

PAINKILLERS

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PROLOGUE

Hong Kong 1997

I remember them. Their mouths, and their needles.

There were ten of them, that I recall. Not one of them was out of her twenties, and most were younger. They'd not worked anywhere else, you could tell that. There was nothing usual about them. Nothing used. Armed as they were, they were immune to wear.

I never saw them on the street. Entering the respectable-seeming fabric wholesalers in whose attic they worked, I cannot remember once passing a girl on her way through to the outside. The godowns and junks, the coconut sellers of the wholesale market, the men sorting clams, the cranes loading trucks parked along the Praya - did they ever see these things? Were they even aware of them? Did they know this was Kennedy Town?

Inside, I never saw them dressed. Perhaps they had no real clothes. I never saw any. I remember sea and flame-tinted silk; rich brown lace against white skin. That is all. That, and their painted eyes. Their mouths. They never spoke.

They wielded their machines with the cold proficiency of nurses, screwing their needles through your skin as easily as they might puncture the rind of an overripe fruit. Then they would straddle you. Hose scratched your hips, or the buttery heat of flesh slid there, and already it seemed too much to bear. As though, even without the machines, something obscene had taken place inside you: a tumescence of the nerves. So, for a second, you were tempted to pluck out the needles, be done with all of that, and lose yourself instead inside the girl: a comforting, proletarian fuck.

But you never did.

They clipped fine plastic-sheathed wires to the needles they had buried in your stomach, pubis, thighs, and plugged the wires into a box by the side of the bed. Sometimes, as they leaned and twisted, sorting wires, turning dials, you stroked their breasts. You weighed their breasts in your hand as they hung,

straining the embroidered cups of a bra or sliding wetly about against a silk slip. You could gently pinch a nipple, or maybe tug a strap free, and the flesh would slip like mercury out of its sheer container and into your sweating hand. You could do that, but it wouldn't make any difference.

Sooner or later, she would turn that dial.

They were merciless.

Eva thought I was having an affair. Someone from work, she thought: a young ambitious business graduate, arcing her taut body so her hips met mine a clear foot above the sheets, and her well-thumbed mobile phone purred rhythmically beneath the damp pillows of our motel bed.

In the day, alone with her imagination, Eva wept. In the evening, when we went out, fashion shades hid the pinkness of her eyes.

She did what she could to keep me solely hers. She went through my pockets while I was in the shower. When I made a phone call from our apartment she would hover behind the door, listening - and she ordered itemised bills that told her nothing she didn't already know.

She dressed up for me. Gucci. Donna Karan. Alexander McQueen. I remember the night I came in pissed from Frank Hamley's birthday party. She stepped out of the bedroom in a new Stella McCartney slip dress and let me take it off her, very slowly.

She did not make love to me. She simply couldn't. The shame had eaten too deep. It had ruined her. She made home instead. She studied *World of Interiors* and *House and Garden*. She hired designers. She bought expensive originals. She browsed for homewares in Seibu and Daimaru. (What would her grand-daddy think, whose head had rolled on Stanley Beach some fifty years before, as he surveyed all this Nipponese extravagance from his frame by the kitchen door?)

She rang me late at the office to ensure I was really there. I always was. Kennedy Town was a very occasional, and strictly daytime, affair: the single release I allowed myself. Anything more ordinary, more human, would have probably finished me off.

Sending Justin to the Higashi school in Tokyo was costing me about £70,000 a year. Then there was the luxury to which Eva was accustomed. Her mother had been swaddling her in Chanel since her fourteenth birthday, and had substituted cash for compassion the moment our son was diagnosed. 'Why can't you treat him properly?' she'd say, and more: unmothering the daughter she had never loved.

To start with, Eva used her allowance to help pay for his therapy. But when at last I threw her mother out the house, the cheques dried up. Justin was still living with us then. He was in the room with us, that evening of the final row, banging his head steadily and with increasing force against the leg of a Franck Evennou chair.

The last I saw of the Kennedy Town girls, they were on TV. I was sitting at the bar in the Big Apple on Luard Road, trying to tune out an early-evening Mr Bean rerun, when the picture on the heavy JVC hanging above the optiks yawned and span and the TVB Pearl newsroom came up; and after that a shot of Kwai Chung.

The camera was looking inland from the anonymous centre of the container port. Smuggler's Ridge was a grey line above Kwai Chung's brutal grey apartment blocks. In the foreground, police boats were

gathering around an antique Saab junk, retrofitted for salvage work. The junk swung about. The gears at the top of the derrick juddered spasmodically.

It was lifting a container from the shallow water: one of those long steel boxes you see being loaded here by their hundreds onto ships bound for Taiwan and Nagasaki. When I looked again they had lowered it onto a concrete jetty. There were no markings on the box's sides; no identifying plates. Trapped sea-water sprayed from the door's seams, drenching the four policemen who were hammering away at the latch. When the door came free the outflow knocked one of them over.

I grinned, ordered another bourbon. Then they opened the door.

Horror isn't dressed up here; it's an ordinary part of life. On Reclamation Street, men chop live turtles to pieces. Calves' heads bleed into the gutters. Later, on the portable TV at a nearby dai pai dong, I once saw a policeman slipping the dismembered remains of a shark victim into individual plastic bags. Once, a car had burst into flame on the Eastern Corridor; the tabloid photographer used a telephoto lens to capture the way the driver's hair, caught in the searing updraught, ballooned and sprung away from her crisping scalp.

The way it's all displayed so openly - you never quite get used to it. It wasn't much before eight when the TV displayed the contents of the container.

The police had cordoned off North Street by the time I got there. I stood watching over the heads of a curious crowd of restaurateurs and market traders as the police carried box after box, crate after crate, out of the fabric store. I guessed they were taking away the girls' effects. It couldn't have been anything other than perfume, lipstick, underwear, a little cannabis if they were lucky. Certainly no heroin, no small arms or haul of dirty money. It wasn't that sort of establishment.

I thought about their little black boxes: the dials, the pins and the wires. The scent of rose talcum. I realised I was crying.

Hamley wasn't at home and he'd switched off his mobile. I caught the tram into Central and crawled the bars pretending to look for him until I was good and plastered. I hoped he was safe. If he wasn't, then neither was I. The little black boxes, the women with their shiny, silent mouths. Hamley had introduced me to them, but he knew no more about them than I did. Less. Someone had decided to erase the experiment. Did the erasure extend as far as the punters?

I rang his flat again from a phone box off Citibank Plaza; this time I woke up his girlfriend. I was only making things worse. I crossed Garden Road and waved down a cab.

We lived above Magazine Gap, high up the Peak, where the Japanese had erected their Temple of the Divine Wind during the occupation. They never got around to completing it, the British eventually blew it up, and now, from an eighth-floor apartment in nearby Cameron Buildings, Eva's martyred grandfather looked out from his gilt frame on one of the most commanding views in Asia.

I let myself into the apartment as quietly as I could, but I needn't have worried. Eva was out for the count. I swallowed a handful of vitamin B with a glass of tapwater and slipped under the duvet beside her. I lay there, stroking her, stroking her fingers, tracing the elegant curve of her nails, the slight dryness over her knuckles, the hot square of her palm. A little, childlike part of her came alive, just long enough to squeeze my hand. Then I lost her again.

It turned out Hamley had seen the same news report I had. The next day he phoned me at the office, from Macau. He had an onward flight already booked.

'Lisbon?' I said. 'What the hell are you going to do in Lisbon?'

He didn't know. He had no plans. He was just too frightened to stay. 'I mean, Adam, Christ, their fingers...'

'Yes,' I said.

'Why the hell would someone do that to their fingers?'

'They did it themselves,' I told him. 'Trying to force the door.'

'You reckon?'

'A school-friend of mine saw it once.' Dimly, it occurred to me that I was making it worse. 'A fire on board a ship he was serving on. The hatches lock automatically. Steam pours in. A rating got trapped in a compartment and tried to claw his way out.'

'I'll call you from Lisbon,' Hamley said. But he never did.

ONE

London Spring, 1998

1.

The next time I saw Hamley - the last time - was last spring. Eva and I were back in London by then, running a small cafe by Southwark Market. If you weren't told about us, you'd never have found us; we were squashed in between on one side a specialist fabric wholesaler who opened maybe one day in the week if the elderly owner could be bothered, and on the other, a glorified garage full of broken barrow wheels and boxes of fluorescent tubing.

Nevertheless, the day had been hectic. A bunch of public relations people from the Tate's Bankside development had adopted us, and someone had put the word around about us at IPC tower, which housed something like a hundred magazine titles. Hannah had to go out twice to buy more bread. I thought we had enough chorizo and pecorino to last us the rest of the week, and we were left with about

half a day's supply.

I kicked the last of our customers out around five forty-five. Hannah offered to stay and help clear up but it was her early night so I didn't take advantage. I was stuck here until seven anyway, when Eva arrived with the next week's stock.

I set about sweeping the floorboards clear of crumbs and dropped receipts. In the kitchen, hot water spilled from the tap into a bucket plashed with Dettol, and the antiseptic smell of it was just now cutting under the fug of coffee and burnt sugar and melted cheese. I reached for the handle of the front door so I could sweep the step, when it opened by itself. 'We're closed,' I said - then I registered who it was.

I asked him where he'd been, what he'd been doing with himself, and he said he'd kill for a cup of coffee. The pressure had gone out of the Gaggia but I had a jar of instant in the kitchen. When I got there the bucket was overflowing and a fine skein of spray had fanned the polished plaster behind the sink. The floor tiles were sodden.

Hamley followed me in.

I reached for the mop. 'This won't take a second,' I said.

He closed the door behind him.

It was only now I saw how old he had become - and strange. His shoes, which had that weird, squared-off toe fashionable among the Italians, were scuffed down to the leather. His green wool pleated trousers had lost their crease, and there was a large grease-stain on the right lapel of his nasty brown-pink check sports jacket. A cheap blue-and-white stripe shirt was open at his neck, and white chest hairs poked luxuriously up through the gap. They grew so thickly, I imagined they'd run seamlessly into his beard, if he had one; but his face was so smooth and pink he might have shaved only an hour ago.

He said, 'You'd better pray I'm going to prison.'

'What?'

'The day I come out is the day I'm coming after you. Cunt.' The word sat clumsily in his mouth; he had no practice, saying that sort of thing.

'I don't understand why you're so upset,' I said.

He swallowed, broke eye contact. I thought maybe he was going to leave, as suddenly and inexplicably as he had arrived, but he just stood there, staring off into the middle distance like a bored life model.

He had a face that had lost personality as it aged: his sunken eyes had nothing to say. His cheeks had grown jowly, and taken together with the unremarkable line of his chin, they leant him an air of weakness.

'Frank?'

He reached into his jacket and pulled out a letter for me to read.

It was from Hong Kong. The Top Luck inquiry had subpoenaed him.

I folded it up and handed it back. I said, 'This hasn't got anything to do with me.'

I said, 'I don't know what it is you think you're running from.'

Not strictly true: in May 1997 an investigation into the murder of senior Hong Kong movie executive James Yau Sau-Lan stumbled across a money laundering operation.

Yau's company, Top Luck Investments, was established in 1989 to finance Cantonese film production in Hong Kong. In 1992 Top Luck floated its film interests on the Hong Kong stock exchange. They even made movies: an output one film critic called 'pre-eminently forgettable, but pure box-office'. So far, so good. The problem came when you looked at the company's annual turnover. 50 million unaccounted-for US dollars passed through Top Luck's books every year.

It wasn't the first time difficult questions had been asked of Top Luck. As long ago as 1991, an audit report had been ordered on the company at the offices of the Serious Crime Group. The report, which I had compiled and Hamley countersigned, drew only the most ambiguous and tentative conclusions, however, and Top Luck was left free to trade.

The shocking and violent death of its managing director ended Top Luck's run of remarkable - well - luck. When it was revealed in court just how gently Hong Kong law enforcement had treated the company over the years, an enquiry was inevitable.

True, it should have been me giving evidence at the inquiry. But nothing in my behaviour since could possibly arouse suspicion. I served out my time, as shabby and undistinguished as countless others. Come the handover of the colony to the People's Republic, I handed in my badge and slogged my way over to Chek Lap Kok with the rest of the aparatchiks.

