid off him like butter off a hot dumpling.

It took Yola a long time to get over that. And you have to give her credit for this – she didn't blame Mirek. Not once.

'Yola,' says Marta, lighting the gas for the stove, 'why don't you show Tomasz your photos?'

'I'm sure Tomasz has no desire to see my uninteresting

photos.' Yola gives Marta a kick on the shins. Yes, her shins are already quite bruised.

'I would like very much to see your photos,' says Tomasz.

So Yola has to get out the three photos she always carries with her. The pretty house in Zdroj, with its garden sloping down to the river and its orchard of plums and cherries. The four Masurian goats, a bit blurred, because they wouldn't keep still. And Mirek, sitting on a swing in the garden, that sweet smile on his big round face, his tongue sticking out, his cute pointy eyes wrinkled up with laughter.

'This is your son?'

'My beloved son, Mirek.'

'I would like very much to meet him.'

*

Early next morning, Andriy wakes up feeling disoriented. There's something different in the caravan. He can hear whispering and giggling. What's happened to Emanuel? In the other single bunk, where Emanuel should be, Tomasz is fast asleep. At the other side of the cabin, the double bunk has been pulled down, and in it are Yola and Marta. Andriy shuts his eyes again and pretends to be asleep. A little while later, the whispering stops, and Marta gets up and puts the kettle on. Emanuel, who had obligingly gone off to sleep in the Land Rover, comes to join them for breakfast.

It is mid-morning by the time they get to the ferry terminal in Dover, and they are all in a rush. Contrary to what Vitaly had said, Yola, Tomasz and Marta have no trouble changing their tickets. There are tears and hugs and exchanges of addresses as they say goodbye in front of the harbour.

'We will come again,' says Tomasz.

'For sure,' says Yola. 'But not for strawberry or chicken. Now we are in Europe marketing we can earn good money here. I will be teacher. Tomek will be government bureaucrat. Marta . . . what will you be, Marta?'

'I will be vegetarian,' says Marta.

'One day Ukraine will be also in Europe marketing.' She kisses Andriy on each cheek. 'And Africa too.' She gives Emanuel two little kisses, and he blots his eyes on the sleeve of his green anorak.

How hard it is to tear up old boundaries, and how easy to set up new ones. Andriy watches with a heavy heart as the ferry pulls away from the dock. As well as the sadness of parting, there is the sadness of knowing that he is on the far side of this new boundary across Europe. It will be a long time before he can work freely in England; even in Russia, now, Ukrainians are illegals. Will Ukraine soon be the new Africa? He puts his arm round Emanuel's shoulder.

'Let's go.'

They walk across the harbour, where a crowd is gathering to greet a ferry boat coming in. Andriy stops to watch, remembering his own arrival almost a month

ago. Where is the innocent carefree young man with terrible trousers and a heart full of hope who disembarked from that boat? Well, the trousers are still the same.

A little ripple runs through the crowd. Two figures who had been standing together move away from each other in opposite directions. He spots a shaven shiny head cutting towards the terminal – Vitaly – and he remembers the £65 he still has in his pocket after filling up the tank with petrol. They'd better get going before he sees them. On the other side a line of darkness opens up as the crowd gives way to a dumpy black-clad figure walking fast with his head down. Andriy knows at once that it is Vulk. His heartbeat quickens. Should he go up and accost him? Or should he be friendly and try to wheedle information out of him?

In the end he does neither – he just goes up and asks very directly, in English, 'Please tell me, where is Irina?'

Vulk looks startled. He doesn't recognise Andriy.

'Irina? Who is it?'

Andriy feels a red-hot surge of anger. This monster who tried to take her didn't even ask her name. She was just a bit of anonymous flesh.

'Ukrainian girl from strawberry-picking. You remember? You took in you car?'

Vulk looks around shiftily. 'That Ukrainian girl is not vit me.'

'So where she is?'

'Who are you?' says Vulk.

Thinking fast, Andriy puts his hands in his pockets,

Four Gables

So there we were, standing by the North Circular Road, heading for Sheffield. In front of us, a great torrent of metal – two torrents in fact – was rushing in each direction, the cars gleaming black, blue, silver, white, as they caught the sun, wave after wave, as endless as a river pouring into the sea. In my opinion there are too many cars in England. Andriy was watching the cars like a man bewitched, following them with his eyes, turning his head this way and that. Once he shouted out, ‘Look, Irina, did you see that Ferrari?’

‘Mm. Yes. Wonderful,’ I said, even though to me they all looked the same, apart from the different colours. You have to do that, with men, share their interests.

Poor Mamma tried to share Pappa’s interest in politics, and became very Orange, and stood in the square chanting for Yushchenko. But he obviously shared more with Svitlana Surokha.

‘Slavery begins when the heart loses hope,’ Pappa had said. ‘Hope is the first step towards freedom.’

And Mamma had said, ‘I hope in that case you will learn one day to wash the dishes.’ You see? Mamma only has herself to blame. She should have tried harder to please poor Pappa. Maybe I will have to stand by the roadside, shouting for Ferrari.

‘Andriy, tell me what is so special about Ferrari?’ I asked.

He looked very serious and furrowed his forehead. ‘You know, Irina, I think it all comes down to engineering. Some people say it is design, but I would say it is high quality of V12 engineering. Transverse gearbox. Dry sump lubrication.’

‘Mmhm,’ I replied.

I like it much better when he talks about Sheffield.

Although it was early morning the sun was already hot, and the air had a bad smell of burning oil and warm asphalt. Despite the torrent of cars, it was almost an hour before one stopped to give us a lift. The driver was an old man, almost bald, with thick-lensed glasses. His car was also very old, with patches of rust on the doors. The seat cushions were squares of foam with raggy knitted covers. I could see the disappointment on Andriy’s face.

It didn’t take us long to realise that his driving was very strange. He kept swerving from lane to lane, overtaking on either side. When he accelerated, his car groaned and juddered as though the wheels were coming off. Andriy was hanging onto his seat belt with both hands. Even Dog looked alarmed. Sometimes when we overtook the old man thumped his horn Beep! Beep! Beep! and cried out, ‘That’s another Jerry shot down in flames!’

‘Why is he shouting at those cars?’ I whispered to Andriy in Ukrainian.

‘German car,’ said Andriy in a low voice. ‘Volkswagen. Bee-em-vay.’

In my opinion, his driving licence should be confiscated.

The man asked us where we were from and when I said Ukraine, he said Ukrainians are fine people, and great allies, and shook my hand as if I personally had won the war, the car veering from side to side. Then he passed a Toyota, and he beep-beeped his horn and shouted, 'Little yellow bastard!' which was strange, because the car was red.

'I wonder what he'll do when he passes a Ferrari,' I whispered to Andriy, but Andriy said it wasn't possible.

Then quite unexpectedly we took an exit off the motorway, whizzed round a roundabout, made a left turn, and suddenly we were threading our way along little country roads.

'Is this the way to Sheffield?' I asked.

'Yes, yes. Near Luton. It's on your way.'

In front of us, an old blue Volkswagen Polo was driving along quite slowly. Our driver pulled up behind and started to beep his horn and flash his lights. The car in front kept going. Our driver revved up and pulled out to overtake. Andriy and I held our breath. The road was far too twisting to see what lay ahead. We had just started to pass the Polo when, out of a bend in the road, a large grey car appeared coming towards us, travelling fast. Our driver braked. Then he changed his mind and accelerated. The car jerked forward past the Polo and he cut in sharply. There was a double screech of brakes. The Polo veered to avoid a collision and two wheels

went in the ditch. The grey car skidded into the opposite verge. Our driver drove on.

'Got him!' he said with a look of satisfaction on his face.

I glanced back at Andriy. He had gone very white.

'We must get out of here,' he muttered.

'Excuse me, please stop,' I yelled to the driver. 'I need a toilet. Urgent.'

The driver stopped. Andriy and Dog jumped out of the back with our bags and I jumped out of the front and we ran back down the road as fast as we could, until the car was out of sight. Then we sat at the roadside until we'd stopped shaking and got our breath back.

Now we were stranded on this small road going to nowhere, and there were no cars passing. Andriy said we should get back to the motorway, so we started to walk, thinking we would wave our thumbs if a car passed, but none did.

We must have walked almost a kilometre when we came across the blue Volkswagen Polo we had overtaken, still stuck with two wheels in the ditch, and the driver, a young black woman, standing beside it, looking extremely annoyed.

'You need some help, madam?' said Andriy.

He sounded so gallant, quite like Mr Brown. I was thinking to myself, that's good, soon we will have a display of sun-bronzed manly musculature. And we did.

The woman got into the driving seat, and he went round to the front and pushed, and the muscles in his arms bulged like . . . well, like something very bulgy. And slowly slowly the car moved back onto the road. Mmm. I can't imagine Mr Brown doing that.

The young woman offered us a lift. She said she was going to Peterborough, and even though it was the wrong direction I said yes, because I didn't want to walk all the way back to the motorway. She said she could drop us off on the A1, which is a major road going north, and that was good enough for me. Andriy and Dog went in the back again, and I sat in the front, next to her. She had a sweet turned-up nose and hair done in tight plaits all over her head that looked like neat miniature vegetable rows in a garden. I was very curious to touch it, but I didn't want to offend her. Her name was Yateka, she said, and she was a trainee nurse in an old people's home.

When he heard this, Andriy got very excited. 'Do you have a brother called Emanuel?'

We explained that our friend from Malawi has a sister who is a nurse but he has lost contact with her.

'England is full of African nurses,' she laughed. 'More in England than in Africa. And I am from Zambia, not Malawi, which is the next-door country.' Then, seeing the disappointed look on Andriy's face, she added, 'But there is one Malawian nurse at my place. Maybe she will know something, because Malawians tend to keep together.'

So it was agreed we would go with her to Peterborough and meet this Malawian nurse. All this time we were driving along slowly – in my opinion women are much better drivers than men – and we had plenty of time for conversation, which was good, because Yateka was very talkative. It turned out she was not really a trainee, for in Zambia she had already been running a health centre for six years, but to work in England she has to do a special adaptation training. She explained that there is a new rule that the National Health Service is not allowed to recruit nurses from Africa, so she must do her adaptation training in a private nursing home.

'This is a good rule for Africa, but a bad rule for us nurses,' she said, 'because my adaptation job pays only the minimum wage, not a proper nurse's salary. Then they make deductions. Tax. Food. Accommodation. Uniform. Training fee. Agency fee. At the end of the week I have nothing left.'

'I know about these deductions,' I said. 'We are strawberry-pickers. Accommodation, food, transport; everything comes out of our wages. You know, I had not expected such meanness in England.'

'Worst thing is the agency fee,' said Yateka. 'Nine hundred pounds I must pay for arranging this training place.'

'Nine hundred!' exclaimed Andriy from the back seat. 'This is more than we pay for phoney work paper. These are bloodsuckers!'

'Nightingale Human Solutions. They are vultures, not nightingales.'

'But is it worth it?' I asked.

'When I am in the National Health Service I will be able to earn fifty times more in England than in Zambia. This is a problem for Africa, because every African nurse wants to come in England, and there are not enough nurses to look after all our sick people at home.'

'Same for us. Wages for strawberry-picker in England is higher than for teacher or nurse in Ukraine.' Andriy furrowed his brows together in a very thoughtful and intellectual-type way, which is actually quite sexy in a man. 'This global economic is serious business.'

You see? He is quite intelligent, despite being uneducated.

'You come from Ukraine?'

'Yes of course. Do you know some Ukrainian people?' I asked.

Yateka told us that one of the old men in her nursing home was Ukrainian, and he was always causing a lot of bother with his peculiarities.

'I wish you would talk to him. Maybe he would listen if someone talked to him in Ukrainian.'

'Of course,' I said. 'We would be happy to talk to him.'

I was curious about these Ukrainian peculiarities.

*

It's happened again. He wanted to go to Sheffield, but somehow he's ended up in this place. Andriy is feeling vaguely annoyed with Irina, with Yateka, and with himself. Why didn't he just say no?

Four Gables nursing home is a large grey house on the outskirts of Peterborough, set back from the road behind

a screen of gloomy evergreens. Yateka pulls into the car park and leads them inside. The first thing Andriy notices is the smell – sweetish and feral. It hits him like a blast of bad breath as soon as they open the door. Half a dozen old women in various stages of decrepitude are sitting in armchairs pushed up against the walls, dozing with their mouths sagging open, or just staring. 'Wait here,' says Yateka. 'I will look for Blessing.' They sit down on a padded bench and wait. The air is heavy and stale. Irina gets into a strange conversation with an old lady sitting nearby, who thinks she is her niece. Dog goes off sniffing along the corridor on the trail of the strange smell, and disappears. After a while Andriy gets up and goes to look for him.

'Psst!' A skinny arm beckons him in through an open door. 'In here.'

He steps into a tiny room. That smell – it reminds him of the smell inside the rabbit hutch on their balcony in Donetsk. In the middle of the floor, Dog is sitting on a rug at the feet of a very old woman, who is feeding him chocolate biscuits from a tin.

'Hello, young man. Come in. I'm Mrs Gayle. Your name?'

'Andriy Palenko.'

'Polish?'

'No, Ukrainian.'

'Oh, splendid! I'm very partial to Ukrainian men. Have a seat. Have a biscuit.'

'Thank you, Mrs Gayle.' Andriy crams the biscuit in whole, coughing as the crumbs stick in his throat –

it is the first thing he's eaten since that bread last night.

'Have another.'

'Thank you.'

He sits down on a chair, then he realises it is in fact a commode covered with an upholstered lid. The rabbit-hutch smell is all-pervasive.

'Take two.'

She blinks. Or is it a wink? Her eyes are small and watery, sunk deep into their crinkled sockets. Her hands are thin and bent like claws. Will I be like this one day, Andriy wonders? It is inconceivable.

He remembers his grandmother's room at home, piled from floor to ceiling with heaps of musty clothes, the space for sitting becoming smaller and smaller. It was sad to watch her life shrink away. As she lost control of her bladder, the smell from the room became so intense that they could hardly bear to go in there. However much his mother had washed and scrubbed and sprinkled powder around, the rabbit-hutch smell just got stronger, until in the end she died and only the smell was left. A bit like the smell in Mrs Gayle's room. He is starting to wonder about the commode he is sitting on. What is under the lid?

'My daughter put me in here, you know, after my husband died. She says I smell. In your country, young man, what happens to old people?'

'You know, usually they live with family, but sometimes they go into monastery. Woman-only monastery is very popular with Orthodox ladies.'