It was Hamley, my superior, who had fled so suddenly and inexplicably, and several months before his time, and it was hardly surprising that the enquiry's suspicions had fallen first on him.

I tried pointing this out to him, but it didn't do any good. He wasn't much interested in talking. I don't know what he expected to get out of this meeting, and I don't think he knew either, which of course could have made him even more frustrated. I don't remember much about what happened next, except that it got physical. In the end I had to throw the Dettol in his face.

I ran water in the sink for him to bathe his eyes, then I went and looked out a towel for him in the cupboard under the stairs. When I got back I found the kitchen empty and the water still sloshing about weakly in the sink. I heard a car pulling away from the kerb. I ran to the door in time to see the reflections of his brake lights gutter and die in the puddles of the opposite pavement. I rubbed my neck. I thought maybe he'd twisted it, but it felt okay now. I went back inside and fished the Wray & Nephew out of the hole in the back of the cupboard under the sink. The bottle was half full. I looked at my watch: I had about half an hour before Eva turned up. So I finished it.

2.

By the time she arrived I'd wiped down the tables, mopped the floors, and arranged the packet teas in

attractive pyramids in front of the window. But I hadn't even begun to clear the paper liners from out the counter, and I'd clean forgotten to scrub out the juicer. Carrot sediment had dribbled and set on the chrome in dirty orange streaks.

'I can't leave you to do any bloody thing,' she said, scrubbing the sheen off the metal with a scourer.

'Leave it to soak for a couple of minutes, darling.'

She dropped it into the sink, knocked the remaining pieces in after it, and tore off her gloves. Her eyes darted about the kitchen, as she hunted for signs of catastrophe.

'I washed the floor in here,' I offered.

'I didn't think it needed it,' she said.

'It was busy today. We're nearly out of sausage.'

'I told you to buy more last Saturday.'

'How were the roads?'

She went back to the till. 'Haven't you cashed up yet?'

'I haven't had the chance,' I said, hating the whine in my voice.

She started scooping change out of the till and onto the worktop in short, compulsive jerks. She scraped pennies into her palm, counting them much like a Macanese croupier deals cards in the Jai-Alai: with an expression somewhere between boredom and contempt. I watched her fingers curl and jerk. She wore her nails short now, and even so one of them had torn. The skin on that side of her finger was inflamed.

'That can wait,' I said, wanting her to look at me, even if it meant a confrontation.

'Don't tell me what to do.'

'Look at me,' I said.

She looked at me. 'What?' she said.

She was my age: twenty-six when we first met. But nothing that had happened in the years since had changed her the way it had changed me, or Hamley. The crows' feet at the corners of her almond eyes were still the suggestive, bedroommy hints I remembered from our first meeting. Her skin was still sound and white: the proverbial porcelain of Orientalist fantasy. Only her hands had changed, coarsened by her work at the cafe - but that was nothing a little cream and a return to our old life wouldn't cure.

'What?'

Her mouth was small, her lips full and puckered: when she was younger she used a dark lipstick to make them appear bruised, an eruption of something absurdly sensual at the centre of that perfect sloe-eyed mask.

I said, 'I think the Japs must have put us in a guide. They like our teas.'

She started counting the silver.

'They come here after matinees at the Globe.'

'I'm counting,' she said.

'Twelve,' I said, plucking a number out of the air.

She flapped a hand at me to shut up.

'Six,' I shouted. 'Twenty-four. Plus three.'

'The cakes are in the boot,' she said, not missing a beat. 'Let's not be here all night.'

Our Mazda Xedos was parked opposite. Its silver skin, so striking in the day, reflected back the sodium-lit surfaces of the street like a fly-spotted mirror. I got all the way to the boot before I remembered the keys. Eva had them. Had she watched me, traipsing out here like an idiot? I went back inside. 'I need the keys.'

'Oh - ' She pressed a fistful of coins to her forehead, as though the close contact might help her remember what they came to. But it had gone out of her head. She slapped the coins back on the counter with a bang. Several went spinning off and disappeared behind the worktop.

'Sorry,' I said.

She fished in her pocket and threw her keys in my general direction. 'Ta,' I said, for all the good it did.

In the boot there were stacks of flat square boxes: the sturdy, corrugated cardboard ones contained pecan pies and apple tartins and carrot cakes so juicy and fatty you could hardly cut them without the whole thing collapsing into a gooey mess. The thin white ones held rounds of brie. There was a carrier full of large paper packets of coffee beans, and the smell coming out of it was so heady and spicy I stuck my head in the bag for thirty seconds of pleasurable hyperventilation. I slung the carrier round my wrist and carried the brie in on top of a stack of cake boxes.

Eva was bagging up the money at last. I dropped the boxes and the bag on the worktop beside her.

She walked past me and out into the road. I followed her. 'I'm quite happy to unload,' I said. She reached into the boot, took hold of a stack and then stuck there. 'Oh fuck it,' she said.

'What?'

'Ugh.'

'What?'

She hoisted the boxes out of the boot and made for the cafe. She was holding them away from her as though they were dirty. They wobbled precariously.

'Let me,' I said. I made to take them from her.

She swerved to avoid me, staggering to keep the pile upright.

'Eva?'

'I can manage.'

I glanced into the boot. Something had leaked onto the plastic sheet lining the boot. I ran my finger through the goo and licked it. It was honey.

When I got back inside, Eva had gone through to the kitchen. I looked for an excuse to follow her. The coffee needed decanting so I took the carrier of beans through. Eva was scrubbing her hands under the hot tap. I edged around her to get to the shelf with the coffee jars. Normally I used the little stepladder but Eva was in the way. I reached up on tiptoe for the first tin. But there was more in it than I expected; it came down too fast and I dropped it. It bounced once. The lid sprang off. Beans shot all over the floor.

Foam span off Eva's hands as she wheeled around. 'You bloody oaf.'

I knelt and felt under the sink for the dustpan and brush. They weren't in the usual corner. I reached further in.

Eva stepped towards me, poised for the kill. 'Needing another tippie?' she said.

I backed out the cupboard and looked up at her.

She said, 'I know where you keep it.'

'I'm simply looking for the dustpan and brush,' I said.

She laughed: it was the closest she ever came to screaming. 'Adam, I can smell it on your breath.' I watched her, showing nothing, until she had to look away. She looked up at the ceiling instead, haughty as a Noel Coward heroine. 'At least have the decency to switch to something tasteless,' she said. 'Vodka. Now isn't that what people usually do?'

Eva turned everything that pained her into social comedy. It made it hard to take her seriously.

I got out the dustpan and brush. Eva went back to bagging up day's takings. When she finally returned, arms laden with little plastic bags of change, I was pouring the beans I'd rescued back into the tin.

'I told you I washed the floor,' I said. 'What's the problem?'

'Adam.'

Back home, as usual, Boots got under my feet. I sat at the kitchen table with the day's post, kicking him out of the way. He took it well. What a game! Scrabbling for purchase on the terracotta, chewing my shoelaces...

'Oh for fuck's - '

'Bootsie! Come here.' Eva knelt at the foot of the stairs, arms extended towards him. He ignored her. He growled, terrorising my shoe.

It was all junk mail. I tore it up and threw it in the bin, turned and tripped over the dog.

'Oh for God's sake feed him, can't you see he's hungry?' Eva straightened up. Her hand shook as she gripped the banister. 'I'm going up to change.'

Boots gave her a cursory glance as she climbed the stairs, heels clicking on the unpolished boards.

'Stupid sod,' I told him, when she was gone. 'You're supposed to be hers.' Boots wagged his tail. I went over to the fridge and took a half-empty can of shit from the door. He scampered over to his bowl and looked up at me with his big cow eyes, ready for our Big Bonding Experience. I emptied out the can into the bowl. He let go a big grateful fart.

I poured myself a Coke and, hearing Eva ascend the carpeted stairs to our bedroom, spiked it with rum from the bottle on top of the Welsh dresser. I sat back down at the table, drank off half, and tried to put my head back together. Even Boots got bored, I sat there so long, and eventually he hauled his way out of the room.

I watched him go, scratching up the wooden staircase Dad and I had built.

Out in the garage, wrapped in greaseproof paper in the drawer of an old chest, sat the beeswax blocks we had bought, the day we had hammered in the last nail. We figured it would take about a week to rub all that wax into the raw pine, and give Eva the antique effect that she wanted. From where I was sitting, I could see the shiny pool where my dad had started the job.

'Adam?'

I came to with a start. I hadn't heard her come down. I was lost in memories, she had taken off her shoes, and besides, we'd done too good a job, Dad and I - not a board on that staircase that squeaked. I turned and read the clock over the fridge. It was half past midnight.

She came over, took the bottle from the table and screwed the cap on. 'Where does this one live?'

I nodded at the dresser.

Maybe she figured something really was wrong; maybe she was just too tired to fight. She didn't say anything, just put the bottle back where it belonged, then folded up a couple of jumpers that were drying on chairs near the washing machine. She folded them up and dropped them onto the bottom step, ready to take them up to the bedroom when she was done here.

'Eva?'

But she was miles away, off in Tidy-up Land. Her own drear little vice. There were some cups on the draining board. She checked they were dry, then she put them away. Boots had finished his shit. She put on rubber gloves, washed his bowl under the hot tap and set it to drain.

'For fuck's sake,' I said.

I'd left the rest of my junk mail and empty envelopes on the table. She sorted through them, choosing what to keep, what to throw away.

I nudged my empty cola glass to the edge of the table. Stuck out a forefinger. Tapped the rim.

The glass shattered at my feet.

Eva, who was far too well bred ever to show a hit, crossed smoothly to the stairs, picked up the jumpers and slapped her way back to the bedroom.

I looked at the glass shards, glinting on the terracotta tiles Dad and I had laid. About an hour later I got around to sweeping them up, and a little after that I turned off the lights.

The bedroom curtains were very thin and I could see well enough to undress without waking Eva. The trouble began when I tried to get Boots off the bed. He was stretched out on my side like he owned the place. 'Piss off.' I nudged him. He woke and wagged his tail.

'Shush.'

He growled happily, paddling the bed like a cat.

'Shut up.'

He lay down again, still on my spot. The room stank of him.

'Jesus.'

I left them to it, got the spare duvet out of the airing cupboard and laid it out on the sofa in the living room. In the bathroom, I sucked water from the tap and swallowed a couple of vitamin B. Closing the cabinet door, I caught sight of myself in the mirror.

Recently, faced with my thinning hair, metallic-grey cheeks, and thickening nails, I had begun to feel as though time were shuttling me off indifferently, eager to be done. Tonight I had something else to worry about.

There were red marks round my neck, where Hamley had seized me. An unmistakable pattern. By morning they would be bruises.

I sneaked back into the bedroom. They were both asleep again. Boots was laid up against Eva's arse, whimpering softly. Good on you, I thought. Pity you can't like her when she's awake. I dug out a turtle-neck from the cupboard and took it with me into the living room.

That way, in the morning, Eva wouldn't see the marks.

Her knowing was the last thing I needed.

3.

When Jimmy Yau Sau-Lan died, no one as much as phoned me. That's how far out of the loop I was. That's how unimportant I had become. I had to find out through the newspaper, and that was only by chance.

Several days after his death - when the news of it was quite stale - the South China Morning Post happened to carry a story about the worsening Triad situation in Macau. With pictures. After that, I knew it was only a matter of time before things started falling in on top of me.

What Jimmy Yau was doing in Macau that day no-one seemed to know. But there probably wasn't any mystery in that. It's only a ferry ride away from Victoria Harbour; I used to take day trips there to sample the restaurants.

What is mysterious is how his attacker knew where and when to hide, to catch Jimmy as he drove his hired convertible along the Rua das Lorchas. The grenade fell short, blowing a two-foot-deep hole in the tarmac; it was the shock wave lifted the vehicle over the rail and dumped Jimmy into the Porto Interior. Witnesses said they saw the upturned car plunge in on top of him. The police had divers and dredgers out there all day but they never found his body.

Four days after Hamley's short, sharp visit, Brian and Eddie - Jimmy Yau's sons and heirs - came bounding into the cafe. You could tell they were the men of the family now because Eddie had got himself a sensible haircut.

I was in the kitchen, making sandwiches, when I heard the prang and clatter of the table football machine. We'd really only put it in the cafe for decoration, and it was so near our busiest time, the players must have been treading everyone underfoot as they rushed from handle to handle. I carried in an order of Italian chicken baguettes to the counter. Hannah was spooning froth into the cappuccinos. She placed them one at a time onto a tray. Her hand was shaking.

Then again, her hand was always shaking. People frightened her. The only reason she worked here was her mother arranged it one summer holiday for her and she hadn't the self-confidence to move on. I asked her what was wrong. She nodded at the boys capering about the table. 'Is it all right, Adam?'

I glanced at them, saw who they were, and stretched my mouth into a rictal smile. 'Of course it's all right, Hannah. Can you look after this lot? Table two.' I nudged the tray towards her. Reluctantly, she took it up and headed into the room. She eased uneasily past the brothers. Eddie spun the handles with a flourish and stepped back into her. She dodged out the way just about. Eddie grinned. Brian scored.

'Fuck me,' said Eddie, surprised.

'Fuck yourself,' said Brian, his accent thick and catarrhal, and tossed the ball back into the centre. Brian was faster than his little brother, and more patient. Eddie was smarter. He hunted for an advantage. At a crucial moment he tilted the table by the handles. The legs juddered and scored the floor.

Hannah was still handing out plates and cups to table two, bending from the hips in an unconscious, neurotic display of sexuality. The tourists she were serving - they were so amorously big, they could have modelled for Gary Larsson - took no notice.

Eddie did. He said something to Brian. Brian studied the backs of her knees. Unable to put it off any longer, I went over. 'Fancy a sandwich?' I said. They turned to me.

Eddie smiled for the both of them. Smiling wasn't in Brian's vocabulary.

'Hey,' said Eddie. He came over and slapped my shoulder. He was wearing a blue and red skinny-rib jumper, rolled up to the elbows. I glimpsed the tangle of scars up his arm, the circular burn-marks from fat cigars. No wonder people weren't eating much. 'Adam, man.'

'Hi, Eddie,' I said.

'Mr Wyatt.'

'Hi, Brian.'

Brian was wearing a black shirt and black jeans. His hair was black. So were the pupils of his eyes; it was like he was frozen in a state of dumbfounded astonishment.

'Are we making a noise here, Adam?'

'It's okay, Eddie.'

'We didn't mean to hurt your table,' said Brian - a truculent child making a rote excuse.

'It's had worse.'

'Hey Brian, it's cool, right?' said Eddie. Jimmy Yau had sent Eddie to study in London, and Eddie had picked up most of his English from parties in Hoxton and raves in posh squats off the M25.

'Yeah,' I said, 'it's cool.'

'Cool.' Brian blinked. It was impossible to say how much Brian understood. It never seemed to make any difference to what he did.

There wasn't anything anyone wanted to say after that, so I went back to the counter.

'Is everything all right?' Hannah squinted across the room, like she was trying to tune out the parts of it that worried her.

'I know them, Hannah. It's fine.' I plucked a handful of slips from the hook by the coffee machine. 'Are these fresh orders?' Without waiting for an answer I returned to the kitchen. If they wanted to say something to me, they were going to have to say it. I didn't have time for their Joe Pesci impressions.

It didn't take them long to start fucking the place about again. When Hannah came in to tell me, she gripped the door-jamb like it was the only thing keeping her upright.

'Get him another coffee,' I told her. 'Sponge him off and calm him down.'

'He wants to complain.'

'So let him.'

'To you.'

I followed her out of the kitchen in time to see a blue Mondeo pull away from the kerb.

'Hey, we're sorry, man,' Eddie said.

The other customers looked like the only reason they were still here was Brian had nailed them to their seats.

'It was an accident, Mr Wyatt,' Brian glowered.

'No problem,' I said.

Hannah meanwhile had fetched a cloth, and she began to mop up the table where Brian had backed into it. Then she knelt and ran the cloth over the floor. Brian had a good long look at her arse.

'That's enough,' I said.

Brian looked at me like I was the one with the problem.

Eddie played diplomat.

'Do you have ten minutes?' he said.

We walked down Stoney Street, past the Clink to the river. The sky was clear, and there were pockets of warmth wherever the sun found a way through to ground level.

Eddie said, 'They listened to Hamley yesterday.'

'Was I mentioned?'

'Oh yes.'

He hadn't wasted any time. I said, 'What's going to happen to me?'

Eddie shrugged. 'Frank knows a little bit. It's nothing Top Luck's lawyers can't chip to shit.'

'He said I knew about the money?'

'He said you turned a blind eye to certain things.'

The road led under Cannon Street railway bridge and slewed right, to meet the embankment. The Thames was still black and gelid, like it had bubbled up from an ice cave. A Japanese family were hesitating outside the Anchor, intimidated by the pub's authentic interior: a warren of gloomy snugs.

The pub is set back from the river. 'Trading In The British Tradition', runs the sign above the door; sadly, it doesn't say what it's trading it in for. There's a raised, paved seating area looking over the river, and sometimes on summer evenings I sat out there, watching St Paul's mellow out in the dying light, while around me the Germans and Japanese tucked into 'Good 'Ole Fish & Chips' and 'Dr Boswell's Lamb & Mint Pie'. I picked us a table in the shadow of the rail bridge.

I insisted on going in and buying; that way Eddie wouldn't be there to see me pouring one double into another. A thin stream of Coke filed off the pungency of the rum. While Brian and Eddie's lagers were pouring, I drank off a finger's-worth and added some ice.

'Mum wants your help,' said Eddie, when I got back.

'Oh yes?'

Money. Great name, scary woman. I liked her, as much as you can like someone you don't trust.

'She wants you to come round for dinner.'

'I can't see what use I can be to her,' I said.

'Don't worry about that,' said Eddie. 'Think what use she can be to you.'

I thought about Jimmy Yau's promises to me, and I thought about Macau. I thought about Frank Hamley in Hong Kong, telling tales.

'I'll try and make it,' I said. 'Things are busy right now.'

'She's doing eels and bitter melon,' said Eddie. Like this would tempt me.

I wondered if their sister would be there. 'When?' I said.

'Next Thursday.'

I shook my head.

'You can make time for it,' Brian said.

'It's Justin's birthday,' I told him.

Brian blinked, like, So what? But Eddie was all heart. 'Hey, man, we didn't know. How old is he, anyway?'

We walked back to the cafe. I thought they were just going to get back in their car, but Brian whispered something in his brother's ear, and after a short conference, conducted out of my hearing, they followed me in.

There was a queue waiting to pay stretching almost to the glass partition, and Hannah had given the till a nervous breakdown. Eddie and Brian waited patiently while I sorted her out and helped her get through the line. When the counter was free, Eddie and Brian came and leant there. Eddie with me, Brian with Hannah: he had drills for eyes. Hannah couldn't meet his stare. She turned her back on him and started wiping down the juicer. He watched her backside.

'I'll get mum to suggest another night, then.'

'Sure,' I told Eddie. 'Right.'

'My name is Brian,' said Brian, startling us both. Eddie watched his brother. 'We're in film,' Brian said.

The object of Brian's affections ducked down out of sight and changed the CD in the machine. And changed it again. It was a good machine - a Nabeshima - and it had lots of buttons...

Brian knew when he was being snubbed. He shoved his fists in the pockets of his jeans and tried to act casual.

Eddie sighed. 'Good to see you, Adam,' he said.

'Likewise.'

Eddie led his brother out of the cafe. At the doorway he turned. 'Hey, Adam' He held up something small and shiny. Oblique sunlight cast strange, intagliated shadows over his scarred arm. 'Catch.' He threw it to me. I snatched at it and missed. It ricocheted painfully off my thumb and bounced across the floor. It was the ball from the football table.

Eddie grinned. 'Too much Coca-Cola, mate,' he said.

4.

I was already half-way up Hemingford Road before I remembered that tonight was Eva's dinner party. Angelica Loh and her husband had already arrived, drinking brandy from Eva's best glasses. They I could cope with; they were the least pretentious of Eva's Hong Kong friends. Loh Han-Wah was a patents lawyer with run-down offices in the City. Angelica had resigned from her stylist's job at Elle Decoration to look after their second baby and was well into her second year of domestic contentment. They had left Hong Kong in 1995, eighteen months before we did, and had been good to us when we first arrived. The others, who arrived in dribs and drabs over the following hour, were people I could have lived without - women who spent their lives giving each other dinner parties to help out various fashionable charities.

How they'd rolled up in London I was never too sure; the Handover hadn't triggered the exodus some British newspapers had expected, and most of the colony's smart money had stayed put. Maybe their stockbroker husbands had caught wind of the depression soon to sweep over East Asia. Princesses from mansions overlooking Shek O, they had emigrated en masse to Little Venice and the King's Road, acquiring, after a couple of British winters, the lost and ludicrous aspect of exotic birds shivering their lives away in a municipal zoo.

This evening Eva - ever ready to bind herself to the rack of social disappointment - had invited them over for supper in our tiny, petit-bourgeois kitchen.

While Eva poured brandy in the living room for David Kwok, the art dealer, and Flora Chau and Brenda Lai, Loh Han-Wah followed me downstairs to the kitchen and helped me set the table. His eyes twinkled behind round wire-framed spectacles as we worked. 'What's for dinner Adam?'

'I've no idea,' I admitted, my mind still occupied with the day's disastrous trade at the cafŽ. 'Here, we'll

need an extra spoon, apparently.'

'Ah,' he said. He liked me, but my reputation made him uneasy. He always seemed to be about to make some devastating witticism, but he never did.

'Business going well?' I asked. A client of his was contesting rights to a minidisc format. His firm and the suits from Nabeshima had been head-to-head for months.

'I think we're ready to settle.'

'Shall we come down?' This from Eva, peering at us from over the banister.

Loh smiled vaguely at her. His glasses, reflecting the hob light, hid his eyes.

'Sure,' I said.

'Darling, you're always so enterprising,' said David Kwok. Kwok ran an off-Bond Street gallery of antique oriental fabrics, prints, and what the decoration magazines call 'artefacts'. It was all unbelievably nasty stuff. Since shifting operations from Hong Kong's Hollywood Road to London's West End he had begun to fancy himself as a connoisseur, which for him meant adding a nought to everything and screaming abuse at the poor sods at Phillips whenever a piece didn't make its reserve. 'And how long has it been open?' He tented his fingers in front of his mouth, waiting for the response. His hands, smooth and plump as a child's, always unnerved me.

'Eighteen months,' Eva told us. 'The returns are excellent, especially with all the work that's going on in Greenwich.'

The trouble with Eva was, she had to talk everything up. She had to compete. Our cafe wasn't anywhere near Greenwich - the Millennium Dome was two whole bends in the river further east - it was in Southwark. When the new Tate opened at Millbank, then we'd have more trade than we could cope with. But we'd spent the past eighteen months serving sandwiches to road builders, and olives and focaccia to a handful of corporate refugees from Sea Containers House. It was a slow business but a promising one. In fact the reality of it was much more exciting than all her nonsense about the killing we were making but weren't.

But oh no, Eva had to compete. 'It's a bit of fun,' she said, with a casualness any fool could have seen through. 'Just while Adam gets started again.'

I stared at her. Brenda and Flora exchanged glances. Loh fixed me with his speculative smile.

'That's so good,' his wife, Angelica, enthused. She laid her perfectly manicured hand on Eva's wrist. 'It's a great idea.' She was a dreadful Polly-Anna, but she knew how to keep potentially acid evenings like this bright and bubbling; I was grateful.

'Red, anyone?' I said - my own attempt at social lubrication. Very suave. Very urbane. Everyone here knew I'd not be 'starting again' any time soon. How could I, given the cloud surrounding my departure?

Against all evidence, I had given Top Luck a clean bill of health. If now the enquiry did not think I was culpable, it was only because my subsequent performance provided me with a dismal kind of alibi. I spent a lot of time between '92 and '97 on sick leave. Dreadful, shrieking stomach pains, like talons,

shredding my insides, had me in and out of clinics for months. The doctors couldn't find anything. And the rum smell in my skin and hair, the long lunch-hour, the tie askew and the three day-old shirt gave personnel more straightforward reasons for my poor results.