'Hm! That sounds quite nice, a women-only monastery.' Mrs Gayle nibbles at a biscuit with what is left of her teeth. 'Company. A roof over your head. No matron to boss you about. And the only man you have to worry about is Lord Jesus . . .' She searches in her bag and pulls out a pack of cigarettes. '. . . who is probably much less demanding than a husband. Probably drinks less, too.' She roots through her handbag once more. 'Have you got a light?'

'No, I am sorry. I not . . .'

'You'll find a box of matches in the handyman's room. End of the corridor, down the stairs, and it's on your left.'

She gives Dog another biscuit, and he sits up on his back legs to take it. Andriy has never seen him do this before. The room is very hot and the smell overpowering. He is beginning to feel a bit strange.

'Go on.' She gives him a little prod with her walking stick. 'Don't hang about. The handyman's not in at the moment.'

The handyman's room is a den of old bits of wood, furniture awaiting repair, defunct appliances, obscure machine parts, etc, and in a cabinet along one wall an interesting array of tools. Andriy pauses in the doorway. The handyman is nowhere in sight. On a table by the door are a packet of tobacco, a large curved pipe and a box of matches. He hesitates. Then he picks the matches up, puts them in his pocket and goes back up the stairs.

On the door to the corridor is a No Smoking sign.

'Mrs Gayle. Excuse me. Do you know about smoking ban?'

'Hah! You sound just like my daughter! She's always trying to stop me smoking. Have to smoke in here – can't stand the stink. Have you got the matches?'

He hesitates. She pokes him with her stick.

'Come on, young man. Let an old woman have a bit of fun.'

He hands the matches over. She lights the cigarette and at once begins to cough.

'My daughter put me in here because I'm a communist, you know.' Cough, cough. 'Yes, I was incarcerated because of my political views.'

'No!' Can it be true? Do such things happen in England?

'Yes. She's married to a stockbroker. A minor scion of the aristocracy. Vile man. Now I'm in here, and they're living in my house.' Her left eye twitches.

'How is this possible?'

'Yes, I wanted to donate it to the International Workers of the World, but they got it off me. Made me sign something. Told the social workers I was mad.' She has become so agitated that she gets another cigarette out of the pack and lights it, and starts to puff, even though the other one is still smouldering in the ashtray. 'Do I seem mad?'

'No. Very not mad, Mrs Gayle.'

'But what they don't know is, I'm coming home. I'm getting married again, and I'm coming home.' She chuckles. 'Are you married, young man?' The eye twitches again. Or is it a wink? Andriy feels a moment

of panic. He shakes his head. She takes a few more deep drags on her cigarette, coughs once or twice, and continues, 'Yes, Mr Mayevskyj in room nine. The Ukrainian gentleman. Have you met him yet?'

By now the little room is completely filled with smoke. It must be noticeable from the corridor. If someone catches them, they could be in trouble. Andriy reaches across to stub out the cigarette in the ashtray, but quick as a flash she grabs it first and sticks it in her mouth, along with the other one.

'No you don't, young man.' She lowers her voice to a confidential whisper, puffing away on both cigarettes simultaneously. 'He has an incredible sex drive for a man of ninety-two, you know. Yes, they don't know this yet, but we're getting married and we're coming to live at home.'

'That will be nice surprise for your daughter.'

'It'll be a surprise. I don't know about nice.'

*

While I was waiting for Yateka and Andriy to come back, I heard someone calling out for help. It was the old man in room nine. He had dropped his hearing aid down the back of his chair, so I helped him to find it. It turned out he was the Ukrainian resident Yateka had told us about. He put in his hearing aid and we got into a long conversation about Ukraine, the way it was when he lived there and the way it is now. Then he cleared his throat and embarked on a long speech about malfunctioning hydraulic lifts and other engineering problems, and at the end of it he suddenly took me by the hand

and said I had a very beautiful figure, and would I marry him.

I said teasingly that I couldn't marry him, because I agree with Tolstoy that a wife should share her husband's interests, and I could never be interested in hydraulics. 'Oy oy!' he exclaimed, striking his forehead. 'I have other interests too. Do you care for art or philosophy or poetry or tractors?' Before I could answer, he started to recite an obscure poem by Mayakovsky about love and destiny, but he got stuck after a few lines, and became agitated and started shouting for his books. So I went to look for Yateka.

Yateka calmed Mr Mayevskyj down, and brought him a cup of tea. Then she made some tea for us, too, which we drank sitting out in the garden. It's strange because I didn't know any Africans in Kiev, but Yateka is the second African friend I have made in England. When I told her about Mr Mayevskyj's marriage proposal, she grabbed my hand and laughed out loud.

'Now you understand what I mean by peculiarities,' she said. 'That poor old man. He has become more mentally unstable ever since they took his gearbox away.'

'Gearbox?'

'He had a gearbox in his room. Did he not tell you about it? He said it was a relic of his beloved motorbike.'

'Why did they take it away?'

'Matron said it was not hygienic to have a gearbox in the room.'

'What is not hygienic about a gearbox?'

'I don't know,' said Yateka. 'But nobody can argue with Matron. You don't know what she is like.'

'I cannot see the harm in a gearbox. I would let him have it.'

Yateka giggled. 'You would be the perfect wife for him. Maybe you should accept his proposal. It would make him very happy. And in a few years, you will have a British passport and an inheritance.'

'Not all Ukrainian women are looking out to marry an old man for his money, you know, Yateka.' In fact I was thinking these stereotypes of Ukrainian women are not helpful. Where does this idea come from?

'And why not? In my country if a young girl can make a good marriage to a wealthy senior it is good for the family. Everybody is happy. Sometimes nowadays the young girl can get AIDS, which is a terrible tragedy in my country. But this will not be a problem with Mr Mayevskyj,' she added quickly. 'The only problem is his two daughters. These are not nice people at all. They have already intervened three times to prevent him from marrying.'

'Is this true? He has had three fiancées?'

'Maybe they are worried about the inheritance.'

'He has inheritance?'

'He told me he is a millionaire.' Her eyes twinkled darkly. 'And he has written a famous book. A history of tractors.'

I could believe he has written a history of tractors. But I must say, he didn't look like a millionaire. Or smell like one.

'But maybe you already have a lover.' She winked.

'Maybe,' I said with a nonchalant shrug.

'You know, you can stay here if you like. There's a spare room in the attic which cannot be used for residents because of safety reasons. It's been empty for years.'

She gave me another twinkly look. I could feel myself blushing. There is something incredibly romantic about attic rooms.

*

The Malawian nurse turns out not to be Emanuel's sister after all, though she does look a bit like Emanuel, thinks Andriy: very small and slightly built, with a round shining face. Her name is Blessing.

'I am sorry to disappoint you.' She gives him a dazzling smile that also reminds him of Emanuel.

They are sitting in the nurses' room while Yateka and Blessing are having a tea break.

'But don't you know some other Malawian nurses?' says Yateka.

'You know, my cousin was in a nursing home in London that was closed because of a scandal – the proprietor was stealing the residents' money. Some of the other nurses there were from Malawi. They all lost their jobs. The agency found new jobs for them, but they had to pay another agency fee. Nightingale Human Solutions.'

Yateka wrinkles up her nose. It is a small plump nose, shiny like a stub of polished wood. Quite a nice nose, in fact.

'Would you like me to ask my cousin?' says Blessing.

'Yes, please. I give you telephone number where Emanuel is staying. Maybe you help brother and sister

be reunited.' He writes the address and phone number of the Richmond house on a piece of paper and passes it to Blessing.

Another rather pleasant thought has started to nudge at the edges of his consciousness. He has heard it said that black women are incredibly sexy, but he has never before had an opportunity to find out for himself. Maybe here will be an opportunity for him? This little coupé-model Malawian nurse, she has quite an entrancing smile. And the other one – Yateka – see the way she moves, the curve of her shapely legs accentuated by those clumsy lace-up nurse's shoes, the sway of her buttocks in her slightly-too-tight uniform. You have to admit, there is something incredibly sexy about a woman in uniform.

Stop! Stop this idiocy, Palenko! Here is a lovely high-spec Ukrainian girl sitting beside you, and still you are letting your thoughts chase about after other women. When the road forks, whichever way you choose, you can only go one way. Goodbye, Africa Yateka. Goodbye, Vagvaga Riskegipd.

Goodbye and God be with you? Or goodbye and see you again? Andriy Palenko, what's the matter with you? Goodbye is goodbye. End of story. And yet . . . And yet it's not really desire that makes that last goodbye so hard to say – it's curiosity. Never to know where the other road would have led you. Never to know what lies beneath that taut crisp uniform; never to know whether that long-ago kiss lingers in her memory as it does in

yours. Never to know what would have happened when you met.

Irina's voice snaps him out of his reverie. She is talking about something incredibly interesting.

'I think there is only one thing to do,' she is saying. 'We must give Mr Mayevskyj back his gearbox.'

'Gearbox?'

'Yateka told me he used to keep a gearbox in his room. A beloved relic of an old motorbike. But the matron found it and took it away from him.'

'Since then,' said Yateka, 'he has become unstable.'

'It is enough to make any man unstable.'

'I think if he had his gearbox again, he would behave in a more normal way.'

'You are right, Irina.'

Sometimes you have to let a woman think she is right.

*

I AM DOG I AM SAD DOG MY MAN IS IN LOVE
WITH THIS MORE-STUPID-THAN-SHEEP FEMALE
HIS VOICE IS THICK AND SOFT HIS PISS IS
CLOUDY HE STINKS OF LOVE HORMONES SHE
STINKS OF LOVE HORMONES TOO SOON THEY
WILL MATE HE WILL HAVE NO MORE LOVE FOR
DOG I AM SAD DOG I AM DOG

*

'I think Bill the handyman will know where the gearbox is,' says Yateka. 'Since Matron asked him to take it away.'

'Down the stairs at the end of the corridor, then turn left,' says Blessing.

Bill is back in his basement room, poring over an open newspaper. He is a short square man with a bald head and a clipped moustache. He looks up as Andriy comes in.

'They've nicked me bloody matches again. Those old birds. You can't trust 'em. Bunch of flaming firemaniacs. Who are you, anyway?'

'I am looking for gearbox of Mr Mayevskyj. He has been asking after it.'

Bill takes this as a reproach.

'It weren't my idea to take it off of 'im. I just do what Matron says.'

Even as his mouth searches for a suitably annoyed expression, his eyes fall upon Dog.

'That your dog?'

'Yes, my dog. Dog.'

'I used to have one like that. Mongrel. Called him Spango. Great ratter.'

Bill settles himself back in his chair, and passes the newspaper he has been reading over to Andriy.

'What d'you think of them, eh?'

A young woman with bare breasts and blond hair is smiling at the camera. Andriy looks at the picture. The light in the basement is dim. Actually, she looks very much like his last girlfriend, Lida Zakanovka. Could it really be her? He stares more closely. Did she come to England? Did she have a mole like that on her left shoulder?

'Nice, eh? Better than the missus. You should have seen the pair last Thursday. Magnificent.' Bill gives a companionable grunt. 'You can keep it, if you like. I've finished with it. Any time you like, you can bring your dog down here.'

'Thank you.' Andriy folds the newspaper under his arm. He will have to look at it in daylight.

'Does he drink tea, your dog? Spango was a great tea-drinker. Here, boy . . .'

Bill reaches for a mug with a few centimetres of cold brown tea left in the bottom and pours it into a bowl for Dog. Dog wags his tail, and starts to drink, gulping noisily. Andriy watches, amazed. He realises for the first time how little he knows about this dog. First he was sitting up for chocolate biscuits. Now he drinks cold tea, slurping and slopping as if in ecstasy. Where did this creature come from? How did he appear so mysteriously in the night? What was he running from? Why did he choose them?

Meanwhile, Bill searches in the corners of the room and comes back with a small, heavy package wrapped in an oiled cloth inside a plastic bag.

'This must be it. She told me to throw it away. But you can't, can you? Don't tell her where you got it from.'

'Thank you. Dog likes your tea.'

There is no one in the nurses' room when he takes the gearbox upstairs, so he pulls out a chair and sits down to wait. Something else is bothering him now. That mole

– did Lida Zakanovka have a mole there? He unfolds the paper to take a closer look. Hm. Definitely it is like Lida. Holy bones! What is she doing in England? Here in the brighter light of the nurses' room, he can see clearly. No, maybe this one is more pneumatic. His Lida was more like the cabriolet model. To think he wasted four years of his life over her! What a fool he was. Lucky she never got pregnant. This girl in the photo is quite something. Good curves. Not too thin. But is it Lida?

'What are you looking at?'

Andriy jumps up. Yateka is standing behind him. She must have tiptoed in on those softie-softie nurse's shoes. She is frowning. Andriy jumps to his feet and quickly folds the newspaper away. Did she see? Of course she did. That was a bit of bad timing.

'I have gearbox, Yateka.' He smiles pathetically.

'You have it already?' Her face is severe. Her uniform is so crisp it almost seems to crackle. He can feel a blush creeping up his cheeks.

'Should I take to Mr Mayevskyj?'

'Better wait until tomorrow. It is nearly his bedtime now. Too much excitement at bedtime can make him knotty.'

'What is knotty?'

Her face relaxes. The smile comes back. 'You know, that Ukrainian, he is always looking for a wife. Mrs Gayle, Miss Tollington, Mrs Jarvis. They all told me he asked them to marry. And they all three accepted. And now . . .' Yateka rocks back on her heels hooting with laughter; she laughs so much she almost falls over, and

has to hang onto the door for balance. 'And now also Irina.'

'Irina?'

'Yes, he has asked Irina to marry him. I think she will accept.'

'Irina?'

'It is a good marriage for her. British passport. And he has an inheritance.'

'It is not possible.'

Yateka smiles. 'In love, anything is possible.'

Then one of the buzzers starts going off, and Yateka grabs her bag and disappears silently on her softie shoes.

*

There was a gravel pathway leading through the rose beds down to a lower lawn, a secret place hidden away inside a circle of laurels, with a couple of benches and an old sundial.

'You and Andriy can sit down there,' said Yateka. 'I finish at seven o'clock. Then I'll show you the spare room.'

It was still warm, but the sky was heavy with rain clouds, and no one else was in the garden. You could sense the storm coming, the leaves of the laurels were curling in the heat. Dog appeared out of nowhere and started padding along beside us, farting disgustingly. What had he been eating? Why couldn't he leave us alone?

Andriy sat down on one of the benches, and I sat down beside him. He seemed very moody. I was wondering

whether I had done something to annoy him. Bad moods are not attractive in a man.

'I want to discuss a problem with you,' he said. 'Love problem. Man-woman relationship type of thing.'

Oh, at last, I thought, and my heart started to beat faster. Then he said, 'Mr Mayevskyj, this old scoundrel, has proposed marriage to three old ladies, and all have accepted.' He gave me a nasty narrow-eyed look. 'Now I hear that it is in fact four. And that you also, Irina, have fallen victim to his charm. Is it true?'