'And how are you, Adam?' said Angelica, treating me like an invalid as usual. 'How are we?' I'd half-expected her to say - though I saw her difficulty. The codsup I had made of Hong Kong was hardly for the dinner-table. If it hadn't been for the Handover, I wouldn't have lasted the year. As for another appointment - well, word travels fast in this business.

Easier, then, to make out that I'd suffered a misfortune, a breakdown, ME - something for which I could not be held culpable. 'Oh, keeping busy,' I said, in my best duffer-pottering-about-the-garden manner. 'Eva keeps me in trim.'

David Kwok laughed a dirty laugh. Eva coloured up.

'And you, David,' I said, feeling the heat of the second bottle of merlot rise in my throat. 'Flogged any treasures recently?'

Nobody else missed my tone - Loh's spectacles were flashing like there were LEDs built into the rims - but David Kwok was too fat and too happy with himself ever to notice a hit from me. 'You must come,' he went on, explaining about his latest venture, a fine arts gallery in Dering Street. 'It's next to Anthony D'Offay.'

He had new pieces arriving from mainland China every couple of months. How he got away with it I could never figure. Most of it belonged in a museum, which is probably where it originated. David Kwok was going up in the world. The first time I met him he was churning out fake Alexander McQueen for Stanley Market.

The phone rang. I stood up. David, bless him, decided he still wasn't getting enough attention, and got to the phone before me. 'Wai?'

I took the receiver off him. He winced and shook his hand, like I'd hurt him. As if.

'Adam?'

'Yes.'

'It's Money.'

I swallowed. 'Uh-huh.' I couldn't have been put more off my stride if she'd turned up at the door.

'Did Eddie behave himself today?'

I glanced round at the dining table. Everyone was looking at me. 'Yes,' I said.

'You know how those two are.' She made them sound like a couple of feisty dogs.

'Yes,' I said.

'I forgot it was Justin's birthday, I'm so sorry.'

'That's fine,' I said, as neutrally as I could.

She twigged at last that something was wrong. 'Have I caught you at an awkward moment?'

'We've got some friends round.'

'Who is it?' said Eva.

'It's a woman, Eva,' said David Kwok. As though women were an exotic breed of deer. A well-spoken woman.' He turned to look at me over his shoulder, all coquettish. I half expected him to flutter his eyelashes. 'Very mysterious.'

'Would you like me to call back?' said Money.

'No, no. Let me take it upstairs. Stay on the line, yes?'

Eva wanted me to tell her who it was, but David was prancing around like a fairy, distracting us all. 'So sorry,' he was saying, 'I hear a bell, I answer it just like Pavlov's dog.'

I ran up to the living room, where Boots was flopped disconsolately on the sofa. He stood up and shook himself, expecting some attention. I ignored him, and took the stairs to the bedroom two at a time. But Boots was too fast for me: as I opened the bedroom door he muscled in past me and jumped onto the bed. I had to tussle with him to get to the phone. I snapped up the aerial. 'Mrs Yau?' I sat down on the edge of the bed and held Boots at bay by his flea collar. He licked my hand.

'Eddie tells me you have a lovely cafe,' Money said.

God knows where that came from. I could hardly imagine Eddie saying, 'Guess what, Mother, Adam Wyatt and his wife run this lovely cafe...'

'Thank you,' I said.

'Look, Adam, I realise you're busy but we really ought to meet up. I haven't seen you since Jimmy... How does next Friday suit you?'

'I'll have to ask Eva,' I said.

'I'm not inviting Eva.'

This was more the woman I remembered; I almost smiled.

'Frankly, I don't think she'd be too delighted to know I was seeing you.'

'Do you have to tell your wife everything?'

I stayed silent - the telephonic equivalent of a shrug.

'I don't suppose for a second you've told her about Frank Hamley.'

Boots leapt on the bed and nuzzled the phone. I clouted him and he fell off the mattress.

'Adam?'

'I'm here.'

'Friday, then,' she said.

'Friday I work at the cafe.'

'Wednesday?'

'I don't think so.'

'You might want to have a read of today's Post before you put me off altogether.'

I swallowed.

'Adam?'

'What's happened?'

'Frank was knocked down by a hit-and-run crossing Queensway.'

I felt as though I were falling.

'He was due to give further evidence. They don't think he'll regain consciousness.'

'What are you saying?'

'The inquiry is going to be looking for a new witness.'

'You know I wouldn't cooperate.'

'I know,' Money said. 'But I'm not the one who ran over Frank's head.'

5.

I got downstairs again to find things warming up pleasantly. Angelica and Loh Han-Wah were holding hands, listening to a funny story of Eva's. David Kwok had drunk himself silent and Brenda and Flora were bullying him into making a liberal gesture for some charity or other. Hardly anyone noticed when I took my seat.

'But you must,' Flora insisted. David blinked. 'It'll bring so many interesting people to your new gallery - '

Loh's laughter drowned out Flora's third-degree. Eva, pleased with her story, leaned over to me. 'Who was it?' she said.

'Some old friends,' I said, off the top of my head.

'Who?'

'Mike and Ylwa,' I said. They were old acquaintances of mine from Hong Kong. Still there, for all I knew.

'Really?' Eva looked like she wanted all sorts of gossip, so I set about clearing the table of empty bottles. 'More wine, anyone?'

Flora and Brenda wanted David Kwok to auction something for a regional opera company they fancied. 'Something small,' Flora suggested. 'Something jade.'

They all left early, off to mansions in Barnes and mill-houses in quaint little villages served by the M4. Eva washed up. I dried.

'Even when you grill it, it just falls apart,' Eva complained. 'Let's not do it again.'

She had cooked a favourite of hers this evening - talapia with a peach salsa. She'd lifted it from a copy of House & Garden.

'It was delicious,' I said, and meant it.

'It looked like we'd scraped it off the grill.'

'Nobody cares about that.'

But Eva cared. Nothing, apparently, had been quite right. 'We should just have plonked a bowl of fruit on the table,' she said, demolishing each stage of her perfectly nice meal in turn.

'You like tirami su.'

'It was too wet,' she said.

I let it go. It wasn't the food was upsetting her, it was the people, and the games they played.

There was a third of a bottle of red still on the table, but I resisted and screwed the cork in.

Eva snapped off her rubber gloves. 'Let's leave this.'

'I'll finish.'

'No. Come to bed.'

I followed her up.

In the bedroom, she took off her earrings and heeled her way out of her shoes. Boots bounded up the stairs. Eva swung the door shut on him and after a couple of minutes whining and scrabbling, he got the message and thumped back down the stairs.

I watched her undress. It had been a long while since we had been this intimate with each other. Her body surprised me. The way it had thickened. Was her period due? I had no idea. She slipped into bed.

I finished undressing and got in beside her. The sheets smelled of dog.

She reached for me. Her hands touched my hands. Fumbling, I took hold of her. She rolled onto her front, moving closer. I laid my hand like a dead thing on her back. The knobs of her spine made a ridged line against my palm.

'Thanks for tonight,' she said.

'I'm sorry I got a bit pissed.'

'Did you?'

I yawned. I couldn't help it.

'What did they have to say?'

'Who?'

'Mike and Ylwa.'

I'd had time, by now, to get my story straight. 'It was a social call,' I said. 'They're coming to London in about a month.'

'It was nice of them to look us up.' She smiled, the way she used to. 'Don't you think it's nice?'

'Yeah,' I said, resisting another yawn.

She touched my cheek. 'Sleep tight.'

I closed my eyes. Relief flooded me. I couldn't lie to her any more - not tonight.

I lay there a minute, forcing my shoulders to untense. I thought she was going to turn off the light, but nothing happened. I opened my eyes. She was looking at me. 'What are those marks on your neck?'

I rubbed at them, hiding them; I turned the other way. 'Just muck, I suppose. I should have had a shower when I came in.'

She believed me. Because I was a good liar. Because it was easier.

She turned out the light.

6.

Money Yau lived in one of those huge Georgian piles overlooking Blackheath. I had the taxi drop me at the bottom of Eliot Hill, and walked the last half mile from Lewisham. The streetlights fell away at the edge of the scrubland, and the roads that criss-crossed the darkness were barely wide enough for the BMWs and Volvos that frequented them. In place of road markings were lines of fussy white stakes, everywhere chipped and scraped after one too many private parties at the V&A, one too many bottles of rioja at Zinc.

Jimmy Yau bought the place, thinking to retire here come the Hnadover. He never lived to enjoy it. He'd have been the only householder on Wat Tyler Road who didn't belong to the Chelsea Arts Club. What he had seen in the place I had no idea, unless it was an ancestral preference for high ground. I imagined him, in furs and leather helmet, defending his hilltop palisade. It was the only picture I had of him that ever seemed to sum him up.

The gate was open when I arrived. I caught a glimpse of white walls, elegant high windows, honeysuckle - the security light flashed on the moment I stepped on the gravel. I stumbled through a halogen glare and took shelter in the porch. They must have noticed the light go on inside because the front door was already ajar.

'Adam.'

I was still dazzled, and the light from the hall was streaming out past the girl who stood there. All I could see was her silhouette.

'Remember me?' she said. There was an edge to her voice; she had expected more from me than this rabbit-in-the-headlights gawp.

'Zoe,' I said, stupidly.

She was at least as tall as her father. Much taller than Brian and Eddie. I wondered if they envied her that - her physical similarity to their father.

'Come on in.'

'I hoped you'd be here,' I said, stepping past her. Her hair smelled sweet and androgynous - CK One, I told myself, though I knew well enough that startling scent. I watched as she shut the door.

She was wearing a georgette slip dress sheer enough that I could follow her long, too-slender legs past the beaded hem. Her Miu-Miu sandals were so wafer-thin, the straps so wire-tight, they had to be some kind of NASA by-product.

'Mother's in the kitchen still. Would you like a drink?' The pearl studs in her ears picked up and accentuated her eerie, blind-seeming grey eyes. Her teenage gawkiness was gone, but she had filled out hardly at all. Her breasts were tiny, pointed nubs against the grey silk. She looked more than ever like a half-starved Siamese.

I followed her into the living room.

'Do you still drink rum?' she said; she was watching me in the mirror above the drinks cabinet.

'White, if you have it.'

'Bacardi?'

My mate Ron. 'Why not?'

Her eyes didn't leave me once.

I sat down uninvited on the sofa and stared into the fire. 'I noticed there's a film on tonight. One of Brian and Eddie's.' It was one of those gas contraptions, the flames too blue at their heart to be convincing. 'I think I remember it. What's it called?'

'Full Auto Angel,' she said.

'I set my video.'

'I thought you couldn't watch them.'

'Well,' I said.

'There.' She sat on the seat next to mine, sipping from a glass that was clear and ice-filled, like mine. How old was she now? Twenty. Twenty-one. Her arms were smooth and unblemished. I thought about Brian and Eddie. I wondered where her scars were.

'How's Eva?' she said.

'Fine.'

'Eddie said your cafe's nice.' She drew her nails through her hair, drawing it from her ear, showing off her smooth, freshly shaved arm-pit.

I looked away. 'I guess it's what I need right now,' I said, and strained the rum out of the ice. As soon as I swallowed I knew it was a mistake. Everything went rubber: my neck, my gut. I closed my eyes, fighting a sudden nausea. Deep inside, the aliens flexed, multiple elbows drumming at my chest wall as they sucked the clear hot goodness from my intestines.

'And Justin?'

'Justin's well,' I said, when I could.

'Where is he now?'

'A school in Kent.'

I tried breathing, and decided it was good.

'Knox Lodge,' I said. 'It's a special school. New.'

'I missed you at the service.'

'I wasn't invited.'

'Would you have come?'

Jimmy Yau was always getting in the way of Zoe and me. Death itself had not stopped him.

'Dad liked you a lot,' she said. She looked at the fire. She drank her drink. 'Do you miss him?'

I didn't know what to say.

She put her glass down with a thunk on the coffee table. 'Nobody else does,' she said.

'I'm sure that's not true.'

'Mother's angry with him.'

'That's not so unusual - '

'Granddad's lost his mind. Brian and Eddie, well, they wouldn't show feeling if you chopped them into little pieces in front of each other.'

I dared a small smile.

Zoe watched me. As usual, she was hungry for something.

'I miss him,' I said. 'In some ways I'm not sorry about what happened. I took a lot of damage, knowing him.'

'Adam?'

I turned in my seat. Drops of split rum chilled my thigh.

'I hope you set your video.' Money Yau had aged a lot in the two years since we'd last met. The whiteness of her hair I had expected; but not the way her face had sunken in. 'I'm so glad we've done this at last,' she said.

'Money.' I stood up. 'It's good to see you.'

Her eyes, which had always seemed so mild and reticent, alone still held the spark of life. And her voice - that too remained poised and youthful. The overall effect was of a vital and indomitable woman looking and speaking through a grotesque paper mask. 'Come through to the dining room,' she said. 'Everything's set.'

Eddie and Brian were carrying dishes in from the kitchen. Eddie grinned his not-quite-friendly grin and asked me how I was doing. Brian, distracted by my arrival, lost the plot and began orbiting the table, anxiously sniffing the food on each plate. Obviously this meal was something he found profoundly unconvincing - a charade he might yet penetrate, given brains enough and time.

Either Eddie had been having a little joke with me, or Money had changed her mind about serving eels. Crispy duck was followed by red mullet in a hot ginger sauce, a dish of bitter melon, and a salad of cucumber and beansprouts and about half a ton of salt. I'd forgotten how much of a taste I'd acquired for

the Hong Kong style: I ate so fast I hardly spoke. Plus, I was trying to soak up Zoe's too-generous glass of rum. My insides were okay but my head still felt like it was bobbing about near the ceiling rose. When I swallowed it lashed about at the end of my rubber umbilical neck.

'It's quite an early one,' Money said/ 'Isn't it, Eddie?'

'Yeah,' said Eddie, poking experimentally at his mobile phone.

'My husband did the choreography.'

It had always puzzled me, the simple pride Money took in talking up her sons' films. As though she didn't know full well where they came from, or what they had involved. I wondered what the commissioning editor at Channel 4 would think - some silk-tie innocent, scoffing posh school dinners in the Union - were he suddenly to be confronted by Eddie's smile, Brian's drowned eyes, their arms, their burned and shredded backs.

I tried to get her to talk about Jimmy, I suppose to show Zoe I cared.

'Privacy came naturally to Jimmy,' Money said. 'It's very hard, now that he's gone, to know what to do for the best.'

'Zoe tells me his father doesn't understand what happened.'

'Zhenshu's senile,' she said, flatly, refusing my easy sympathy. There were other things on her mind.

'Most of these are businesses I've never heard of. I'm beginning to think some of these so-called managers are taking me for a ride.'

I nodded and grunted, my mouth full of rice scented with lotus flowers. I felt awkward, listening to Money's business problems when her children were in the room. Not that Brian or Eddie were paying any attention. Some communication was taking place between them, some wordless, piquant traffic. They seemed to stir and turn their heads and move their hands in unison, as though this unlooked-for and unprecedented screening had triggered old routines in them.

'The tax office sent me another reminder.'

I dragged my attention back to Money. She was still on about her financial worries.

'I know they're going to fine me but it's the interest they charge that frightens me.'

A whole case of rum couldn't have made that evening any more surreal than it already was. Each year organised crime launders about twenty billion US dollars through Hong Kong; not a little of it passed through Jimmy Yau's hands at one time or another. And here was his widow, worrying over her annual tax return.

The first, stylophoned bars of Fÿr Elise burst from Eddie's jean-jacket. He took out his mobile and thumbed it. 'Hello?'

'Edward, turn that thing off.'

'Seb? Right - '

'Ed - '

'Cool.'

'Edward, we're eating.'

Smoothly, Eddie got up from the table and walked to the window, phone still pressed to his ear. 'Eleven thirty, mate. Yeah. Kickin'. Rice grains fell from the lap of his linen trousers.

Everything was 'cool' with him. 'Big', or, even 'wicked'. Things were 'happening' with him. His laughter was clipped, anxious, and coke-fuelled. Brian, meanwhile, sat watching his younger, smarter brother - the grub who had usurped him - with eyes flat and impenetrable as steel plate.

'It takes me the whole of every morning, just replying to official enquiries about the estate,' Money complained.

I couldn't work out what she wanted from me. She wasn't so naive: her anxiety over such routine matters had to be part of some strategy. But what was she angling for? I gave her the calm-down speech I'd used on tax evasion suspects: your tax man is your friend and your confessor, with good will all can be redeemed, and so on.

Brian meanwhile had turned his attention back on his food. He prised a chopstick into the poached eye of his fish and used it to snap the bony plate over the gill.

'Brian. Stop it.'

Brian stared his mother down.

'So, Adam,' she said, fingers fluttering at her throat. Brian unnerved her - there was too much of his father in that dead stare of his. 'How long can an appeal like that drag on?'

Eddie laughed. 'Yes, mate. Yes. Hell, mate, yes. Hell, yes. YES! Yes mate.'

The skull came to pieces under Brian's chopstick. He mashed the cream inside fish's tiny brain pan.

'Thirty, forty minutes, mate,' said Eddie. 'Yes. Yes.' He thumbed off his mobile. 'Fuckin', he said.

He came back to the table and clapped Brian on the shoulder. Brian stood up and followed his brother out of the room.

Money said nothing, just let them go. Was she intimidated, or just fed up? Her face was too loose and sunken to read.

The front door banged shut.

'Well,' she sighed, 'let's all have a drink.' She said it as though she'd just put two toddlers to bed. Not intimidated, then - and I had the sense that her flighty-and-no-good-with-numbers routine hadn't been meant for me at all, but for them.

7.

She led us back into the living room. 'What'll you have, Adam?'

I'd eaten well, so I risked a whisky and soda. Zoe went to the sideboard and made three.

'I was hoping you could come visit me sometimes,' said Money, 'and help me with all this.'

'It would be worth investing in some professional advice,' I said. Zoe handed me a glass. I sipped. It was practically neat. 'I can't see that I'd be much use.'

Zoe sat on the sofa beside her mother and set down their glasses. The liquid inside them was pale, the soda water fizzing furiously. I sipped again from mine. There was barely a hint of gas. Was Zoe trying to get me drunk?

'Of course,' said Money, 'Zoe does what she can to help.'

Zoe shrugged.

'You know she deferred a year at college? To help me.' Money smiled at her daughter. 'But I was never a good listener, was I?'

Zoe returned her mother's secret smile. Had they had a row? Were they making up?

'Like I said, professional help will be cheaper in the long run.'

'But complicated.'

'How so?'

'Adam,' said Money. 'I want you to do me a favour. I want you to deal with Jimmy's affairs.'

I stared at her.

'Zoe stayed home to help, but I'd sooner she used the year to relax. It's been a difficult time for us all, and she deserves the time for herself.'

'I don't think - '

'I want her to travel, to enjoy herself.'

'Another drink?' Zoe said. I looked at my glass. It was empty.

'Jimmy's affairs weren't always very clear,' Money admitted. 'I don't want her getting into trouble.'

She'd rather I did. Well, I could hardly blame her for that. I wouldn't want my child associated with

Jimmy Yau's 'unclear' affairs, either.

'What about Eddie?' I said, angling for an easy out.

Money snorted. 'I need help, not stunts.' Her contempt for her son was appalling. She had a crudeness that had been bred out of Eva's friends, though they all came from the same stock.

'I'm sure he could do a good job,' I said, 'given the chance.'

Zoe set down my glass. There wasn't the faintest hint of soda in it. She knew my weakness. She wanted her mother to know it, too, for some reason.

Still, it was my out, so I took it; I drained the glass in one. The aliens in my chest spasmed and thrashed. 'I can't help you,' I said. 'For one thing, I've already got a job.'

Money laughed. 'You surely don't mean the cafe.'

'Eva's relying on me,' I said.

For another thing, I was breathing fire into her face. Sweat had broken on my forehead, that had nothing to do with the gas fire. Even I could smell it. Whisky, Wray & Nephew, last night's wine and God knows what else. She really should have taken the hint.

'Would you like another?' said Zoe, reinforcing the obvious point.

'Leave him alone,' Money said.

None of us said very much for a while. We had moved into new territory. Black water. The deep dead sea where deals rise like foam off the tip of an oar - and last about as long. There is nothing so evanescent as organised crime.

'I want you to tidy up Jimmy's affairs,' Money said. 'Turn as much as you can into legitimate interests. Liquidate the rest.'

The enormity of it misfooted me. I struggled not to laugh.

'Is that so unreasonable a request?'

I turned to Zoe. The kid who thought she could show me up with a couple of shots of Glenlivet. 'Is this what you've been up to, Zoe?' It was too absurd. 'Taking apart a triad?'

She sighed. 'We control fifty money-changers in the Hong Kong-Kowloon region. Four money transmitters, a securities broker, two remittance corporations. Dad shut down Miami operations in '95, once FinCEN got wind of our Mexican giro house investments, and converted them to roubles. Thirty billion, all ready to plough into St Petersburg, only the Florence DIA arrested dad's co-investor. He managed to divert about half our moneys into arranging exports of Kazakhstani mercury. The money we get now from the mining companies in Brazil we trade for cocaine in Columbia and change that for Italian gold in Slovakia.'

I stared at her.

'We are not a fucking triad.' She refilled my glass.

I looked at Money. She was serious. I looked at Zoe - her hungry eyes.

They were monsters.

'You want to demolish all that?'

'Top Luck's just the weakest, the first to go,' Money sighed. 'But without Jimmy, everything else will come apart in time.'

Zoe explained. 'When we launder money from Shenzhen, we take eighty percent. The market rate is only sixty, so why do our clients keep coming back to us? Last year we exported a consignment of caesium to Korea, and they insisted on paying us for red mercury. That's triple our expected profit and we - '

'I don't want to know this,' I said.

They tried again.

I stood up. 'I don't want to know.'

'We're sitting on a time bomb, Adam - '

'It had nothing to do with me.'

'No,' Money agreed, coldly. 'But Top Luck has.'

Slowly, clumsily, I sat down. My hand was shaking so much, Zoe had to take the glass off me before she could fill it.

Money cocked her head on one side, examining me. 'How did you think you were keeping the enquiry at bay? Personal charm?'

'Jimmy said - '

'Jimmy protected Frank Hamley, too.'

I tried picking up my drink. The rug was old but fuck it, I thought, whisky won't stain it. I wiped my chin.

'I'm the one protecting you now,' Money said. 'I'm all that's standing between you and the inquiry. For the moment, you're safe. But it's only a matter of time before my bluff is called. Look at Hamley.'

I looked at Zoe instead. She was studying the ice in the bottom of her glass. It had been Money's idea to get me drunk. That's why Zoe was still here. Money was using her daughter to soften me up.

I thought about what would happen if I said yes to them. The work they would have me do. The lies I would have to tell Eva. The double life I would lead. Zoe's thin arms, her blind, hungry doll eyes. The androgynous scent of her skin, like a perfume.

I thought about what would happen if I said no. About Hong Kong, about testifying at the inquiry, about what I would say. I thought about Jimmy's colleagues, clinging to the wreckage of their fractured empire, watching me from the gallery, watching me on TV, reading about me in the papers and on the internet, waiting for the moment when the gweilo starts to squeal.

Or rather, not waiting. What load does it take to crack open a skull? Does the speed of the car make a difference? The pressure in the tyre?

'Which is it to be?' Money said.

I told her no.

Never, but never, make a grand exit. Be quiet, dignified, melt into the background, fade gently away - then if something goes wrong you won't make a prat of yourself.

They rang me a taxi but I didn't want to linger there a moment more than I had to. I said I'd wait outside and get some air before the ride; I said a few other things as well, and I don't think they were sorry to see me go.

They swung the door on me and I headed down the gravel drive between rhododendrons and untidy ornamental firs. It was a clear night, and cold, and the air hit the back of my throat like menthol.

The moon, a fat crescent, lit my way to the gate. A partial eclipse had taken a bite out of its bottom corner; it hung there, precise and asymmetrical, like a carefully turned engine part.