What has that naughty Yateka been telling him? I shrugged my shoulders nonchalantly.

'Irina, you cannot go about smiling at every man who comes your way.'

This made me quite annoyed. What makes him think he has the right to lecture me?

'I can smile at who I like.'

Then he said, in a very primitive voice, 'And if you do, you will end up giving full body massage to Vitaly's mobilfon clients for twenty pound.'

I was shocked. Why is he saying such a horrible thing to me? I thought he was teasing, and now it seems he's serious.

'Vitaly is dead,' I said.

'No, the world is full of Vitalys. You just don't see them, Irina.'

'What are you talking about, Andriy?'

'The men you smile at, Irina - some of them are not decent types.'

Oh, so he's still upset about the twenty-pound note, I thought.

'Mr Mayevskyj is not a bad type.'

'Actually he's quite a scoundrel.' He frowned. 'Are you going to marry him?'

'That's my business. I can decide how to live my life. I don't need you to lecture me.'

'You are blind, Irina. You don't see what is happening in this world.'

'For example? What don't I see?'

'This mobilfon world all around you. Businessmen buying and selling human souls. Even yours, Irina. Even you they are buying and selling.'

'Nobody is buying and selling me. I made my own choice to come to the West.'

I was thinking, if he is going to carry on like this, maybe tonight will not be *the night* after all.

'The West is no different. This Orange Revolution that you like so much – what do you think this was but a Vitaly-type business promotion? Who do you think paid for all the orange flags and banners, and the tents, and the music in the square?'

What on earth has got into him? I thought we were going to walk in the garden, and maybe talk about something romantic, that would be nice, and instead he starts prattling about politics. Maybe this is how it happened with Pappa and Svitlana Surokha. No, with them it was probably the other way round – first the politics, then the romance. Well, if he can argue, so can I.

'If we're going to talk about this, at least let us do so honestly, Andriy. Nobody paid my mother and father to

be there. They went because they want Ukraine to be free from Russia. To have our own democracy – not one run from the Kremlin.'

'To exchange one run from the Kremlin for one run from the United States of America.'

'This is Russian propaganda, Andriy. Why are you so afraid of the truth? Even if the government doesn't change, the important thing is that we the people have changed. No one will take us for granted any more. Once in a lifetime a nation makes a historic bid for freedom, and we have the choice to be participants or to stand on the sidelines.' Was that from one of Pappa's speeches, or one of Svitlana Surokha's?

'What use is freedom without oil and gas?' he sneered.

'With freedom, maybe we can join European Union.'

'They are not interested in us, Irina. Only for new business possibility.'

He lectures me in that ridiculous Donbas accent, as though I am the dim-wit.

'And who do you think paid for the buses that brought you up from Donbas? Eh?'

'This is all Western media propaganda. You are naive, Irina, you believe anything that any mobilfonman tells you. You thought you were the actors, but you were only extras.'

'You didn't walk, though, did you? You Donbas miner?'

'Hah! Now we hear the typical voice of the bourgeois schoolgirl!' His tone had become harsh and sarcastic.

'I'm not a schoolgirl!'

I don't know what came over me at that moment.

I just wanted to hit him. I wanted to punch his smug stupid face. That ridiculous superior smile – what does he think he’s got to smile about? I just wanted to get rid of that smile. I couldn’t help myself – I lunged with my fist. But he caught hold of my wrist and held it. He wouldn’t let go. And then he pulled me towards him, and then he grabbed me in his arms, and next thing he was kissing me, on the mouth, with his lips, with his tongue. And pressing me closer, so tight my breath was squeezed away, and my heart was beating its wings like a bird struggling to ride a storm. And the sky and the clouds were spinning and wheeling around my head until I didn’t know where I was. But my heart knew I was where I wanted to be.

*

It is night time. The clouds have cleared, and through the pointed gable window above the iron-framed bed Andriy can see the hunter Orion, bright in the southern sky, his jewelled belt, his dagger, and nearby the starry Sirius. On the floor at the foot of the bed lies his own faithful Dog, almost as starry, snuffling in his sleep.

Irina is in the bathroom at the end of the corridor, taking a shower. She has been in there half an hour. What is she doing?

So far, everything is as it should be. All satisfactory. You have moved up from second to third without slipping, and now all you need is to gather a bit of speed and gently engage fourth, without suddenly slamming into

reverse. No, Andriy Palenko, it’s more than satisfactory, it’s fantastic: This is no Zaz, this girl, this Irina – so sweet, so lithe, one moment she melts like a snowflake in your hands, then she sears you like a fire, until you don’t know whether you’re freezing or burning; you only know you want more. And even though she doesn’t know yet what’s coming, somehow her body already knows it’s yours; you can feel it, and so can she. Like a garden waiting for rain.

And although you can see there will still be many disagreements to negotiate – because this girl, this Irin-ochka, she’s still young, and she thinks she knows everything; she has led a very sheltered bourgeois life, her experience is limited, and there’s a lot she has to learn – and let’s face it, she does say some very stupid things – still, you’re in no hurry, you have eternity in which to re-educate her. And though she can be both stubborn and slippery, she’s not unintelligent. Quite the opposite. She has already started to take an interest in Ferrari, and look how she came up with a solution to the gearbox problem. Yes, definitely you have made the right choice.

Andriy gazes through the window at the stars. Why is she taking so long? His mind drifts back over the events of the day, and for no particular reason he starts thinking: room twenty-six, Mrs Gayle’s room, is directly below this one – two floors down. Is she still smoking down there? He thinks he catches a faint whiff of smoke wafting upwards. The matches – what was that word the handy-

man used? – he should never have let her have the matches. Is there a fire escape in the attic? If that room were to catch fire in the night, how many of them would survive to see the next morning?

Then the door opens. Irina comes into the room, padding softly on bare feet. She is wearing nothing but a towel twisted around her hair in a turban, and a small towel wrapped around her body. A very small towel. She walks towards him. Her legs and arms are rosy from the hot water, and her cheeks are glowing. She smells wonderful. He murmurs her name.

‘Irinochka!’

She smiles shyly. He smiles too. He reaches out his arms to her. His whole body seems suffused with radiance. Wait a minute – one part of his body is not suffused with radiance – the manly part. From there, all radiance seems to have completely disappeared. Why is this? What has happened to you, Palenko?

At that moment, Dog wakes up and sniffs the air. He growls, a long low growl. He sniffs again, then he starts barking madly.

*

I AM DOG I AM GOOD DOG I SNIFF I SMELL SMOKE
MAN-SMOKE FIRE SMOKE I SMELL FIRE PAPER
FIRE WOOL RUBBER CLOTH BAD FIRE SMELL FIRE
NOISE CRACKLE CRACKLE I BARK WOOF WOOF I
BARK TO MY MAN WOOF WOOF WOOF MY MAN
RUNS TO FIRE HELP HELP FIRE HE SHOUTS GOOD

DOG HE SAYS I AM GOOD DOG I BARK HE SHOUTS
BELLS START TO RING EVERYBODY RUNS ALL
DOORS ARE OPENED ALL OLDIES START TO RUN
SOME START TO PISS ALL THE PLACE SMELLS OF
OLDIE PISS SMOKE FIRE AND OLDIE PISS ALL
OLDIES STAND IN GARDEN TALK TALK TALK BIG
RED WHEELIE COMES WHOO WHAA WHOO WHAA
WHEELIE IS FULL OF WATER WHEELIE PISSES
ON FIRE SSSSSSS FIRE GONE OLDIES LAUGH MY
MAN LAUGHS GOOD DOG HE SAYS I AM GOOD DOG
I AM DOG

*

Mrs Gayle has been expelled from the home. The door of her room gapes open, and peeping inside, Andriy sees everything is black with smoke. The small rug where Dog had sat and eaten chocolate biscuits yesterday is a charred mess, and even the edges of her bedclothes are singed from the fire. Really, she had a very lucky escape. Good Dog.

Mr Mayevskyj's room is further along the same corridor. It is a small, untidy room, with books and loose papers spread over every surface, and it has the same all-pervasive smell of rabbit hutch and air-freshener. Sometimes the rabbit hutch seems stronger, sometimes the air-freshener dominates; and now the faint whiff of smoke adds its own sinister flavour.

‘Oh, you darling!’ cries Mr Mayevskyj.

Andriy thinks at first he is addressing him, but the old

man's gaze is fixed on the gearbox that Andriy is holding in his hands.

'This gearbox is from 1937 Francis Barnett. My first love.'

'But not your last, Mr Mayevskyj.' Andriy tries to sound severe. 'I have heard you have made many conquests among ladies at Four Gables.'

'Yes, that is inevitable,' beams the old man. He raises his hands as if in surrender.

He is completely bald, completely toothless, and his skin hangs in loose wrinkles; he sits in a wheelchair and his urine dribbles down a plastic tube into a bag at his leg. So this is his rival in love. Yet there is such an untamed energy about him that Andriy can feel its magnetism.

'What a pleasure it is to talk in Ukrainian.' He leans forward eagerly in his wheelchair. 'Ah! Such a beautiful language, that can express both poetry and science with equal fluency. You are from Donbas, I guess from your accent, young man? And you have come all this way to return my gearbox to me? I wonder how it ended up there – these swindling Africans must have stolen it and traded it for vodka.' He races on before Andriy can get a word in. 'And this new young woman Irina is also from Ukraina. She is my latest love. What a beauty! Such a figure! A very cultured type of Ukrainian, by the way. Have you met her?'

'Yes, I have met her. She is indeed very cultured. But ...'

'Stop!' The old man raises a gnarled hand. 'I know

what you will say. She is too young for me. But how I see it is this. To find wisdom and beauty in one individual is rare. But in a marriage, this combination is possible.'

'You are thinking of marriage?'

'Of course. I think it is inevitable.'

Inevitable? What has Irina been saying to him? Perhaps she is not so innocent as she appears. That smile – who else has she been grinning at? What a fool you are, Andriy Palenko, to think it was specially for you.

'But you have also proposed marriage to Mrs Gayle and two other ladies previously. And all have accepted.'

'Ah' – he waves his hands in the air and smiles gummily – 'these were just passing fancies.'

'Mr Mayevskyj, it is not gentlemanly to offer marriage to so many women.'

Mr Mayevskyj shrugs with such a smug little smirk that Andriy feels an urge to punch the old goat on the nose. Control yourself, Palenko. Be a man.

'Women are weak creatures, and easily tempted, Mr Mayevskyj. It is not gentlemanly to take advantage of their weakness.'

'You see in our situation there are no other men for these foolish creatures to love.' The old man is still smirking. 'Apart from you, now, of course. And by the way I have heard certain murmurings in this direction also, young man.'

'Murmurings about me?' Andriy feels a panicky quiver in his chest.

'There is one lady who says a mysterious Ukrainian visitor has proposed marriage to her. This same Mrs Gayle, in fact. Formerly my fiancée. She was celebrating

last night with whisky bottle. She has already made announcement to her family.'

The quivering in his chest becomes more violent. He can almost smell the rabbit hutch closing in on him.

'It is all completely untrue.'

'This would be good marriage for you. Passport. Work permit. Inheritance. Big house,' the old man continues with enthusiasm. 'Only family may cause problem. Same like my family. Children nose-poking in parent's love affair.'

Holy whiskers! This would be an original outcome to his adventure – he will marry Mrs Gayle, Mr Mayevskyj will marry Irina, and they will all live happily together in Peterborough, end of story.

'Mr Mayevskyj, if there has been some misunderstanding about my intentions, I will do my best to clarify with those concerned. And you must do same. You must tell these old ladies that you have no intention to marry. If you refuse this, I will take away the gearbox.'

'My dear Francis Barnett. We had many happy times.' His lower lip puckers like a child's about to cry. 'Is it so wrong to long for love?'

'Mr Mayevskyj, you are old. It is better for you to love your gearbox, and to leave ladies to their follies.'

The old man gazes at the gearbox.

'Maybe I have been too dissipated in my affections.'

Andriy takes some tissues from a box by the bed, cleans the residual oil from the gearbox and places it on the bedside table.

'Now, you must promise me that you will tell these ladies that you have taken vow of chastity, and there must be no more talk of marriage. Next problem is where to hide gearbox so that Matron does not find it and remove it again.'

Mr Mayevskyj taps his nose. 'This matron is very nose-poking type. If she catches any hint of this gearbox it will definitely be removed. Let me think. In this bottom drawer' – he lowers his voice and points to a battered piece of chipboard furniture – 'I am keeping my specially adapted undergarments. However, since I am not permitted to wear them, no one ever looks inside. Maybe if you put it there, buried beneath, I will be able to take it out and talk to it from time to time.'

Andriy opens the drawer. Inside is a jumble of greyish-white cotton and lengths of elastic sewn on with black button thread, some pieces of pink foam rubber, and a coil of clear plastic tubing attached to an empty yoghurt pot. Interesting. Andriy wraps the gearbox back in its oiled cloth and tucks it in a corner.

As he is closing up the drawer he hears a screech of tyres on the gravel drive below the window. He raises the blind. A huge black car has pulled up outside. An elegant streaked-blond woman with a horsy face is getting out of the passenger side; out of the driver's side comes a tall dark man who looks like – Andriy can think of no other way to describe him – a minor scion of the aristocracy.

'Goodbye, Mr Mayevskij. I wish you a long life and much happiness with your gearbox. Now it is time for me to return very quickly to Donbas.'

*

I wish it would rain soon. Everyone is sweating and grumbling. You can feel the electricity in the air. I can even feel it in my body. A good storm will clear the heat and tension. Yateka has disappeared somewhere. Andriy has gone to give Mr Mayevskij his gearbox. I am sitting in the dining room, waiting for him to come back. I wish I could open the French doors into the rose garden, but they are locked in case anyone should try to escape. Beyond the rose beds is the little gravel path that leads down to our secret garden.

Twice, he kissed me there yesterday. The first time was beautiful, like heaven, and I just wanted to believe it was real. The second time it was solid, like the earth, and all my doubts disappeared. Yes, definitely he's *the one*. I can still feel the imprint of his hands on me, hot and strong, as if he's already taken possession of me. And that melting feeling in my body. Last night, I thought it was going to be *the night*. Then that annoying dog intervened. Well, I suppose it was quite a good thing that it saved us all from the fire. But how much longer do I have to wait? I just wish it would come soon.

Who would have thought I would come all this way only to lose my virginity, not to a romantic bowler-hatted Englishman, but to a Donbas miner? There are plenty of

those where I've come from, but the strange thing is that in Ukraine we would probably never have met. We're from different worlds, me from the advanced Westward-looking Orange world, him from the primitive Blue-and-White industrial East, that old derelict Soviet world that we are trying to leave behind. And even if we had met, what would we have had to say to each other – a professor's daughter and a miner's son? Being over here in England together makes us more equal. It's as though destiny has brought us together. Just like Natasha and Pierre – they'd been acquainted for years, and yet it took a whole war and peace before they could see each other with new eyes and realise they were meant for each other.

I admit there are some things that frighten me. Will it hurt? Will I know what to do? Will he still love me afterwards? Will I get pregnant? You can't let these fears stop you. And there's something else that worries me, something so vague that it's not easy to put into words, and yet in a way it's the most frightening thing of all: will I still be the same person afterwards?

'What are you dreaming of?'

It was Yateka. She had crept up behind me and put her hands over my eyes. I knew it was her by her voice, but I said, 'Andriy?'

'Aha!' She laughed and let go of my eyes. 'You are dreaming about that naughty man.'

'He is not naughty, Yateka. He is the best man in the world.'

She gave me a funny look.

'You think so?'

'Actually, I think he is wonderful. Gentlemanly and thoughtful and brave. How he rescued everybody from the fire – that is quite typical of his behaviour, you know. The only problem is his dog, but maybe eventually he will give it away. You know what I like best about him, Yateka? I like the way he says, "You are right, Irina." Not many men can say this.'

'Irina, I think maybe the Ukrainian millionaire will be better for you. There's something about Andriy ...'

'What?'

She gave me another funny look.

'What is it, Yateka?'

Then she laughed. 'I think Ukrainian men are just like Zambian men.'

What did she mean?

'Have you got a boyfriend waiting for you in Zambia?' I asked. 'What will you do when you finish your training?'

'You know, Irina, I have only three weeks of this slavery left. After that, if I get a good report from Matron, I can work in NHS and earn good money. And I can do proper nursing work, not this minimum-wage toilet-cleaning type of work I do here. My dream is to train for theatre nurse, or intensive care. And I will be free – free of Four Gables, free of Matron, free of Nightingale Human Solutions.' She gave my hands a squeeze. 'So don't worry for me, Irina. And good luck with your millionaire!'

Before I could protest, we were distracted by a sound of shouting outside in the driveway, and a few moments later Andriy came rushing in with a wild look in his eyes and blood pouring from his nose.

'Andriy, what has happened?' I put my arms around him – my own wounded warrior.

'Irina, I must leave this place immediately. Will you come with me?'

'Of course, Andriy. But why?'

'There has been big misunderstanding. Go and get your things. I will explain later.'

I hugged Yateka.

'Goodbye. Thank you for your kindness.'

'I'm sure you will come back,' she said.

So there we were, back on the Great North Road, Andriy, me and the dog. As usual, the river of cars was streaming past and nothing was stopping. Fortunately the rain hadn't started yet. Andriy still seemed very agitated, so I gave his hand a friendly squeeze.

'What happened? Why did we have to leave so suddenly?'

'It was all big misunderstanding.'

'What misunderstanding?'

'Nothing. It's finished now.'

'You said you'd tell me. Andriy, you promised.'

'This old lady, Mrs Gayle. She said I had proposed marriage to her. Then announced it to her daughter and son-in-law, and told them they must move out of house because she is coming back. Then she celebrated with whisky.'

'Andriy, you have been lecturing me about smiling too much at old men, and now you are doing same thing exactly.'

'It is completely different.'

'In what way is it different?'

'It was misunderstanding.'

'I cannot see any difference. You must have given her some encouragement.'

'Irina, this is no laughing matter. These people are terrible, what barbarians. You cannot imagine what they said to me.'

His face was like a thunderstorm.

Fortunately just at that moment, a car pulled up – in fact it was not a car, it was a van. Or a bus. In fact it was a bus turned into a caravan.

'Hi. Where're you going?'

'We are going only to Sheffield,' said Andriy emphatically.

'Great. Get in. I'm going up that way.'

The driver was a young man about the same age as Andriy. He had small round glasses, some fluffy ginger curls on his chin that looked as if they were struggling to be a beard, and ginger hair pulled into a ponytail – a thick curly ponytail, not like . . . In my opinion men should not have long hair. Andriy's hair is not too long. And it is not too short.

'My name's Rock.'

In fact it was hard to imagine someone who looked less like a rock. He reminded me of a shy little snail

travelling in his shell home. We introduced ourselves, and it was just as well we were soon on friendly terms, because the caravan went as slowly as a snail, and it was clear that the journey was going to be a long one.

Nine Ladies

It will be a miracle if we ever make it to Sheffield, thinks Andriy. This old single-decker bus must be fifty years old at least, with prehistoric transmission, only four gears plus reverse, on a long angled gear-stick, like the old Volgas. The engine drones like a swarm of bees, and when it picks up speed – the maximum is forty Ks per hour – the whole body shakes and vibrates. Even in Ukraine, to undertake a long journey in such a vehicle, you would call in the priest and ask for a blessing or two.

There is something else he notices – the smell from the engine. It is actually quite a pleasant smell. It reminds him – this seems strange – of the little restaurant on the corner of Rebetov Street. Fried potatoes. Irina sits up and sniffs the air.

‘Fish and chip?’ she says.

‘Nearly,’ says Rock. ‘Actually, it runs on used chip fat – I converted it missen. Burns up t’ excess by-products of consumerism. Not strictly legal, because you don’t pay tax on it. But, as Jimmy Binbag said, the chips of wrath are wiser than the vinegar of instruction.’

She is sitting next to him at the front, gripping onto the edges of the double seat. Andriy catches her eye.

‘Are all Angliski drivers crazy?’ she whispers in Ukrainian.

‘Seems so,’ he whispers back. ‘At least this one is not speed maniac.’

‘So where are you two from, then?’ Rock relaxes into a steady thirty Ks per hour, resting his forearms on the wheel and rolling a cigarette at the same time.

‘Ukraine. You know it?’

‘Aye.’ He pauses to lick the paper. ‘We had some Ukrainians up in Barnsley. Miners.’

‘My father was miner,’ says Andriy.

‘Snap,’ says Rock. ‘Mine too. Before he died.’

‘He died in accident?’

‘Neh. Pneumoconiosis. Black lung.’

‘Mine died in accident. Roof falling down.’

‘Fuckin’ roof fall. That’s tragic. Sorry, pal.’

‘You still miner?’ asks Andriy.

‘Neh. They shut all t’ pits round us. Anyroad, me dad said I were too soft. Said I should get educated, instead. What use is educated in Barnsley, I said. Anyroad, I went to college and did mechanical engineering. But then I thought to missen, in’t engineering part of t’ problem? So I decided to do this, instead.’

Still resting his forearms on the wheel, he strikes a match and lights the cigarette. Puffs of sweetish smoke billow through the bus. ‘You still a miner?’

‘I was. Before Father’s accident. Now I cannot go back down. I cannot work underground. So I have no work. I come in England for picking strawberry.’

‘Aye, it’s all crap. As Jimmy Binbag said, when t’ toilet of capitalism is flushed, all t’ crap rains down on them below.’

He takes another deep puff and holds the smoke in his lungs. Then he passes the cigarette to Andriy. Andriy shakes his head.

'My father said, when miner goes underground, death may visit. When miner smokes, death is invited.'

'Jesus! I bet that put you off! Anyroad, I thought they'd shut all t' mines in Ukraine.'

'Many was shut. Then we open them again.'

'You opened t' mines?'

'Miners did it. With our hands.'

'Weren't that a bit dangerous?'

'Of course. Also illegal. Working in seam one metre tall. Thirty-seven degrees of heat. One hundred per cent of humidity. No *ventilatsya*. No safety *vikhod*. No power tool. Only with pick in our hand we go back underground to cut coal. Then we sell it for money. You know, in this time there is no other work. We have to live.'

'Holy fuck.'

The swarm of bees drones on, soothing and purposeful. A few drops of rain spatter against the windscreen. Irina sighs and stirs, her head heavy on his left shoulder. She is asleep. She hasn't heard anything. One day, he will tell her the whole story: the bright spring morning; the hole in the ground, gaping like a wound, where they lowered themselves into the earth; the stifling darkness that swallowed them up. Those first tremors. Then the long roar of the explosion. The shaking. The tumbling boulders from the roof. The voices shouting, screaming. Then the silence. Black dust. He moves his arm up and enfolds

her, pulling her head onto his chest. Her hair flows over him like streamers of dark silk.

Behind the front seats, a curtain made out of an old sheet has been strung across the bus. It is only partly drawn and Andriy can see into the back, where all the seats have been taken out apart from four, which are arranged around a square makeshift table. In one corner is a low cupboard with a gas ring on top, and some cardboard boxes in which clothes, food and pans are jumbled together. The rest of the floor space is taken up by a double mattress, with some grey-brown tousled bedding.

'You convert this bus yourself?'

'Aye. It weren't hard.'

'I would like to do something like this. Get old bus. Convert. Travel round world.'

Would Irina come with him, he wonders, on a trip like this? And Dog? On the mattress in the back of the bus, Dog is snoring and farting in his usual vigorous way and Rock's dog, curled up beside him, is sniffing and sighing more delicately.

'I'm not sure Alice would make it round t' world.'

'Alice is your girlfriend?'

'Neh, Alice is the bus. My girlfriend's called Thunder.'

Hm. Interesting name for woman. Quite sexy.

'She is also miner?'

'Neh. They don't have women miners over here. Mind you, if they did, she'd be ace.'

'Rock, if you not miner or engineer, what work you do?'

'Me?' Rock takes another long drag on his cigarette and adjusts the little round glasses that have slipped over to one side. 'I suppose you could say I'm a warrior, like.'

'Warrior like? This is your job?'

'Neh, not a job. More like a calling. Aye, an earth warrior. Defending t' earth from t' vile clutches of corporate greed.' He starts to giggle.

'Hm. This is original.'

'Aye, you see there's this ancient stone circle up in t' Peaks. Three thousand year old. And some greedy bastard wants to open up a quarry right beside it. So us warriors – we've made a camp there, up in t' trees. They can't blast the quarry without cutting t' trees down. And now they can't cut t' trees down, because of us' – he giggles again – 'defending our ancient British heritage from tentacles of globalisation, in Jimmy's immortal words.'

This Jimmy sounds an interesting type.

'But why for they make quarry in such historic place?'

'Greed, man. Sheer greed. All for export. Building boom in America. Turn muck into brass. Jimmy calls 'em t' enemy within.'

He has become quite agitated, staring all around him with anxious eyes.

'In Ukraine was same,' says Andriy soothingly. 'Everything was sold. Now is nothing left.'

'Was it Ukraine where they had all them protests? Summat about t' election? Orange banners an' all that?' His voice has become calm again, almost dreamy.

'That also was greed. Few businessmen have got all public asset into their hand. Now they will sell to West.'

'Andriy, you are talking complete rubbish!'

She sits bolt upright, rubbing her eyes.

'I thought you were asleep.'

'How can I sleep when you talk such rubbish?'

'Is not rubbish, Irina. You know nothing about our lives in the East.'

They have slipped into Ukrainian, and raised their voices. Rock watches them with a benign smile on his face, leaning low over the steering wheel. The bus is going incredibly slowly now, barely ten Ks per hour.

'I know what is good for Ukraine, Andriy' – she stabs her finger at him – 'and it is not to be dominated by Russia.'

What's got into her? OK, so now it is time for re-education to begin.

'Is not domination, is economic integration, Irina. Integrated production, integrated market.' He speaks slowly and clearly. Can she, a young girl with a head full of feminine things, be capable of understanding such ideas? 'Ukrainian economy and Russian economy was one. Without Russia, Ukrainian industry collapsed.'

'Andriy, Russia has been robbing Ukraine under the Tsars, under communism, now under economic integration. It is just a different name for the same thing. At least with Yushchenko we can build our own independent economy.'

Her voice has taken on an irritating preachy note which is not at all attractive in a woman. She should stick to womanly topics, not meddle her pretty nose in politics.

'Irina, the main people who have been robbing

Ukraine are our fellow Ukrainians. Kravchuk, Kuchma, your Timoshenko – all of them billionaires. You know, when they closed coal mines in Donbas, there was European money to help miners, for new industries to replace old. What happened? All money went into pockets of officials. New Ukrainian officials, not Russian. Mobilfonmen. Mines were sold, stripped of machinery, closed. No new industries replaced them. In desperation, miners went underground themselves to dig for coal. Can you imagine in what conditions? Can you imagine this for one moment, Irina?’

‘There’s no need to shout.’

‘I’m sorry.’ She is right. Shouting will not bring him back. ‘In one of these mines my father died.’

‘Oh, Andriy!’ She puts her hands up to her mouth. ‘Oh, why didn’t you tell me before? I’m very sorry. I’m so very sorry.’

Tears brim up into her eyes, and there’s such a look of pain on her face that he has to take her in his arms again to comfort her. He will have to go more softly with re-education next time.

‘It’s not your fault, Irina. Please don’t cry. You didn’t kill him with your own hands.’

She sighs. She buries her face in him. He strokes the dark bird’s-wing of her hair that settles against his chest.

Wait a minute – what’s happening now? The bus seems to have slowed almost to a halt and is drifting gently across the road. Rock is slumped forward over the wheel, sighing softly and still giggling a little. Andriy leans over, grabs the wheel, and tries to guide the bus back on

course, giving Rock a hard dig with his elbow at the same time. Rock shakes his head, blinks, smiles, resettles the glasses which have almost slipped off his nose, then takes control of the wheel again.

‘No stress, our lad. Time for a little kip.’

At the next service station he pulls off the road, parks the bus, drapes himself over the steering wheel, and in a few minutes he is fast asleep. Irina wanders off to find the washroom. Andriy sits in the bus, listening to the snoring sounds of Rock and the dogs, and feeling impatience build up in him like steam in a cylinder. Will they ever get to Sheffield?

‘What’s the matter with him?’ whispers Irina, climbing up into the seat beside him, looking bright-faced and relaxed.

‘Tired from driving. You know, this old bus. No power steering.’

He has a pretty good idea about the cigarette, but he doesn’t want to alarm her.

Half an hour or so later Rock wakes up, scratches his head, shakes himself all over like a dog and immediately goes off in search of something to eat. As he steps down out of the bus Andriy notices for the first time how small he is – he looks like a curly-haired elf in his baggy earthy clothes as he skips off towards the service area. He returns a few minutes later with a bottle of water, an orange, a loaf of sliced bread and four bars of chocolate. Andriy reaches in his pocket for some money, but Rock shakes his head.

'No stress. I liberated them.'

He peels the orange methodically, sharing out the segments one at a time between the three of them. Then he breaks up the chocolate bars and does the same. Then he carefully counts out the slices of the loaf. He seems to be in no hurry to go anywhere. Behind the little round glasses, his eyes have gone pink.