I cast my mind back, trying to recall when I had last seen the stars. A summer night beside the Cam, in my first summer vacation. Sleeping under a net on a small game reserve in Zimbabwe. The night the electricity failed in the resort town of Buzios, during my six-month affair with KPMG Rio...

I'd got as far as the open gates when the security light from Hell came on again to light my way. Even reflected off the gateposts, the glare was unbearable. I winced, shielding my dark-adapted eyes, and tripped on something hard and unyielding.

I threw my hands out to break my fall and crashed like a tree. Something big and sharp razored my palm. I sat up, dragged in a burning breath, and held my hand up to the moonlight. There was a glass shard there, a big one, sticking up out of a rising pool of blood. Black blood filled the basin of my palm and dribbled off.

Shock made me stupid: I pulled the shard out. I must have screamed, but no one came to the door.

I got up and saw what had tripped me. A metal plate: the gates locked into it when they were shut. I catted. Saliva ran down my chin. I wiped it away with my good hand. It smelled of spirits and fish and soy sauce. Blinking against the harsh light, I staggered back to the house.

I rang the bell and waited, studying the wound in the light from the glass-panelled door. Bits of shattered glass were still buried there. I could see them glittering - bright flecks. Or was it bone?

The door opened. 'Adam,' Zoe said, then, 'Jesus.'

'I fell,' I said.

'Let me look,' said Zoe. She took my hand in both of hers.

'Ow.'

'What is that? Glass?'

'Can I come in?'

'Or is it grit?'

'Ow.'

'Come on, then,' she sighed, and led me down the hall.

There were voices coming from the kitchen. Music and screaming. Full Auto Angel through a cheap speaker.

The kitchen wasn't a bit like the rest of the house. The red floor tiles were lifting. The table was topped with sickly yellow Formica.

All I need is a tissue,' I said. 'I'll take the cab to casualty.'

Money was clearing up after our meal. There were garlic skins and fish-guts all over the chopping block.

'Don't be silly,' she said. 'Zoe, get me the first-aid box.'

The TV sat on the top of the fridge.

Brin was tied to a table. A girl in a bikini and RayBans was whipping him with a car aerial. The scene was cut to look like a special effect.

In a moment the door would burst in under a hail of shotgun pellets. Cantonese extras in Versace jeans and blue sweatbands identifying them as members of the secret Order of the Paper Chrysanthemum would steal in like ghosts, silence the girl with a touch, and pass through.

Brian would not appear again until the third reel, posing as a wheelchair-bound cripple. Taken apart and reassembled, the wheelchair would in Brian's hands make a primitive but impressively loud heavy machine gun, in a scene praised by cult film critic Kim Newman for its 'exuberant post-Besson pastiche', and later analysed shot by shot in a long behind-the-scenes exclusive in Fangoria magazine.

Zoe came back in with a Tupperware cake-box and a bottle of medicinal alcohol.

Money dipped the bottle over a cotton swab and cleaned the cut, then used a pair of eyebrow tweezers to pull the bits out. I told her not to probe so deep, to let me go and get the cut seen to properly, but she wasn't listening. I winced and tugged away. She leaned her wrist into mine, pinning my hand against the table, and probed still deeper.

'Fuck! Shit!'

'Oh, grow up,' she muttered, peering myopically into the tear.

Eddie was taunting his pursuers, knocking one after the other off the top of the HSBC building in ever more gymnastic and unlikely ways. It was like watching music. Like jazz. Like the dialogue you get between guitars. Eddie was much fitter then.

She rummaged about in the cake box and came out with paper sachet. She tore it open and withdrew a bright, scythe-shaped needle. Now I was really in trouble. 'I'd rather - '

'Oh Adam,' she said, losing patience with me, 'I do this all the time for the boys.'

The girl in the bikini had revived and was being comforted by her faithful, somewhat boyish female companion.

I thought about Brian and Eddie - their scarred arms.

'The scraps they get into, if I hadn't learned how by now we'd never be out of Casualty.'

'But my palm - '

'Put your hand on the table.'

'Cab's here,' said Zoe, leaning in.

'Tell him we'll be a few minutes.'

'I can - '

'Oh for God's sake Adam keep still.'

I swallowed. 'Is that proper surgical thread?'

'For heaven's sake,' she sighed. She pressed the needle in.

'Christ!'

'What now?'

'You can't just poke it in like that.'

'Why not?'

'Because it hurts, you stupid bitch. It hurts, damn it.'

She blinked at me. 'Brian and Eddie don't carry on like this,' she said.

'Here,' said Zoe, coming in again. She handed me a glass. It was so full the rum dribbled off my fingers.

'What?' she said, meeting my eyes with her hungry, Siamese smile.

'Now. Adam,' said Money, 'hold still.'

Zoe hunkered down beside me and slid her arm round my shoulders. I looked away, at her hand. The long bones of her fingers, her delicate wrist, the blue tracery under her skin. I smelled her again.

Money's needle went in, and out, and in.

8.

The letter came lunchtime the following day, franked Hong Kong, with a government stamp. Eva saw.

'Aren't you going to open it?' she said.

It was thin - a single sheet. A friendly one-liner from a former colleague? A formal summons on ICAC letterhead? Would it make any difference, which it was? I crammed it unopened into the inside pocket of my jacket, drew the jacket off the chair and slipped it on, one-handed. 'Let's get going,' I said.

'You can't drive in that state.' Eva pulled the plug out of the sink and snapped free of her rubber gloves. We'd just eaten a late lunch, and planned to get to Knox Lodge by 4.30. 'Why won't you listen? We'll have an accident.'

'Tell you what,' I said, kicking the kitchen door open. The warped wood grated sickeningly on the stone step. 'You keep rehearsing that idea - see if you can make it happen.'

There was a narrow leaf-sodden path connecting the basement area to the garage. She followed me out in her slippers.

'Adam, I am really not that interested in your fragile ego, I am - '

'I'm driving,' I said. I unlocked the garage door and pulled it up on its rollers with my good hand. I glanced at her, ready for the next round, but she had gone back inside.

The garage was on the same level as the kitchen, which was to say seven foot below the road. The drive was absurdly steep - there were steps set into one side because you couldn't walk the slope without them. In winter sometimes the whole thing became an ice-ramp. When we were visiting Justin once, the AA had to winch us onto the road.

The Xedos needed cleaning - I tried not to rub against it as I sidled towards the driver's door. I took a moment to fuss about with the controls, adjusting wing mirrors and the seat position so I could drive comfortably one-armed. Eva had insisted we buy an automatic and for once I was grateful. I reversed up the steep drive and onto the street. Eva was already waiting on the pavement, arms folded over her Karen Millen suit. I unclipped the door. She started to get in when I remembered Justin's birthday present.

'I thought you had it,' she said.

'Of course I don't,' I said.

'Okay,' she said. 'I'll go and get it. Jesus.' I watched her back to the front door, noticing the stiffness in her shoulders, the mincing steps she took in her new boots. She let the door stand open while she went inside.

All this damage from one sly little visit to Money. I was a nervous wreck. My hand was stiffened and useless. Eva had dressed it that morning and in the light of day the stitches looked frighteningly professional. 'Where did you go?' she asked me. 'Did you have to wait long?'

'Did it hurt?'

'Did they give you any antibiotics?'

Drizzle spattered the windscreen. I thumbed the stick down one notch to turn on the wipers, and stretched the stitches in my palm. I winced.

The pain became a warmth, then, as it eased, a buzzing shape - a thick crescent, with an edge taken out of one corner. It felt as if the shard was still there, and it reminded me of something.

'Adam.'

Eva was back already, struggling with the PlayStation box. She had wrapped it in shiny gold paper. I leaned over and opened the door for her. She clambered in part way and dropped the box over her seat into the rear of the car.

'Careful,' I said, 'it's delicate.'

'Oh Adam, just - '

'What?'

She bit her lip.

I waited till she'd strapped herself in. 'Eva?' I wanted to say I was sorry.

'Can we go now?' she said, tightly.

I put the car into gear. There's a button on the stick you have to press to take it out of reverse, and another bolt of heat shot through my palm. This time I recognised the shape.

'There was a lunar eclipse last night,' I said.

'I wish you'd let me drive.'

'It was very pretty.'

'I'm only trying to be nice,' she said.

We took the A13 to the Dartford Crossing. The M25 was so unnaturally quiet, I even got to play with the cruise control. Since it was clear by then that I wasn't going to run us off the road, Eva cut back on

the anxious glances and sharp intakes of breath. She wasn't any more relaxed - but there were different reasons for that.

Knox Lodge lies just outside Staplehurst, about forty minutes off the M20. It started life as a country house, but it's been institutionalised for so long, accreting prefabs and benches and extra toilet blocks, today it resembles any mediocre private school.

Injured pilots were treated here during the second world war; the Ministry of Defence used it as a sort of workhouse-cum-retirement home for fifty aged pen-pushers when they restructured Porton Down; in the Seventies, young offenders went there as an alternative to Borstal. The district health authority rattled about in it until '92.

The rumour was it was going to be Britain's first Higashi school, especially since local authorities were refusing to help out parents paying for their kids to go to the one in Boston.

The principal, Guy Criville, was a convert - he had a photograph of himself with Dr Kitahara on the wall behind his desk - but whatever his professional allegiances, his school hadn't the money to run his mentor's full programme. A lot of people found Criville's pint-sized version pretty disappointing, but Justin had already been through Kitahara's Daily Life Therapy in Tokyo and it was pretty obvious by the end that he simply wasn't up to the full programme.

If you're autistic, the world is meaningless.

Literally. Meaningless. The parts of your brain that give meanings to things don't work properly, or at all. That's why, in extreme cases, you never really acquire language. All you have, at best, is a series of bird calls - noises that conform roughly to words, which you rote-learn to use in specific situations. Calls for food, calls for the toilet, calls for Give-me-that and for Take-this-away.

Because nothing in the world makes any sense, you can't spot the obvious patterns. Sunset, bedtime; breakfast, bathtime - to you it's just one damn thing after another. You never know what's going to happen next, and of course it's only a tiny step from that to thinking that the next thing that'll happen could be very bad indeed.

The best you can hope for is a little control. A routine you can rehearse, repeat and comprehend. Lunch at 12.05:00pm and not, under any circumstances, 12.06:35pm, because that opens a window for the chaos to get in. A tea of bread and butter cut always into isosceles triangles of exactly the same size, because a square piece once choked you, and you daren't risk it happening again.

And then, just when you think you've got the lid on things - this is where the irony becomes really delicious - there are other people.

We're all born with a message inside our heads: a piece of information so incredible, it has to be coded in our genes - because we'd never work it out on our own. It says to each of us - if you can believe this - that there are other people, like us, waiting to make contact. Think about it: other people. It even tells us what they look like.

If you're autistic, you can't hear the message. Without it, there is only one reasonable conclusion left for you to draw: you are alone. (The animated furniture around you wants you to join in with their unpredictable games - and sometimes you do - but nothing on earth will convince you that that you are one of them.)

It was just before four thirty in the afternoon when three hat-stands entered Justin's room. They stood there a moment, flailing and hooting, and then they started interfering with him.

Justin's favourite carer, Francis, came and led us to his room. School was over for the day and the kids here were left to themselves until tea at 5pm. Justin was bouncing up and down on the bed when we came in. He was very beautiful. Eva's breath caught in her throat.

There was his face, of course, but we were used to that. It's that expression of theirs: calm, untouched, transcendent. If you let yourself, you can end up believing it's not a lack of something but - on the contrary - a surfeit, that makes them act the way they do. Popes have canonised such holy fools; there are saints whose lives read like case studies in pervasive developmental disorder.

These days, no-one's fooled for long. The real world's the only radio show in town: dare to tune out and you're nowhere but gone.

Francis crossed the room and extended his hand. 'Justin,' he said, easily, 'come over here.'

Justin stopped bouncing. His hair, which had grown almost to his shoulders, descended in a fan around him. He shook his head, clearing it out his eyes.

It was his hair made the difference, I decided. A dark halo for a fallen angel. (Parents are entitled to their metaphors, however trite.)

'Justin?'

He turned and looked at Francis with eerie beneficence.

Francis extended his hand. 'Take my hand.'