'I can drive if you like it,' says Andriy.

'No stress,' says Rock.

Half an hour later, when they have finished eating, he fills up the tank from a drum in the luggage box, hands Andriy the keys to the bus and crawls into the back.

'Move over, Maryjane,' he says, and stretches out between the dogs. Soon, the three of them are snoring in chorus with the drone of the engine. In the front passenger seat Irina seems to have drifted off to sleep too.

Sitting behind the wheel, Andriy is doing his best to concentrate on the road. Well, for one thing, he was right about the steering – this old bus is even worse than the Land Rover. The gear movement is fiendish, too. Fortunately, once they are on the road, there isn't much steering or gear-changing to do, nothing much to do, in fact, but to sit there and watch the kilometres slip slowly by.

The promised rain has not materialised, and the sky is still heavy and hot. It is early evening now, and the traffic has built up a bit. Not that it makes any difference

to him – theirs is by far the slowest vehicle on the road. It is surprising, he thinks, that Sheffield doesn't seem to be getting any closer. Surely they would have seen a sign for it by now. On their left is a sign for Leeds. Is that not somewhere in the north? Then a sign to York. Well, at least they are in the right county. But isn't Sheffield supposed to be in South Yorkshire? Where has it disappeared to?

Irina wakes up, and reaches over to touch his hand.

'Are we nearly there now?'

'I think so.'

'Tell me something else about this Sheffield.'

'Well, you know, Sheffield is the first city in England to be declared a socialist republic, and the ruler, this Vloonki, is known throughout the world for his progressive policies.'

'What are these progressive policies?' she asks, a note of suspicion in her voice. 'Will I like them?'

'You will like the bougainvillea for sure.'

He leans across and kisses her, steadying the bus with his right knee.

*

Although Andriy is very handsome and manly, there are times when I wish he was not quite so primitive. How have I let myself fall in love with a man who is riddled with Soviet-era ideas? I hope that here in the West he will be able to shed some of his outdated misconceptions, but I wonder about this Sheffield. Will it turn out to be some kind of communist-style workers' paradise like

Yalta or Sochi, with sanatoria and communal mudbaths everywhere? We will see.

Rock did not wake up for several hours. When he did, he was amazed to see how far we had come.

'You should've turned off on the A57. We've come way too far north. We'll have to turn around and go back again.'

'You did not say anything about this,' said Andriy rather grumpily. That is one of his bad points, I have noticed. He is inclined to grumpiness. I suppose he is desperate to get to this Sheffield.

Rock looked vague and apologetic. 'It was that skunk,' he muttered, staring into the back of the van, though I really don't see how Dog can be held responsible.

Anyway, the bus was turned around and off we went in the opposite direction, with Rock at the wheel once more. The light had faded from the sky. Occasionally a car or lorry thundered down the southbound carriageway, headlights blazing into the dusk. We must have been driving for an hour or so, nosing our way southwards, Rock resting both hands on the wheel, staring straight ahead, without saying anything. The traffic on the road had thinned out. Once or twice a vehicle overtook us, its tail-lights dwindling in the darkness until there were two red pinpricks, then nothing.

Then suddenly he pulled off the road into a lay-by and announced, 'I don't think we're gonna make it tonight,

lads. Let's pull over for a kip and carry on in t' morning.'

Andriy didn't say anything, but I knew what he was thinking. I could see the thundery look on his face.

'You two can have t' bed – I'll sleep on t' bench. Maryjane! Here!'

Maryjane bounded into the front, and Dog followed. Rock pulled two of the seats together end to end. He took off his T-shirt and jeans, threw them into a box with the crockery, and eased his pale little body into a khaki-coloured sleeping bag like a larva crawling into its cocoon.

Andriy stepped outside and helped me down from the bus. We were in a lay-by, set back from the road behind a hedge. There was another caravan there, too, all shuttered up, with a sign saying TEAS. SNACKS. The night was still warm and humid, the sky overcast, with no stars. I breathed deeply, filling my lungs, stretching my limbs and feeling them loosen. We had been sitting for hours. I wandered behind a bush to water the grass and I heard Andriy doing the same a little distance away, stumbling in the darkness, then the soft hiss of his pee seeping into the ground.

When he came back in the dark, he took me in his arms and pressed me up against the side of the bus. I could feel him, all hard, and his breath hot and urgent on my neck. I don't know why I started trembling. Then he held me close, until my body went still against his.

'Irina, we are two halves of one country.' His voice was low and passionate. 'We must learn to love each other.'

No one has ever said anything so wonderful to me before.

He kissed my hair, then my lips. I felt spurts of fire running through my body, and that melting feeling when you almost can't say no any more. But somehow I did say no. Because when it's *the night*, it has to be perfect – not on that disgusting mattress where Dog and Maryjane had been lying licking their parts. Not standing up by the roadside like a prostitute in a doorway. You can't imagine Natasha and Pierre consummating their love up against the side of a bus, can you?

'Not now, Andriy,' I said. 'Not here. Not like this.'

Then he said something quite bad-tempered, then he apologised for being bad-tempered, and I apologised for what I'd said, and he said he was going for a walk and I said I'd go with him but he said no, he wanted to go by himself. I stood at the side of the bus, waiting for him to come back, and wondering what I should say to make him not be angry with me. Should I tell him that I loved him?

When at last we did crawl onto the mattress the bedding was grey and greasy, with a sweaty doggy smell. I couldn't take my clothes off. Andriy thought it was out of modesty – he's such a gentleman – but it was really because I didn't want to feel those limp clammy sheets against my skin. He held me in his arms all night, my head tucked in between his chin and his shoulder. He didn't even notice the sheets.

In the morning, I woke to find my hands and feet were covered in red lumps. Andriy's were too. Rock was already awake, squatting by the gas stove boiling some water, wearing nothing but his underpants, which were grey and loose like the loincloth of an Old Testament prophet.

'Ready for a cuppa?' he said.

He was smoking a thin hand-rolled cigarette, which hung on his lower lip as he talked and puffed simultaneously. His body was stringy and very pale, with no manly musculature, but a sprinkling of ginger freckles and fleabites. I wished he would put some clothes on.

For breakfast we ate the remains of yesterday's bread and some wizened apples that were lurking in one of the boxes. Rock poured out the hot, weak tea, which he sweetened with honey from a jar. Andriy leaned over and whispered in my ear, 'You are as sweet as honey.'

A brown curl flopped down in the middle of his forehead as he said it, and for some reason I can't explain, I felt a shining bubble of love swelling up inside me, not just for Andriy, but also for Rock, for Dog and Maryjane, for the smelly old bus, even for the fleabites and the loincloth underpants, and for the whole fresh lovely morning.

It was still very early. Outside, the landscape was softened by a haze that lingered over the flat empty fields, clinging to the outlines of trees and bushes. The birds had already started to rouse themselves, chirping away busily. Dog and Maryjane were chasing around out there, tumbling and playing. Rock whistled, and they

came running, their eyes bright, their tongues hanging out. They settled themselves on the bed, and we sat in front. Then Rock revved the engine up, tearing through the misty silence, and we were off.

*

Some time last night they must have turned westwards off the Great North Road. The road they are on now is smaller, winding through a featureless agricultural landscape of large fields planted with unfamiliar crops and little settlements of redbrick houses. But what amazes Andriy is that there is already so much traffic on the road, cars, vans, lorries, people racing to get to work. A large black four-by-four cruises by. It looks like . . . No, surely there are dozens of such vehicles on the roads. He glances at Irina. She is sitting in the middle again, her left hand warm beneath his right hand. Her eyes are closed. She didn't notice.

A minibus overtakes them on a long straight stretch, and he counts some dozen men squashed together on the benches, swarthy dark-haired men with brooding early-morning faces, some of them smoking cigarettes, gliding past them into the mist.

'Who are these men?' he asks Rock.

Rock shrugs. 'Immigrant workers. Fragments of globalised labour, Jimmy Binbag called them.'

'Who is . . . ?'

'Whole country's run by immigrants now. They do all t' crap jobs.'

'Like us.'

'Aye, like you,' says Rock. 'Did you hear about that crash in Kent? Minivan full of strawberry-pickers. Six killed.'

'In Kent?' Irina sits up sharply, her eyes very wide.

'Poor exploited bastards. Minions of faceless global corporations. Not me. I've had enough of all that. Now I've turned warrior.' He pushes back the glasses that have slipped down his nose. 'If only me dad could see me now. He said I were too soft for t' pit.'

'But you are defending stones and not people,' says Andriy. 'Why?'

'Coal, stone, earth – it's all our heritage, in't it?'

'What is mean eritij?'

'It's what you get from your mum and dad. Gifts passed on through t' generations.'

'Like underpants,' whispers Irina in Ukrainian.

If I were a warrior, thinks Andriy, I would not be defending some stupid old stones, but the flesh and blood of living people. In Donbas, too, the mobilfonmen have taken over, and people have become disposable, their precious lives thrown away through avoidable accidents and preventable disease, their misery blunted by vodka. This is the future his country has prepared for him – to be expendable. No, he will not accept it.

'What are you thinking?' asks Irina softly.

'I'm thinking how precious you are, Ukrainian girl.'

The words feel strangely solid in his mouth, like lumps of undissolved sugar. He isn't used to saying things like this to a woman.

They are still going westwards. They pass through an ugly traffic-clogged town, out onto a larger highway, then take a narrow road through the fields, which are green and undulating but without the luminous beauty of the Kent countryside.

'All round here used to be pits,' says Rock. 'In t' strike, they blocked all t' roads to stop Yorkshire pickets coming into Notts. Scabby Notts, they called it. It were a battle-ground. Me dad were arrested at Hucknall. That's all history now.' He sighs. 'No binbags in t' dustbin of history, as Jimmy used to say.'

'Who is . . . ?'

'Motorway up ahead,' says Rock. 'Once we're over, we'll soon be home.'

Beyond the fields, some kilometres ahead, they catch glimpses of a huge road carved through the landscape, bigger even than the Great North Road, the lines of cars and lorries moving slowly, as close as coloured beads on a thread.

After the motorway, the road becomes narrower, and starts to climb. The houses are no longer of brick but of grey stone, and the villages smaller and further apart. As they climb, they come into a different sort of countryside, wild and heathy, with dark crags, copses of silver birch and conifers, and sweeping wind-smoothed hills. The sky is heavy, with storm clouds resting on the horizon. Rock is driving in first most of the time, leaning forward over the wheel, because the road is so narrow that if a

vehicle comes the other way, one of them will have to back up to let the other pass.

'I like this landscape,' says Irina. 'It is how I imagined England. Like *Wuthering Heights*.'

'Peak District,' says Rock. 'We're nearly there.'

On a steep narrow road between two woods, Rock takes a left turn onto a rutted dirt track that leads into a grove of silver birches. At the bottom, among the trees, another bus is parked. As they drive closer, two dogs run out of the wood and race towards them, barking. Maryjane pricks up her ears and starts barking too, and Dog joins in. Then three people emerge, following the dogs. Andriy studies them curiously – are they men or women?

*

Andriy was rather annoyed when he realised this was our destination. I think he had believed we would soon arrive in Sheffield. Rock had promised vaguely that he would drop us off in Sheffield the next day. Or the day after. To be honest, I was in no great hurry to reach Sheffield and I was curious about this camp. Maybe there would be a tent or little romantic caravan perched up on a hillside where we could spend the night.

But there was just a jumble of old vehicles at the edge of a wood, some of them propped up on bricks, and the only tents were crude tarpaulins stretched low over bent saplings. Then I looked up and my eyes blinked, because up there among the leaves was a whole spider's web of

blue rope, stretching from tree to tree like walkways in the sky, and canvas shelters perched up in the branches.

Rock jumped down and ran towards three people – they must be his fellow warriors – who were coming out to greet us. He embraced them, and introduced us. They were all wearing the same baggy earth-coloured clothes. In my opinion, they did not have the appearance you would expect of typical warriors. The smallest of them, whose name was Windhover, had a completely shaved head. The two taller ones had the same twisted rat's-tail hair as Toby McKenzie, though one of them had it pulled back into a ponytail. They were called Heather and Birch. Everyone round here seems to have these stupid names. In my opinion, people should be named after people, not things. Otherwise, how can you tell whether they are male or female?

Heather is the name of a small purple flower which is very popular in Scotland and it is also a woman's name, but this Warrior Heather seemed to be a man, at least if facial hair is anything to judge by. Despite his feminine name, he looked quite chunky and muscular, with a thick brown beard that looked as if it had been chopped with nail scissors – maybe this is a warrior fashion. I was less sure about the other two. Warrior Birch was quite tall but seemed somehow insubstantial, with a soft voice and an apologetic manner. Warrior Windhover was smaller but seemed more ferocious, despite having no hair of any kind apart from eyebrows, which were dark and curved expressively over luminous sea-blue eyes

that stood out vividly in the pale bony head. As we followed them back to the camp, I noticed that Windhover and Birch were holding hands, so one of them must be a woman and one a man – but which was which?

To my surprise I spotted a washing line stretched between a caravan and a tree, just like at our strawberry field, and on it were hanging three pairs of warrior underpants, all greyish, shapeless and soggy. And this amused me, because to be honest they did not seem like the kind of warriors who would bother much with laundry.

In a clearing among the trees a fire was smouldering, with a blackened kettle hanging over it and some logs set around it as seats. They invited us to sit, and Heather poured tea for us, which was greyish, smoky-tasting, and very weak, into cups that were also cracked, greyish and smoky-tasting. Then Birch ladled out some food from another pot, and that was greyish and smoky-tasting, too. It reminded me of the warrior underpants. If you boiled them and mashed them up a bit, they would look and taste like this.

They were talking among themselves. Rock was telling them about his visit to Cambridge, and they were asking various questions about laboratories, but I wasn't really paying attention, because I had spotted something in the trees. Up there among the leaves was a caravan – a little round green-painted caravan, sitting in the crook of a massive beech tree, secured with blue rope, and a dangling rope ladder leading up to it.

'Look, Andriy,' I said.

Rock said, 'Aye, that's the visitors' caravan. You can sleep up there if you want.'

Andriy gave me a look that set my body glowing from inside, and my heart was jumping around all over the place, because I knew for sure that it would happen tonight.

*

The bald woman, Windhover, has the most entrancing eyebrows – the way they lift enquiringly, curve suggestively, tighten into a frown, or rise up in arcs of surprise or pleasure. A woman's eyebrows can be a very seductive feature, thinks Andriy. She is talking to Birch, the eyebrows rising and falling in rhythm. Earlier, he saw them holding hands, and as they bent their heads together there was a little stolen kiss. To watch two women kissing is very arousing to a man. Were they doing it on purpose? He has never met a homosex woman before, but he has heard that they are incredibly sexy. Never until now has he had an opportunity to find out for himself. He has heard it said that their passionate nature, thwarted by the absence of a suitable man, turns in on itself and fixes on another of the same kind. But should a suitably manly man appear on the scene, they say, the intensity of the ardour that will be unleashed is beyond description. There's no stopping these homosex women once they get going. A man has to keep a cool head or he could drown in the torrent of their passion. What's more, they say, the homosex woman will be profoundly indebted to the man who liberates her from her sterile

inward-looking fixation, and will show her gratitude in an astonishing display of sexual abandon, etc, which he can only begin to imagine.

This poor hairless woman with beautiful eyes and seductive eyebrows, the thought of her mysterious body pale beneath its layers of dun-coloured wrapping, hungry for the love of a good man, fills Andriy with intense . . . pity. And although of course he is completely committed to Irina and to their future together, still, he wonders whether Irina would object if as an act of kindness, he were to free this sad confined creature from the prison of her thwarted passion.

Oh, don't be such an idiot, Andriy Palenko.

*

After our meal, Rock said, 'Come on. Time to meet the Ladies.'

He led Andriy and me and a small pack of dogs back along the track, over the lane and up a steep path through the wood on the other side. As we climbed up I stopped to look back at their camp, but it was hardly visible, the green-painted caravan and faded green tarpaulins hidden among the foliage. You could just see a wisp of smoke fingering up through the leaves. Warrior Heather, who had accompanied us, pointed out an outcrop of rosy-coloured stone.

'That's the sandstone they want to quarry,' he said. 'Pretty colour, isn't it? It was licensed in 1952. Now they want to open it up again. But we stopped them.'

'You stopped it? With your camp?' said Andriy.

'Yes. We made them take it to court. The court threw it out. We should be celebrating, but actually it's rather sad, because it means the end of this camp. Some of us have lived here for five years. Isn't that so, Rocky?' His voice and manner of speaking were very cultivated, unlike Rock's low-class regional accent.

'Aye,' said Rock, who had gone on ahead, and now stopped and waited for us to catch up. 'Bloody sad. I've been here three year. Now I'll have to become a wage slave again. Earn. Spend. Buy crap. Surrender missen to t' vile clutches of materialism.' He re-lit the cigarette that was dangling on his lip. 'Some of them've gone up to Sheffield and Leeds already. Thunder, Torrent, Sparrowhawk, Midge. Working in t' call centres. Sweat-shops of t' information age, Jimmy called them.'

'Don't worry,' said Heather. 'Nobody'll let you near a call centre.'

At the top, we emerged on a wide stony plateau covered with heather.

Heather said, '*Calluna vulgaris*. Ericaceous. My favourite plant. Just smell it.'

I stooped to pick a sprig, but he stopped me.

'It's protected. You've got to smell it *in situ*.'

I bent down and breathed deeply. It smelt of summer and honey. I could see why he'd chosen this flower for his warrior name. The purple flowers were so small that in the distance they just looked like a mauve haze drifting over the hilltops.

Following a sandy track, we came through a small copse of trees, ash, beech and silver birch, and found ourselves in a flat grassy clearing some fifteen metres wide. Set in the grass was a circle of nine stones.

In my opinion they were somewhat disappointing. I was expecting something bigger and more structured, like Stonehenge. These stones were crooked and uneven in size, like bad teeth. They did not look anything like ladies. No one who has seen the basilica of Santa Sofia or the Lavra monastery at sunset, or even certain English monuments, would find these stones of interest. But then Heather said, 'Iron age. Three and a half thousand years old. Forerunners of our great cathedrals.'

I suppose that is quite interesting.

'You can listen to the spirits up here,' said Rock. He flung himself down on his back in the middle of the circle, his arms and legs outstretched. 'Sometimes, when I lie still, I think I can hear Jimmy Binbag talking. Come and lie down and listen.'

So we lay, the four of us, in a cross shape, our heads to the centre, our outstretched hands and feet just touching. I expected one of them to start chanting some weird stuff at any minute, but nobody did, so I just lay staring at the sky and listening to the breeze ruffling the grass. The clouds were heavy, their undersides purple with rain, with unexpected shafts of sunlight breaking through in bursts of gold and silver like messenger angels. I could feel the closeness of the others, *him* on my left and

Heather on my right, and the silence of the stones. Then, in the silence, I started to feel the closeness of all the other people who had stood and lain in this place over thousands of years, staring at these same rocks and this sky. I imagined I could hear their footsteps and their voices in my head, not hurrying or shouting, but just the gentle chatter-patter of human life, as it has been lived on this earth since time was first counted.

It reminded me of my childhood, when my bed had been in the living room of our little two-roomed flat, and each night I fell asleep to the sound of my parents' voices and their quiet movements tiptoeing around so as not to wake me – chatter-patter.

*

The silence inside the stone circle is eerie. It hangs in the air like the huge hush in the cathedral, after prayers are finished. If you lie still, you can hear the wind sighing in the grass like voices murmuring in your ear. Andriy listens. Really, the sound is uncannily like the whisper of human voices. What language are they speaking? The hiss of sibilants makes him think at first that it is Polish – yes, it is Yola and Tomasz and Marta, talking quietly together. They are back in Zdroj. Marta is preparing a feast. It is somebody's birthday – a child's. They are drinking wine, Tomasz filling up the glasses and proposing a toast to – Andriy strains to hear – the toast is to him and Irina, and their future happiness. Tears come to his eyes. And in the background someone is giggling and whispering – not in Polish now, but in . . . is it Chinese? Abruptly, the giggling

stops, and turns to sobbing. Then the sobbing grows deeper, and now he sees the miners from the pit accident, struggling out of the mass of fallen rock, reaching out for him with their hands, pulling at him, pleading. His father is there among them, shrouded in that terrible black dust, already formless as a ghost. He knows he has to run, to get away, but he is pinioned to the ground. He can't move. His limbs have turned to lead, but his heart is beating, faster, faster. And just as it seems the panic will overwhelm him the sobbing turns into music, a voice – a man's voice – deep and sweet, singing of peace and comfort, easing the pain and rage in his soul with its promise of eternity. Emanuel is singing to him.

He awakes with a start, wondering – did Blessing remember to make that phone call?

*

Maybe I was dreaming, because after a while I realised that the patter was raindrops, and the chatter was Andriy saying, 'Wake up, Irina. Let's go back. It's raining.'

The others had already rigged up a large canvas awning stretched between the trees, and underneath it a fire was smoking. Heather was peeling potatoes, and Rock was stirring something in a pot.

'Can I help?' I asked.

Rock passed me the stirring spoon. Then he disappeared.

'I'll get some more dry wood,' said Andriy, and disappeared too.

'Where are the other people in your camp?' I asked Heather.

He explained that some of them had gone south to a music festival and others, like Rock's girlfriend, had found temporary jobs in nearby towns to earn some money. Unfortunately, since the success of their court hearing the support of the local villagers had dwindled away, and soon maybe it would be time to close up their camp altogether.

'Where will you go?' I asked.

He shrugged. 'There's always somewhere. Roads. Airports. Power stations. The earth's always under assault.'

I thought how wonderful it would be to have some new roads and airports and power stations in Ukraine, but I didn't say so. We listened to the rain pit-patting on the canvas, and the wood cracking on the fire. Somewhere, somebody was playing a guitar.

'Do you like cooking?' Heather threw a handful of chopped carrots into the pot. His fingernails were very long, almost like claws, and full of black dirt.

'Not much,' I said.

'Me neither,' he said. 'But I like to eat. When we lived in Renfrewshire, my parents had a cook called Agatha. She was six feet tall and swore like a trooper, but she had a great way with pastry. One day she was making a batch of tarts, when the oven exploded, and she was rushed to hospital, where she died a week later of third-degree burns. That's enough to put anyone off cooking, don't you agree?'

'Of course.' I laughed, despite the gravity of the story,

wondering whether it was true. And I wondered how someone who spoke in such a cultivated way, and came from a house with a cook, could tolerate living in such a place, and eating such food, and having such dire fingernails. And I wondered whether he had a girlfriend, and whether she lived here in the camp, and what she thought of his fingernails. And I wondered whether he found me attractive, for he, like Rock, never stared or flirted or made personal remarks like some other men, so I felt completely comfortable in their company. Maybe they are only attracted to women of their own species.

*

Obviously the woman with beautiful eyebrows has her eye on you, Palenko – but does that mean you have to proceed? You have discussed the weather. You have discussed the stones. Is it time now to select first gear and try to engage? Or is there a time when you say to yourself, OK. I have met the woman I love. That is enough. Bye-bye, end of story.

Andriy shovels the mush into his mouth, crunching on the chunks of almost-raw carrot, glancing up from time to time to check on the eyebrows. The rain is pattering intermittently on the taut tarpaulin, beneath which smoke swirls round the circle of faces. Windhover is seated next to Birch on the other side of the fire. Now her eyebrows are drawn together in contemplation. Such beautiful eyebrows. She is spooning the sludge into her mouth quite fast, and with apparent enjoyment.

In fact apart from the eyebrows she is not so attractive, he thinks. Her body seems shapeless and lumpy beneath its thick sludge-coloured swaddling – not really a womanly shape at all. Perhaps . . . ? No, surely he could not be mistaken about something like that. Windhover does not return his look.

'This is nice, Heather,' she says, completely ignoring Andriy. 'What is it?'

'Lentil and carrot goulash.' Heather looks pleased. 'It could have done with some paprika.'

*

Dinner was the same tasteless underpants-coloured sludge as the previous meal, but this time it had pieces of chopped-up carrot in it. Another unpleasant thing is that this sludgy diet tends to make you fart, which was noticeable even out of doors, especially from the dogs. I declined Heather's offer of a second helping, while trying to seem enthusiastic so as not to hurt his feelings, because, OK, he's no Mr Brown, but he is very kind.

After we had finished eating, Rock collected our bowls and scraped the remains of the goulash into them – goulash, they call it! obviously they have never tasted the real thing! – and put it down for the dogs, who licked the bowls clean. In my opinion the hygienic arrangements at this camp are deficient, and I wonder why the authorities have not closed it down. There is nothing but a small stream for washing, and a much-too-shallow pit-lavatory, screened by a few branches, with a piece of wood to perch on above the disgusting festering *nuzhnik*

of previous warrior dinners. Somebody has put up a scrawled notice saying *Beware of splashback*.

By now dusk was creeping up and the air was cool and damp. I took the bowls and went down to the stream to rinse the dog-lick off them (the others looked surprised – obviously as far as they were concerned, they were perfectly clean) and then I washed myself all over with Mrs McKenzie's scented soap, because I knew tonight would be *the night*. Then I climbed the rope ladder up to the tree caravan.

The door was not locked. The caravan was much smaller even than the women's caravan at our strawberry field, and rounded like an egg. There was no room inside for anything except a folded-out double bed. I could not see how clean the bedding was, and I thought it was better not to look. I suppose one advantage of being in a tree is that the dogs cannot get up here. On a low cupboard by the bed was a bunch of dried flowers in a jam jar that gave the cabin a pleasant powdery smell. Some ends of candles were stuck into bottles, and there was even a box of matches. I lit a candle, and straightaway the little shell was filled inside with soft flickering light. Beyond the circle of light, the leaves at the window shifted and shivered in the dusk. Storm clouds had banked up along the hilltops. Down below, I could hear the voices of the warriors talking among themselves, and the strumming of a guitar. I stretched out on the bed and waited.

For some reason I found myself thinking about my parents. Had my mother lain and waited for my father like this on her wedding night? Was it romantic? Had it hurt the first time? Did she get pregnant? Yes, she did. The seed that was planted inside her that night was to grow into me. I had grown up sheltered by the twined branches of their love, nurtured until the seed sprouted into a tree – Irinochka – that could stand alone. Had he still loved her afterwards? Yes, but only for a while. Temporarily. Provisionally. Until Svitlana Surokha came along. For the first time, I found myself feeling angry with my parents. Why couldn't they just stick together a bit longer, their love still entwining and sheltering me, while I learnt my own first lessons of love?

I started planning a new story in my head. It would be a passionate romance, a story of enduring love, about two people who came from different worlds, but after many diversions found themselves brought together by destiny. The heroine would be a virgin. The hero would have bronzed muscular arms.

The voices down below grew more animated and the guitar stopped. They were having a discussion, punctuated by bursts of laughter. Suddenly I felt the caravan lurch and sway in a most terrifying way. I sat up quaking. Typical, I thought, tonight – *the night* – the caravan will fall out of the tree. Then I realised the movement was the tug of someone coming up the rope ladder. My heart started to thump. A moment later, Andriy opened the

door. He had a nervous smile on his face and a bunch of heather in his hand.

'I picked this for you, Irina.' He sat down on the edge of the bed, and handed me the heather, looking at me in that fixed, intense way. 'You are beautiful like a green tree in May.'

I buried my face in the heather, which still had the smell of honey and summer about it, because I didn't want him to see me grinning. On the scale of romance, I would say that was about three out of ten.

Then he lay down beside me on the bed, and started to stroke my cheek very gently. I could feel my body melting at his touch as he pulled me into his arms, kissing me with his lips and tongue, caressing me everywhere, and all the time murmuring my name. Mmm. Maybe seven out of ten. The candlelight cast one shadow of our two bodies – blurring, looming, wavering on the curved ceiling. When he touched me down there, the unexpected intensity of my feelings made me cry out. OK, at that point I stopped scoring. I don't even remember him undressing me, but somehow our clothes slid away and we were naked together, skin against skin, on the bed. The candle sputtered out, and the canopy of darkening leaves closed in around us.

Suddenly there was a shudder of wind in the branches, and all at once the storm broke, heralded by a drum-roll of rain on the roof, then blasts of thunder and a pageant of lightning flashes all around us like a carnival in the

sky. Our little caravan bucked and heaved on its sea of leaves. The rain hammered on the thin aluminium shell and from time to time a razor of light would slash through the darkness. I was really afraid that our tree would be struck, and everything would burst into flames.

'Don't be frightened, Irinochka,' said Andriy, pressing me tighter against him.

And so we gave ourselves to each other that night in the storm.

Yes, it was very romantic. Yes, it did hurt a bit, but my feelings were so intense that I didn't realise until afterwards how sore I was. Yes, I was worried about getting pregnant, but he produced something from his pocket that was rubbery and pink and smelt of strawberries. No, that was not quite so romantic, I admit, but it was thoughtful, and that also is a sign of love. Yes, he still loves me, because in the morning he went down on the rope ladder and came back with some bread and tea, and we spent half the morning lying in bed together talking about the future, and the places we would travel to after Sheffield, and all the things we would do. Then we made love again.