Justin gripped his forearm.

Gently, Francis brought the hand into his.

'Remember? It's your birthday. Remember the story? Your birthday.'

He didn't remember a thing, so we sat down and read it all through with him again, only this time with Eva there too.

The front of the scrap-book read 'My Birthday Book'. Inside there was a photographic mock-up of the afternoon as we hoped it would go.

There were Polaroid snaps of the PlayStation game, and its modified handset with outsize buttons. There were pictures of Eva and I; a picture of a birthday cake. Beside each picture there was a sticker with a clock-face printed on it. Francis and I had drawn in the hands ourselves with a gold pen, so Justin could rehearse what was going to happen and when.

In Justin's world there was no such thing as a pleasant surprise. The previous year we took him to Camber Sands, but it had never occurred to us to tell him that we were only going out for the day. As far as he knew he was going to be stranded in this sandy wasteland for ever, never to see his home again.

He spent the day screaming his head off, unable to tell us why he was so afraid.

Eva, feeling excluded, got up and walked round the room. The walls were painted a muted orange - a warm, restful colour. Justin's latest pictures were blu-tacked above the bed. A tree, a house, and a picture of Francis. You could tell it was Francis because the head was dark brown. The face was a blank: tiny white dots for eyes, another dot for the mouth, no nose. Faces meant nothing to him, and besides, being autistic means you look more at the edges of objects than at their surfaces - the same, they say, is true of cats.

Mobiles hung from the ceiling: planes, clowns, five-pointed stars, and some dough decorations we had brought him last Christmas. The more glittery ones were hung low enough for him to stir with an upraised hand.

Eva rarely visited Justin. It was her fear of him that had put him in residential care in the first place. Now that he was older - now that he wasn't smashing light bulbs or poking his finger in and out of his anus - a more complex feeling was holding her back. Embarrassment, and an uneasy and mistaken idea that, in her absence, Justin and I had formed an exclusive bond.

Justin loved Eva's gold wrapping paper. While I assembled the machine he tore the sheet into confetti and threw handfuls into the air. I plugged the lead into the aerial socket of the TV and left Francis to sort out the tuning. I sat on the floor and gathered the scraps up. Eva came and joined me. Justin held out his hands. Eva poured the rubbish into his palms. He threw it straight away into the air. Eva laughed, shaking it out of her hair.

Francis turned the PlayStation on. Sony's fanfare blasted across the room. Justin stuffed his fingers into his ears and screamed.

'Nice one, Francis.'

'Fuck. Shit.' Francis fumbled with the remote and killed the sound.

Justin rocked back and forward - an old stereotypy.

'Oh dear,' Eva sighed, deflated by the sight. Justin did outgrow things, but so slowly, it was hard sometimes to believe in his progress.

'Hey, Justin,' said Francis, 'show Daddy and Mummy your present?'

Justin blinked at him.

'Your other present?'

He still had his fingers in his ears.

Francis extended his hand. Justin gripped his forearm and stood up. They walked round the far side of the bed together.

'We got another present,' Francis explained, as Justin disappeared under the bed.

'A present?' said Eva. 'From whom?'

'I can't read the card.'

'Your present!' Justin shouted. He turned to Eva. 'Your birthday! Your present!' He waved a thick red plastic cylinder over his head. There were diamond patterns transferred onto the barrel: white and blue and green.

'It came this morning,' said Francis, ushering Justin back into the centre of the room. 'Show mummy your present.'

Justin hoofed the carpet, a temperamental foal. 'I'll get you Jews!'

'Do you want a drink?' said Francis.

'I'll get you Jews!'

'Show mummy your present. I'll get you a juice from the fridge.'

I touched the cylinder in Justin's hand. He whipped it away from me.

'Was there a card?' Eva asked.

Francis had it in his back pocket to show us. He handed it to Eva on his way out to the fridge.

'I'll get you Jews!' Justin chanted, waving the cylinder in the air.

'Soon, Jessie, soon,' I soothed - not that "soon" meant anything to him, any more than the niceties of "you" and "I".

Justin thrust the cylinder at my face. I took it. Justin stood back and watched.

It was a kaleidoscope. I held it up to my eye.

Justin clapped his hands, laughing.

'It's from Money,' said Eva. She crumpled the card in her fist.

I let the kaleidoscope drop from my eye. Justin pushed it back in my face; it cracked against my cheekbone. 'Fuck.'

'There.' She threw the card at me. 'Look.'

I laid the kaleidoscope on the floor and flattened out the card. 'Now you are SEVEN,' it said. I opened it. Underneath the doggerel, Money had written a message in Cantonese. 'What does it say?'

'Oh, it's terribly nice,' Eva spat - but whatever sting hung off the tail of that remark, it was interrupted by Francis's return.

At tea-time Francis led Justin off to eat with the other children. Normally Eva and I would have eaten with Guy Criville and his staff, who made a point of their hospitality towards parents; but Criville was at an NAS conference in Birmingham, and when Justin's language therapist met us in the corridor, Eva was full of excuses about how we'd just eaten.

'We can't just ignore them,' I complained, as she led me across the lawn at the back of the main building. 'Don't you want to hear how he is?'

'Don't you dare play the guilt card with me.'

I made a good show of being exasperated. Six brick stairs led us down to the sports field, and beyond it - where I remembered fields, a couple of years ago - a housing estate. 'What are we doing out here, anyway?'

'You think I don't know what she's like?' Eva snapped. 'you think I don't know what she married into?'

It didn't take a genius to work out what this was all about.

I thought of him, Eva's luckless grandfather, looking out from his frame on our living room wall, flushed by the light flooding in from Magazine Gap.

Come the Japanese occupation, it was said, Eva's granddad worked with Hong Kong's rag-tag resistance, spying for Britain through a cabal of canny pro-Allied fishing concerns. That, anyway, was the excuse the Kempeitei had made for beheading him.

Why Jimmy's father Zhenshu should have been the one to betray Eva's grandfather, no-one could ever tell me. There were no personal or business ties to speak of between them. Eva's granddad owned a fishing fleet; Zhenshu, one of a meagre handful of Chinese lecturers, taught electrical engineering at the University of Hong Kong. But Zhenshu's friendship with the senior officers of the Kempeitei had already made him a notorious figure long before any blood was spilled, and perhaps he was simply their spy.

Whatever - by the time the war was over, the rumour of Zhenshu's treachery was rife enough that living any longer in Hong Kong was clearly impossible. Zhenshu met his wife the day he arrived in Tokyo, penniless and brandishing questionable papers. A wealthy woman by all accounts, she died in childbirth, less than a year after they met. Where her fortune went to wasn't clear, though as I later discovered while looking through his papers, Zhenshu's life was a long and confusing catalogue of legal wranglings and Quixotic projects, and might easily have consumed a dozen such personal fortunes.

Little Jimmy grew up with his father in the Japanese whaling port of Abashiri. He told me about it once. The boats. The smell. His dad, living from hand to mouth, fixing short-wave radios.

Yes, I knew what Money had married into. I also knew, better than most, the price she had paid. 'She's living in a foreign country,' I said, 'and she's just lost her husband. Cut her some slack, love, please.'

'You wouldn't know a threat if it grabbed you by the neck and shook you.'

'Really,' I said, conscious of the faint yellow marks under my chin.

'She knows where Justin lives.'

'So?'

'Adam, think. How could she know that? She's been spying on us.'

'Oh, really...' Money wasn't spying on us. She didn't have to. She knew where Justin was, because I had told her daughter, only the night before. 'She's got no reason at all to threaten us, Eva. None. She's just a lonely old woman.'

We got back to find Justin kneeling on the bed, the kaleidoscope glued to his eye, and Francis hogging the PlayStation.

'Yes, he should be able to manage that,' Francis said, quickly dropping the outside, brightly-coloured control box. 'Justin? Come here, your daddy wants to show you something.'

Eva, sidelined again, shot him a hurt look.

'Justin,' I said, 'come look at this.'

Justin climbed off the bed.

'Mummy?' I said, 'are you going to see, too?'

Eva sat down cross-legged between me and Francis.

'Justin!'

Justin came over to our friendly triangle, collided with Eva and, unable to distinguish her from the furniture, clambered right over her into the centre.

'Oh. But - Christ,' said Eva, fending off Justin's random, scything movements.

'Are you okay?'

'Oh, it's terribly nice.' It was so close to her intonation - a perfect playback - I thought at first it was Eva had spoken. But it was Justin.

'Justin,' said Francis, 'come here.' He got him sat facing the screen and gave him the control box. Justin turned it over and over under his nose, sniffing it.

When he was done, Francis guided his fingers over the buttons, into the first level of Return of the Jedi. 'No, Justin, move it like this.'

Justin dropped the control box and started flapping his hands.

'Come on, Justin.'

'Oh, it's terribly nice,'

'No. Take it. It's fun.'

'Oh, it's terribly nice.'

Something was disturbing him. The sound from the TV was low enough, it shouldn't be distressing him. Was it the screen - something in the repeat-rate of the frames? Or had the break to his usual schedule unnerved him at last, in spite of all our rehearsals?

Eva tried stroking his hair. He slapped down her hands.

'Such hair,' she cooed, 'why's it so long?'

Francis caught my eye before I forgot and gave the game away. Justin's terror of having his hair cut was a quite usual obsession at his stage of development. The last time the school barber was round his tantrum lasted well into the night. I'd tried a couple of times, but I was expecting trouble, and maybe some of my nervousness had transmitted itself to him. Justin was hypersensitive to other people's anxiety.

Saying nothing, Francis left the room a moment and returned with scissors and a comb. He offered them to Eva.

'Oh - ' Eva crooned. 'But it's such a pity to cut your beautiful hair, isn't it?' Justin flapped at her to be still. I saw how, as she stroked him, the sleeve of her dress was rubbing back and forth across his arm, just below the hem of his T-shirt. Eva's dress wasn't a harsh material, but to Justin - it must feel like sandpaper to him.

'Maybe this isn't the best time,' I said, as lightly and casually as I could manage.

Francis shot me a look to be quiet.

Eva blinked puzzled, from Francis to me. 'What is it?' she said.

'Try cutting his hair,' said Francis.

Eva smiled. 'Okay.'

Francis reached over to hand Eva the scissors.

Justin looked up as they passed overhead.

He threw the control box at the screen.

'Justin!'

He came upright suddenly, as though jerked on the end of a wire, and started prancing and hopping all over Eva's legs.

'Calm down,' Francis urged, trying to steer him away.

Justin gave a yelp of fear and batted Francis's arm out the way. Seeing a gap open up between Eva and Francis, he bolted for freedom and flung himself on his bed.

From the TV came a muffled explosion. Justin wheeled round and looked up at the screen. It was full of flame and spinning wreckage. Justin started banging the back of his head against the headboard. It boomed, rebounding off the wall.

'Justin, stop that,' said Eva.

Justin looked at her, his mouth a perfect O, and screamed.

Eva, brooking no nonsense, went over to him, grabbed him by the arm and pulled him off the bed.

What happened then was so predictable, I could only stand there and watch it happen, as in a bad dream. Eva recoiled, blood streaming from her nose. Justin lashed out again and again. He caught her in the chest, again in the face.

I launched myself at him, snaring him, pinning his arms at his sides. He screamed and bit my hair. I yelped as it tore from my scalp. I squeezed as hard as I could. He kept struggling. I turned us both round and saw Eva with her face buried in her hands, blood streamed between her fingers. 'Oh fuck!' She bent over, her head between her knees, the way she used to when morning sickness hit her unawares.

Justin, exhausted at last, gave himself to my bear hug, and broke into a new fit of more melodic screaming. I squeezed harder. My bad hand was on fire, the moon-shaped cut opening round the stitches, and I could feel blood sticking my hand to Justin's towelling shirt.

Eva took her hands away from her face and stumbled out the room and down the hall. If she wanted the bathroom she was going the wrong way.

Francis, defeated and embarrassed, picked up the scissors and comb from the floor, and started straightening the room. He bent down at the foot of the bed and picked up the kaleidoscope.

He tipped it upright. Shards of brightly coloured plastic fell onto the carpet. 'Shit,' he said.