No, I am not the same person I was yesterday.

*

I AM DOG I RUN I RUN WITH MARYJANE I AM IN
LOVE SHE IS A BROWN DOG FAST AND SLIM SHE
HAS GOOD SMELL FEMALE DOG LOVE-HORMONES
I SNIFF SHE SNIFFS ALL DOGS RUN AFTER HER

BUT SHE RUNS WITH ME WE RUN IN STORM
AND RAIN WE RUN IN MOONLIGHT WE RUN IN
SHADOWS I GIVE HER MY PUPPIES I AM IN LOVE
I RUN I RUN I AM DOG

*

Next day, before they leave, Andriy and Rock climb up the beech tree to re-secure the caravan. One of the guy ropes snapped in the night, and the caravan is hanging at an angle, its axle wedged between two branches.

'That were a bit of luck,' says Rock, 'or a bit of bad luck, depending on which way you look at it.'

'It was good luck,' says Andriy.

It is early afternoon by the time they get on the road. Irina is sitting in the middle again, her profile inscrutable, her eyes sleepy, as the bus winds its way through narrow lanes and grey-stone villages. He puts his arm around her, and she shifts and moulds her body more closely against his. Her hair is loose and uncombed. He strokes it back from her face and watches her smile. This girl – she is quite something. Yes, Andriy Palenko, you are one lucky Donbas miner.

'So what takes you to Sheffield?' asks Rock.

The sun is high in the sky, a wispy mist steaming from the hills after the rain.

'Sheffield? Is twin town of Donetsk. My town. Is very beautiful, I think?'

'Sheffield? Aye, you could say that. If you've got an eye for steelworks. Or you could say it's not beautiful.'

'The coal mining is still going there?'

'No, that's all changed. Used to be loads of slag heaps. Now it's just got slags.' Rock pushes his glasses up his nose. 'Barnsley were twinned with another town in Ukraine. Gorlovka.'

'I been there. Is also in Donbas region. Not beautiful.'

'Well, Barnsley in't noted for its beauty.'

'I been in Sheffield once before. And I met Vloonki, who is noted for his wisdom and good heart. When we get to Sheffield, we will ask him for help.'

'Vloonki?'

'The ruler. He is blind, but he sees everythings.'

'Aw! You mean Blunkett!' Rock jumps in his seat and his glasses slip right off his nose and skitter across the dashboard. As he leans to grab them, the steering wheel lurches sharply and the bus swerves, skids sideways and bounces off a boulder. 'Bloody Blunkett!' Rock pinches the nose-clip on his glasses to tighten it.

'Why he is bloody?'

'Class traitor. Sold our birthright for a mess of posh totty, in Jimmy's immortal words.'

Sold what? Who is this Jimmy? Before Andriy can ask, Rock calls out, 'There she is!'

They have been winding slowly upwards for a few kilometres through a wild steep landscape of bracken, peat and rock, more sombre than the sandy heathery plateau of Nine Ladies. At the top of the rise the road levels out, and just as it starts to dip they see a city spread below them in the valley, a dense cluster of buildings in the centre, glinting in the sunlight, thinning out to untidy

scatterings of ugly new developments crawling over the surrounding hills.

'This is Sheffield?' Irina's voice is cold.

Andriy's heart shrinks with disappointment. Definitely this city is not upon a hill.

Nor is there any bougainvillea. The leafy outer suburbs soon give way to ribbons of bricky terraces as they near the city centre. Rock pulls into a side road where many of the houses seem abandoned, their curtains drawn, their front gardens full of rubbish and weeds, and plastered with To Let signs. How has Vloonki allowed his city to become so neglected? There is a distant taint of steelworks in the air that reminds him of home.

'Nowhere to park in town. We'll walk from here. I'm meeting Thunder at the Ha Ha.'

They follow Rock through a urine-stained underpass up into the town centre. The storm has chased away the clouds, and the day is hot and bright again. Here the surroundings look neater, and the traffic has been diverted to make a pleasant quarter. Busy crowds throng the pavements, and there are shops, market stalls, even some new and stylish buildings. This is still not as he remembers it, but it is better than his first impression. Andriy's spirits rise. Fountains – yes, there are fountains! And a square with a formal garden full of waterfalls, overlooked by a big Gothic building that seems vaguely familiar, and a modern citadel of glass and steel that should have been a palace, but sadly turns out to be only a hotel. He takes Irina's hand, twining

her fingers between his. She smiles and points. 'Look!'

In the fountains a horde of raggedy children, stripped down to their knickers, are running and splashing through the water. Just like Donetsk.

*

I AM DOG I AM WET DOG I RUN I PLAY IN WATER
WOOF SPLASH RUN IN THIS WATER IS DREAM OF
MY PAST-TIME PUPPINESS HERE ARE CHILDREN
WET CHILDREN THEY PLAY WITH ME WOOF
SPLASH RUN I AM HAPPY THEY TOUCH ME WITH
SMALL WET HANDS GOOD DOG THEY SAY I AM
GOOD DOG MY MAN IS WATCHING I RUN TO MY
MAN I SHAKE WATER ON HIM SHAKE SHAKE
SHAKE GO AWAY WET DOG SAYS MY MAN RUN
AND PLAY I AM HAPPY I RUN I PLAY I AM WET DOG
I AM DOG

*

On the edge of the square is a café with tables set out in the sunshine. A very tall girl with cropped blond hair runs towards them, and gives Rock a hug. His nose comes just about to the level of her breasts, which are small and firm and barely covered by the straps of a faded orange vest. She too has a dog on a string.

'I've got a few things to do,' says Rock. 'Got to surrender missen to t' vile clutches of t' missus. I'll meet you back here at six o'clock.'

Irina announces that she too will take a look at the shops. Andriy watches her vanish into the crowd, Dog padding

along behind her, still wet from his splash in the fountains. Then he reaches for his wallet and takes out a piece of paper. He needs to find a telephone.

*

I was thinking about Natasha in *War and Peace*, how she and Pierre have their blazing moment of love, and all her beauty and passion flow into him, and all his intellect and strength flow into her, and they face the world together from their glorious tower of love. When you read it, tears will come into your eyes, I promise, unless you have a heart of stone. And then, after she has found *the one*, the passion slowly dissolves into a gentle everyday love and she becomes a solid housewife, devoted to their four children, and interested in household and family matters. I wonder whether the same thing will happen with Andriy and me. Already I can see the first signs. For example I noticed today that Andriy needs some new underpants. The ones he is wearing will soon be in the same condition as the warrior underpants. This is not appealing in a man.

That's what was in my mind as I set out to find the street of shops and market stalls we'd come through earlier, because I had noticed they were selling such items – sexy styles in interesting colours, not the universal dark green baggy type you get in Ukraine. And some very small ladies' knickers made of lace. I thought if I could find my way back to that street, I could have a look. But somewhere I must have taken a wrong turn, for I found myself in unfamiliar surroundings which seemed to be a

commercial district, with redbrick office buildings and only a few cafés and shops, none of them selling clothing, but cleaning products, stationery, office equipment and other useless stuff. I must have been walking for almost half an hour, getting increasingly lost. The wet dog was following me, sometimes running on ahead, sometimes lagging behind or disappearing up an alley, sniffing at pissy lamp posts all the time in his disgusting way.

The sun was still hot, but the shadows were lengthening on the pavement. There was nobody on the streets here, and a one-way road system, so the few cars were going quite fast. The dog had disappeared somewhere and I was on my own. I was trying to work out where I had gone wrong and find somebody I could ask the way when I noticed that a large grey car was crawling along beside me, and the driver was staring at me and mouthing something. I ignored him, and he drove off. At the corner of the street a blonde woman was standing smoking a cigarette. She was wearing ridiculous satin shorts and high-heeled boots. As I hurried towards her to ask for directions, the car pulled up alongside her and the man wound down his window. They exchanged a few words and she got into his car. Hm. Obviously I didn't want to hang around in this place. So I turned and tried to retrace my steps, walking quickly, when another young woman came sauntering up the road towards me on spiky high heels. She looked familiar. I stared. It was Lena. She spotted me at the same moment.

'Hi, Lena,' I said in Ukrainian, reaching out to take her hand. 'What you doing here?'

'What you think?' she said.

'I heard about the accident. The minibus. I was so upset. Was that at our farm?'

'I don't know what you talking about,' she said.

Close up, she looked even younger. She had grown her hair a bit, and put on white powder like a mask and a smear of very bright red lipstick that accentuated her babyish pout. It was smudged at the edges, as if she had been kissing. Her black stockings and high-heeled shoes looked absurd on her skinny legs. She looked like a child who had been trying on her mother's clothes and playing with her make-up. Apart from her eyes. There was nothing childish about her eyes.

'How are the others? Tasya? Oksana?'

'I don't know.'

She had stopped, and was staring straight ahead, over my shoulder. I turned and followed the line of her gaze. She was looking towards the forecourt of an office block, where a number of cars were parked. Right at the back, half hidden behind a white van, was a huge black shiny four-by-four. I must have walked right past it.

I felt a terrible sick feeling rise up in me. My heart started up. Boom. Boom. Run, run, shouted my racing heart, but my feet stayed rooted to the ground. I looked at Lena, but her eyes were completely dead.

*

There is a telephone box at the top of the square, near to the café. Andriy fumbles in his pocket for change, puts

a couple of coins in the slot and dials the number on the piece of paper. There is a series of clicks, followed by a long single tone. What does that mean? He dials again. The same empty tone. He listens for a long time, but nothing happens. A blank. He was half expecting it. He sighs. This is it, then. His journey's end. Vagvaga Riskegipd. A blank. Ah, well.

A middle-aged woman is sitting at a small round table on the pavement outside the cafe. He shows her the piece of paper.

'Oh,' she says, 'that's an old number. You have to dial 0114 instead of 0742. But you don't need that, because you're in Sheffield. You just put 2 before the main number.'

He fishes a pencil stub out of his pocket and she writes it down for him.

He tries again with the new number. This time there is a ringing tone. After several rings, a woman picks up the phone.

'Alloa?' She speaks in the same broad regional dialect as Rock.

'Vagvaga?' He can hardly control the excitement in his voice. 'Vagvaga Riskegipd? Vagvaga?'

There is a moment's silence. Then the voice on the other end of the phone says, 'Bugger off.' There is a click, followed by the dialling tone. He feels a stab of frustration. So close, yet still so far. Was that her voice on the end of the phone? He can't recall her saying anything at all to him that night. How old would she be

now? The voice on the phone sounded crackly and breathless, like an older woman's. He resolves to wait a few minutes and try again.

When he goes back into the square the same middle-aged woman is still sitting at her table, drinking coffee. She has been joined by a friend, and their shopping bags are clustered around them on the ground. On impulse, he approaches her once more with his piece of paper.

'No luck?' She smiles at him.

'What is this name?' he asks her.

She looks at him oddly.

'Barbara Pickering. What did you think it was?'

He stares at the paper. Ah. His twenty-five-year-old eyes see what his seven-year-old eyes had not seen: Roman script.

'What is mean bugger off?'

She looks at him oddly again.

'That's enough. Bugger off now, will you?' And turning her back on him, she resumes her conversation with her friend.

He had meant to ask her for some change as well, but now he can't. He goes to the telephone again and puts a pound coin in the slot.

'Alloa?' the same woman answers.

'Barbara?' Barr – baah – rrah. Barbarian woman. Wild. Untamed. An incredibly sexy name.

'She's not here.' The voice hesitates. 'Was it you that called before?'

'My name is Andriy Palenko. I am from Ukraine. Donetsk. Twin town with Sheffield.'

'Oh,' the woman says, 'I thought you was some nutter. Barbara's not lived 'ere for years. She's up in Gleadless now. I'm 'er mum.'

'I met her many long times ago. I was first coming to Sheffield with my father for Ukrainian miners' delegation.'

'Were it that big do at t' City Hall, wi' t' Ukrainians? I were there too. By, that were a night!' A cackling sound down the line. 'All that municipal vodka!'

'Is she still live in Sheffield?' Andriy asks. Then he blurts out the question that has been on his mind ever since he had arrived in England – ever since he knew there was such a question to be asked. 'Is she marry?'

'Oh, aye. Got two lovely lads. Jason and Jimmy. Six and four. Do you want 'er new number?'

'Yes. Yes of course.'

He takes out his pencil stub. She says the new number slowly, pausing after every digit. Andriy listens, but he doesn't write it down.

*

I turned to run, but Lena was blocking my way. She had a horrible smudged smile on her face.

'Be careful,' she said. 'He has gun.'

How could this be happening in an ordinary street in England in broad daylight? Even as I looked the door of the four-by-four opened, and there stood Vulk, grinning at me with his yellow teeth, his arms outstretched in

greeting. I could see no gun. If he had one, it was hidden in his pocket. Should I take a chance and run? In the brilliant slanting sunshine his dark backlit outline seemed like an apparition – a tubby grinning nightmare. I felt the same impulse of frozen panic. He started to walk towards me up the hill, quite slowly. His shadow slid before him on the pavement, hard-edged and squat. Behind me I could hear Lena muttering something. If I ran, would she try to stop me?

He was coming closer. 'My darlink little flowver.' He had taken off his jacket, and I could see the dark circles of sweat on his shirt under his arms. I thought he was panting for breath, then I realised he was whispering, 'Loff, loff, loff.'

I backed away, barging into Lena, and that is when he got out the gun. I stopped, transfixed. It was grey, and so small it was hard to believe it could do any harm. He didn't point it at me. He just held it in his hand and played with it, twirling it on his finger, his eyes set on me all the time.

Then I noticed something at the bottom of the street, behind Vulk's back – people, movement. Suddenly, there was Dog racing towards us, bounding along four paws at a time, and a few metres behind, red-faced and breathless, was Andriy.

*

Dog is barking frantically. Andriy shouts at it to be quiet, but it jumps up, scrabbling at him with its paws, whining

and tossing its head like a mad thing. Andriy picks up their bag and follows it up into the street.

It is half past four. The pavements are busy with shoppers making the most of the last hour or so until closing time. The dog runs ahead through the crush, weaving in and out between people's legs, then stopping to let him catch up, barking in an urgent, purposeful way. Now his heart is jumping about behind his ribs, because he realises that Dog is desperate to take him somewhere, and that Irina has been gone for over an hour. Dog crosses a busy road and turns up a side street between tall brick buildings. The crowds have disappeared, and they are in a quiet business neighbourhood, heading south-west away from the town.

Another right turn brings them to the foot of a long rising street of anonymous workshops and offices. One side of the street – the side they are on – is in bright sunshine; the other side is already in shadow. A hundred metres or so up ahead of them are three figures. Even as he races towards them, Andriy is taking in the whole picture. Nearest to them, with his back turned, is Vulk. He is walking slowly up the hill, waddling in that slightly splay-legged gait of people who are carrying too much weight in front. His bulky form fills the whole pavement. He has taken his jacket off and is wearing a dark blue shirt, tucked tight into the belt of his trousers. His ponytail straggles down between his shoulders. In his right hand is a gun, twirling casually over his forefinger. A few metres in front, facing them, stands Irina, motionless,

her mouth open in a silent scream. Behind her, also facing them, is Lena, wearing black tights and a ridiculous pair of high-heeled shoes. Her lips are a scarlet gash. Her face is expressionless, completely blank.

'Stop!' shouts Andriy. 'Stop!' He is fumbling in his backpack for the gun. Where is it?

Vulk turns. He sees the dog and Andriy running towards him, some five metres away.

'Too late, boy,' he sneers. 'I heff it. Go back.' He raises his gun.

Andriy stops. In that moment of hesitation, Dog growls, bares his teeth and launches himself forward. He has picked up such a speed in running that as he summons up all his strength for that final jump, he appears to take flight, his heavy muscled mass hurtling towards Vulk like a missile – straight at the gun. Vulk pulls the trigger. Dog howls, a long keening howl. He seems to tremble in mid-air as blood bursts from his chest in a crimson shower, then he falls, but still with so much forward momentum that he crashes down onto Vulk, knocking him backwards so that his head hits the pavement with a crack, the huge bleeding dog on top of him, whimpering to its death. The gun falls from his hand and skitters across the flagstones.

Irina has turned and fled, ducking into an opening between two office buildings. Andriy lunges for the gun, but before he can reach it Lena steps forward and puts her foot on it. She bends down, picks it up and points it at Andriy.

'Go.'

He doesn't argue. He runs. As he rounds the corner into the same narrow sunless passageway, he hears a single shot behind him.

*

I will always think of Dog the way I remember him that last time, flying through the air like an angel of vengeance, stern and black, his teeth gleaming like rapiers. I looked into his eyes before he died. They were deep, velvety brown, and unfathomable. I had never noticed before how beautiful they were; for even an angel of vengeance has pity in its eyes. After that I forgot about his awful pissing and sniffing and eating habits, and all I remembered was the way he looked at me when he took flight. I often wonder what he was thinking. Did he know he was going to die?

Andriy was so upset, he wanted to go back for him, but I wouldn't. I said he was dead, and there was nothing we could do to bring him back. I just wanted to get away from that place as fast as I could.

A few minutes later we heard the wail of sirens and caught a flash of blue lights at the end of the alley. We found a gateway behind some bins that opened into a car park on the next street, and we headed away in the opposite direction, not running but trying to walk normally, trying to look as though we were just a young couple out for a stroll. Andriy had his arm round my shoulder, and I leaned against him. We were both shak-

ing. I realised Andriy must have been frightened too. That was strange, because you always think that men are fearless – but why should they be?

We walked round and round for an hour or more. This Sheffield – it wasn't at all as Andriy had described it, palaces, bougainvillea and all that stuff. Nor were there any workers' sanatoria or communal mudbaths. It was very ordinary. The shops had put their shutters up and people were going home. The roads were clogged with traffic. And maybe down a side street, somebody was lying dead. It could have been me.

'Where are we going?' I asked Andriy.

'I don't know. Where do you want to go?'

'I don't know.'

I kept wondering about that last gunshot. I couldn't get it out of my mind.

Most of the time we stayed off the big roads and walked in the side streets, which were empty of people and still hot from the sun. You could feel the heat coming out of the bricks like an oven cooling, the trapped air heavy with dust and fumes. We walked, I don't know how long for, until we stopped shaking and our feet hurt and we started to feel hungry. In the end we found our way back to the café. Rock wasn't there, of course. We were more than two hours late.

The afternoon shoppers were gone and the place had filled up with young people, eating, drinking, smoking, talking, the clatter of cutlery and their shrill laughter

bouncing and echoing off the hard surfaces so loud that my ears rang and my head started to swim. I realised then how hungry I was. We bought something to eat, I can't remember what, only that it was the cheapest thing we could find on the menu. We looked so shabby and out of place, me in my strawberry-stained jeans and Andriy in his Ukrainian trousers. The girl who served us was Byelorussian.

'Are you looking for a job?' she said. 'They've always got vacancies. It's all Eastern Europe round here.'

'I don't know,' I said.

'No,' said Andriy.

'We haven't decided,' I said.

She brought us some portions of ice cream which she said were for free.

'Is there a phone anywhere?' I asked Andriy. 'I want to phone my mother.'

The minute she said 'Hello? Irinochka?' I burst into tears, and I had to pretend to be sneezing because I didn't want her asking what I was crying about. It would only upset her. I just wanted to hear her voice, like when I had a nightmare as a child and she would tell me that everything was all right. Sometimes all you need is a comforting story. So, still sniffing, I told her everything was fine, except that I had caught a cold and the dog had had an accident, and then she wanted to know why I wasn't wearing warm clothes, and which dog, and what kind of accident, and why I had left that nice family, so I had to make up another lot of lies to keep her happy. Why did she have to ask so many questions?

'Irinochka, now I want to ask you something.'

I thought she was going to ask me who I was with, or when I was coming home, and I braced myself to make up another story, but she said, 'Would you be very upset if I found a new boyfriend?'

'No, of course not, Mamma. You should do whatever makes you happy.'

Mamma! My heart flipped over inside me like a big wet fish.

Of course I was upset. I was upset and furious. You turn your back on your parents for one moment and they get up to all sorts of mischief!

'That's wonderful, Mamma. Who is he?'

'You know I told you about that nice elderly couple who moved in downstairs. And they have a son . . .'

'But I thought . . .'

'Yes, we are in love.'

First my father, now my mother!

When I put the phone down, I found my hands were shaking. The fish in my chest was flapping like mad. How could my parents do this to me, their little Irinochka? Outside in the square, dusk had come, but it was still warm. Andriy was standing waiting for me, leaning with his elbows on the balustrade, watching the fountains, his outline supple and muscular, despite his awful trousers, one curl hanging like a brown question mark on his forehead. He smiled. Just looking at him made my body start to sing.

Would Andriy and I love each other for ever? Love, it seems, is quite a slippery, unpredictable thing – not a rock you can build your life on, after all. I wanted it to be perfect, like Natasha and Pierre, but maybe that's just another story. How can love be perfect, if people aren't perfect? Look at my mother and father – their love didn't last for ever, but it was good enough for a while, good enough for Irinochka, that little girl I used to be. Of course when you're a child, you want to believe your parents are perfect – but why should they be?

'How is your mother?' asked Andriy.

'She's all right.' I smiled. Yes, he wasn't perfect: he talked in that funny Donbas way, and he was moody, and he thought he knew everything, despite being riddled with out-of-date ideas. But he was also kind-hearted, thoughtful, courteous and brave, and that was good enough for me. 'You know, Andriy, I discovered something just now. My parents don't need me any more.'

We leaned side by side on the balustrade, watching the fountains, and I started to think about the story I would write when I got back to Kiev. It would be a love story, a great romance, not something stupid and frivolous. It would be set against the tumultuous background of the Orange Revolution. The heroine would be a plucky freedom activist and the hero would be from the other side, the Soviet East. But through his love for the beautiful heroine, his eyes would be opened, and he would come to understand the true destiny of his country. He would be very passionate and handsome, with bronzed

muscular arms; in fact he would be quite like Andriy. But he would definitely not be a coalminer. Maybe he would have a dog.

In the café, somebody popped a champagne cork, and an eddy of noise and laughter carried into the stillness of the square.

'Andriy,' I said. He looked at me. His eyes were sad. A shadow had fallen across his face. 'Are you thinking about Dog?'

He nodded.

'Don't be sad. You have me now.'

I reached up and twined my finger into his brown curl, and pulled his head down for a kiss. Yes, definitely the story must have a happy ending.

*

You have survived many adventures, and now you've reached your destination. You have escaped death a couple of times, and you have won the love of the beautiful high-spec Ukrainian girl. So why is your heart grumbling away like an old Zaz, Andriy Palenko? What's the matter with you?

He listens to the young people drinking in the café a few metres away – they live in a different world. Maybe he and Irina could stay in Sheffield and find jobs for themselves, and maybe he would even go to college and train to be an engineer. He would buy a mobilfon, not for doing business, but to talk to his friends, and at weekends they would come to a bar like this, and drink

and laugh. But he could never be one of them. There are too many things he would have to forget.

She thinks it's because he's grieving for the dog, and she reaches out her hand to stroke his hair and whisper some little sweetness into his ear. Well, yes, you will miss Dog; there will never be another dog as superb as this one. But it's not just Dog. There's a special sadness at the end of a journey. For it's only when you get to your destination that you discover the road doesn't end here after all.

'Come on, Andriy! Don't be sad!'

She beckons. He follows her into the square. She skips down the steps, where water is cascading through stone channels and dozens of fountains are spurting like geysers out of the ground. There is no one there apart from a couple kissing on a bench. She takes his hands and pulls them around her back, pressing herself against him.

'Even though it was very exceptional, Andriy, still it was only a dog.'

He holds her close. She is lithe and warm in his arms.

'Rock and the warriors dedicated their lives to saving some stones, Irina. You could say they were only stones, but it's what they represent. As their Jimmy would say, victims of global capitalism.'

'Is the dog a victim of global capitalism?'

'Don't be stupid. You know what I mean.' Sometimes her frivolity is irritating. 'My father died . . .'

'But you are still alive, Andriy. Why don't you think of that sometimes?'

'Of course I do. And then I wonder why it was me who lived and not him.'

'But you didn't kill him, Andriy. Do you think he would want you to be always miserable, and brooding about the past? The future will be different.'

He shakes his head.

'Andriy . . .'

'What?'

'... your underpants are like the warriors'. She giggles.

'And so what if they are? You are always so mesmerised by superficial things, Irina.'

'No, I'm not.' She splashes her hands through the fountain, spraying a wave of water at him that wets his shirt.

'Yes, you are.' He splashes back, soaking her hair.

'And you talk like a Donbas miner.' She dashes handfuls of water at his face. 'Holy whiskers! Devil's bum!'

'And what if I do? Should I be ashamed of that?' He rubs the water out of his eyes. 'Now you sound like a bourgeois schoolgirl.'

'And what if I am?' She gives him a shove that sends him stumbling backwards into a jet of water. Her eyes are shining. Rivulets of water are running down her cheeks. In spite of himself, a grin breaks out on his face.

'If you are' – he splutters, snorting water out of his nose – 'I will have to re-educate you.' He grabs her wrist, and pulls her towards him.

'Never!' She lunges forward for another shove, slips on the wet stones, and slides into the fountain. As she

grabs at him for balance, he slithers and tumbles on top of her with a splash.

'I will start now.' He holds her down and covers her in kisses. 'Bourgeois schoolgirl!'

'Donbas miner!' She wriggles out from under him, pinning him between her knees. 'Riddled with Soviet-era ideas!'

'Orange-ribbon dreamer!'

'You think you know everything. Well, you don't.' She flicks her wet hair at him. Her clothes are soaked, clinging to the curves of her body. This girl, if he doesn't keep a cool head, she will drown him.

'Show me something I don't know.'

'Here!' She presses him down on the stones, straddling him and pushing her tongue into his mouth. He gasps for breath. She is surprisingly strong, and as slippery as a mermaid. Water is everywhere, in his eyes, in his nose, gushing in shining torrents out of the ground.

And as they wrestle there in the jets of foaming water, a shadowy black dog appears out of nowhere, a mature, handsome dog, running through the spume, barking and splashing with them. Above their heads, stars are dancing on the inky floor of the sky.

But, oh, the water is so cold!

*

Dear Andree

I am writing to fill you up with my news for today by the Grace of God I have received a telephone from

my sister who with your help uncovered my wherebeing. And I feverly hope one day my dear friend you will return to this place called Richmond which is not far from the beauties of Croydon where I await you with beatings in my heart also the beauteous Irina for I hope you two are now joined up in Holy Matrimony.

My sister was full of questionings about my life in the dwelling of Toby Makenzi and his roilsome parents and she rejoiced to hear all has turned out beneficently and we are blessed with daily manifestos of His Goodness. And I have given up my Sinful Curiosity of canals and turned towards rivers for I have become a Fisher of Men.

Each day at eventide the Pa and I together descend upon the river bringing with us the rod and red bucket of the Mozambicans and we spend two hours or more in contemplation of the slow moving waters of the Times. And sometimes in the evening when the river darkens in its mystery the power of Love is so great that I am minded to open my heart and sing. For the sunset upon these waters is beauteous to behold being tinted purple blue with delicious rosy cloudlings (though not as beauteous as the sunsets of Zomba) and I am confounded with admiration for His artistry. And through the mystery of our long conversions upon the riverbank the Pa himself has started to walk in the Way of the Lord and has abandoned his whisky drinking and blaspheming.

And sometimes it has befallen that fishes come upon our rod. And now the beauteous Ma who prepared so

many feastings of fishes for us has started to abandon her previous godless vegetarian ways and the practice of yogurt and is also coming into the Joyful Kingdom. Sometimes at eventide she walks to the darkening river with us to share our contemplation. Also that good mzungu Toby Makenzi for whose friendship I came into this land he has become a follower of the river. And I pray feverdly that before long the opiate will fall from his heart and he too will become aquatinted with Love.

Acknowledgements

I would like to thank all the many people whose help, comments, and moral and practical support have contributed to the making of this book.

First I must acknowledge two main written sources: Nick Clark, *Gone West: Ukrainians at work in the UK* (TUC, 2004) and Felicity Lawrence, *Not on the Label: what really goes into the food on your plate* (Penguin, 2004). Their thorough research was my starting point, but any shortcomings are entirely my own.

Many other people helped with specific information, including Ben Benest, Cathy Dean and Kate Fenton (dogs), Christopher Robinson (Canterbury Cathedral), Charles Gaskain (strawberries), Joyce D'Silva of Compassion in World Farming, Dick Churcher (chickens), Dave Feickert (coalmining and trades unions), Sonia Lewycka (Malawi) and Simon Pickvance of Sheffield Occupational Health Project.

Thanks are also due to Bill Hamilton and all at A. M. Heath for encouragement and sound advice, to Juliet Annan and Scott Moyers for many helpful comments on the text, and to the team at Penguin for being so great.

Thanks also to the O'Brien family, who took me strawberry-picking, to Bob and Doris Spencer at Gara Bridge, where we stayed in both caravans, and to Jos Kingston, who introduced me to Paddy, the original Dog.