We must have made a picture, driving back from the school. Eva's nose wouldn't stop bleeding, which meant she couldn't drive. Not unless she wanted to be snorting and spitting blood out the window the whole way: hardly her style. My hand was so stiff and sore, meanwhile, I had to slow to a 10mph crawl and steady the wheel with my forearm whenever I made a sharp turn.

The driveway was a particular challenge.

'For God's sake watch what you're doing,' Eva cried, as the gatepost loomed up out of the darkness towards her window.

I braked hard, to be spiteful. 'Is your nose better?'

'Yes.'

'Then you bloody do it.'

'I will.'

'Oh don't bother,' I grumbled, yanking into Reverse.

'Let me out first,' Eva said.

'I can do this, goddamnit.'

'I just want to go inside.'

I watched her to the door. She let herself in and switched on the hall light. Her round-shouldered, mincing turn as she swung the front door shut reminded me, in a way her words could not, how much damage she was taking.

I put the car into first gear, with the little button they give you for that purpose, and slid the wheel around. This time I got the angle.

I pushed the car into Park, got out and walked round the front of the car, rummaging through my trouser pockets for the garage keys. Standing there, knowing that the Xedos, at the flick of a button, could roll down and emboss me on the garage door, gave me the usual cheap thrill.

I unlocked the door and swung it up on its weights.

The stench of dog shit assaulted me immediately. My first thought was, I must have locked Boots inside. But there was no sound. The door trundled and clanged to a stop. I stood aside, removing my shadow, letting the car's headlamps light up the interior.

It took me a moment to make sense of it.

Boots was nailed to the wall.

10.

They had crucified him St Andrew-style. His legs, splayed and stretched, made a rough X. His chest was impossibly expanded, the two halves stretched apart by the unnatural extension of his forepaws. The skin over the ribs was tight like a drum. The belly, its contents drawn up under the ribcage, was tiny and concave, like the pictures I had seen of starvation victims.

The left eye was tight shut, the eye muscles puckered and creased. The lip on that side was drawn up in a snarl so extreme, it looked as though his cheek had been cut away. Flecks of blood on the teeth sparkled in the headlights.

The top two bolts were driven between the bones of Boots's forelegs, just below the paws. The paws hung limp, at right angles; it looked, comically, as though Boots was waving. Congealed blood hid the bolt heads.

His back legs had been more difficult to fix. The bolts were only part-way into the wall, and the tissue through which they'd been shot was broken and shapeless.

I got back in the car. I shifted into neutral and feathered the brake, edging into the garage. Once I was parked I engaged the handbrake, turned off the headlights, and pressed the lever that unlocked the bonnet. I left the engine idling, so the exhaust would cover the smell.

I had left a crawl-space of a couple of feet between the front bumper and the rear wall, where Boots was fastened. I edged along it and felt under the bonnet for the bonnet release. I got the bonnet up and manoeuvred the rod into place to hold it upright.

I kept a tool chest in the corner of the garage. I emptied it out one-handed and found the tire-iron - absurdly small, it was more like a tin-opener - fishing about in the bottom. I edged back to where Boots was hanging and wedged the iron under the first bolt. But I was one-handed and clumsy and the lip slid off the head. A bone cracked.

The kitchen door grated open.

I dropped the tire iron and came out from behind the bonnet.

Eva poked her head around the garage door. 'Have you seen Boots?' she called, over the purr of the engine.

'No.'

'He's not in the house.'

'He must be,' I said.

'He's not.'

'Well he's not in here.'

She hesitated at the door, all little-girl-lost. 'What are you doing?' She wrinkled her nose. 'Trying to gas yourself?'

'Well don't stand over the exhaust pipe,' I said.

She stepped round the side of the car.

'No.'

'What?'

'The car's filthy, you'll get your dress messed up.'

'What are you doing anyway?'

'I think a spark plug needs replacing.'

'Now?'

'It's okay.'

'How can you see to work?'

'It's okay.'

'What's the matter with the light?'

She reached for the switch.

'I don't need it,' I snapped.

'Oh well break your neck in the dark then,' she said. 'Miserable sod.'

I waited until I heard the kitchen door slam shut.

Boots's leg was shattered, splinters of bone sticking through the skin. I bent the leg away from the wall: it made a wet, clicking sound. If I wasn't careful I'd prise the leg away and leave the paw bolted to the wall.

With my good hand I fixed the tire iron under the bolt again and worked it more gently. It began grinding in its socket. Another minute and the thread disintegrated. After that I managed to jiggle the bolt out by hand. I looked for somewhere to wipe the blood off my fingers. There was an old pair of jeans I used for painting in a bag behind the toolbox. I was just fishing them out when the kitchen door opened again.

'Bootsie?'

I heard Eva scuffing about in the basement area, and a rustling as she pulled aside the undergrowth of overgrown budleia and honeysuckle. 'Oh Boots.'

The other bolts were loose. They'd used too powerful a gun, because the cement had pulverised around the metal. Once that first, difficult bolt was free, Boots was pretty much just hooked there.

I got him down, clumsily enough, trying to keep his blood off my clothes. When he fell his muzzle came open and a black pool ran out of his mouth. I knelt down and felt inside.

His tongue was missing.

The message was pretty much unmistakable. How many more of these, I wondered, before they ran over my head?

I cast around for the tongue in the dark. Maybe it was somewhere in that puddle of brown slurry at my feet. Either that or we were going to find it under the pillow come bedtime. Or floating in the milk carton at breakfast. Or -

The exhaust fumes were making me nauseous so I slid into the driver's seat and turned off the engine. I took the keys with me as I climbed out. I went round the back of the car and opened the boot. I lifted out the plastic liner Eva had laid there to catch crumbs and spillages. Flakes of dried icing dusted my trousers.

I carried the liner round to the front of the car, laid it out and rolled Boots onto it. I wrapped him up and

dragged him round to the boot. I needed both hands to get him into the car. I tried not to rub the liner across my stitched palm, got my arms round him at last, and manhandled him into the boot.

'Are you going to help me or not?'

I slammed the boot shut so hard the car bounced.

'He's not in the house,' she said.

'Did we leave a door unlocked?'

'No.'

I put my hands in my pockets in case she saw blood stains. I stood side on to her, and glanced down my shirt front. It was too dark to see anything. 'Then how can he have gone?'

I followed her back into the house along the leaf-sodden path to the kitchen door. In the light from the kitchen window I saw my shirt was clean.

In the house, there was nothing out of place. No sign, beyond the missing dog, that they had been here. I couldn't resist looking under the pillows in the bedroom - God knows what Eva made of that - but there was nothing there.

I wondered how I was going to explain the holes in the garage wall.

I said, 'Did you see him when you went back for the present, this afternoon?'

I left him in the kitchen.'

'Did you see him?'

She thought about it. 'No.'

'But you left the door open when you went back.'

'No I didn't.'

'You did. I saw you.'

'Did I?'

'Yes.'

She thought about it. 'I went upstairs for the PlayStation. It was still in the bedroom.'

'Well,' I said, 'there you are, then.'

'Well wouldn't you have seen him?'

'I don't know,' I said.

She swallowed. 'Oh, Adam...' She reached out to touch my arm. I stepped away, conscious suddenly of the smell sticking to me; something gluey between the second and third fingers of my left hand. I shoved my hands back in my pockets. 'I'd better get moving,' I said, and headed down the stairs to the kitchen.

She followed me down. 'Where are you off to?'

'Well if he's not in the house I'd better go look for him, hadn't I?'

'I'll come with you.'

'Wait in the house. He hasn't been fed - he'll probably be back before I am.'

'Where are you going to go?'

'I'll just drive around a while, see if I can see him.'

It needed two hands to open the kitchen door.

'Adam,' she said, 'wait.'

'What?'

'Your hand's bleeding again.'

'It doesn't matter,' I said. I gave the bottom of the door a kick and it came open.

'Let me drive.'

'For God's sake,' I shouted, 'let me do something.'

Her smile was so gentle, something dropped inside me. 'Thanks,' she said, softly. 'If you're sure.'

I smiled back at her, because it was what she wanted, and went back to the car.

11.

My hand felt like there was a wasps' nest under my skin. It was so swollen, the palm so blackened, I couldn't bear to look at it. I drove one-handed down Hemingford Road, then swung a left and tried heading south, but the traffic was so heavy I lost my temper and turned again too early, losing myself in the mewses and plazas that fill the junction of Liverpool Road and Upper Street. When at last I found a way through, I found myself on Islington Green, heading towards the Angel. I remembered the canal and braked sharply for the left turn down Duncan Street. The driver behind nearly rear-ended me. As he overtook, we wound down our windows and he called me a cunt. 'Leather interior,' I sneered back. It was nice not having Eva in the car.

The Grand Union Canal runs underground through Islington, directly beneath the road I was driving

down. At the end of the street, where the tunnel ends, a small copse of mature trees hides the emerging water. I dog-legged right and drove slowly, trying to see into the cutting. There were lights down there - houseboats, moored along the towpath from the mouth of the tunnel all the way down to the next bridge. So that was out. After that the road veered right, away from the water. There wasn't any other traffic just then so I whipped as fast as I could through a four-point turn and drove back the other way, and over the canal. I took the first right turn, hoping this road would follow the line of the water. The Georgian facades moving past me were smart enough but the road might have been a dirt track, the way it felt under my wheels, all patched and pitted, with speed bumps every few yards. I gritted my teeth, kept to a steady 25mph, and tried not to hear Boots thumping about in the back.

I reached the junction, looked right, and there was a pub, the Narrowboat, built on the corner of the bridge and the cutting. So that was out.

I dog-legged left again and then I really lost it: every street I tried turned out to be a dead end until I reached Rheidol Terrace, by which time it felt like I was miles off course. I drove down it anyway until it suddenly opened out, roads leading off every place, and a church rose up ahead of me, and I finally admitted defeat. I turned immediately right, more out of panic than anything else, and found myself in the middle of a council estate. The road disappeared into the darkness, straight and uniform as a scene from an arcade game. Every few yards it narrowed into pedestrian crossings, but the only people I saw were gathered around a phone-box on one of those paved dead spaces the designers call squares.

I should have turned around, but I was mesmerised by the road and the simple shapes of the buildings. There were climbing frames and swings in front of each block; and lawns, if you could call them that. Someone had gone mad on the landscaping: there wasn't a flat foot of grass anywhere.

The darkness ahead of me grew. The estate ended. I couldn't make out what lay beyond. Belatedly, it dawned on me: that unlit strip, where the road finished, could only be the canal.

The kerbs branched off here and there like cilia into parking bays. The ground rose slightly and the road ended at last in a small turning circle. I found an empty bay and parked.

The road, barred to vehicles by metal posts, ended here. But the pavements met and continued over the canal on a concrete footbridge. About eight feet upstream, a square metal duct carried power cables over the water on a separate bridge, topped by a cruel metal railing. The gap between the footbridge and the duct was in shadow: neither the lights from the factory opposite nor the estate's streetlights penetrated that strip of water. I looked around, wondering how easily I would be observed.

The kids were still lingering near the telephone box, lit brutally by the fluorescent light coming from the all-night store on one side of the square: they were too far away to matter.

I opened the boot. The in-built light came on. The plastic was smeared brown in places where Boots had shifted about in his wrapper, but nothing had leaked. I gathered him up, cast around quickly and, unobserved, carried him onto the bridge.

I balanced him on the rail a moment as I tried to get my bad hand out the way, but he tipped off anyway. He plummeted into the water, leaving behind, as his epitaph, the scent of honey.

The wrapper came undone immediately. It unwrapped, a grey, shapeless bloom. Trapped air kept it bobbing on the surface as, caught by the small, sluggish current of the water, it disappeared under the footbridge.

I should have tied him up.

I crossed the bridge and waited for Boots to emerge. The wrapper came first, the old plastic glistening, smeared by streetlights. Then Boots. His legs were sticking up out of the water.

I should have weighted him down.

The left front paw hung at a drunken angle, where I'd broken it with the tire iron. His head was bent back under the water, and the collar looked like a strangler's cord around his neck.

The collar.

I'd forgotten the collar.

All this cloak-and-dagger business and I'd forgotten the one thing that really mattered - the collar had a brass disc clipped to it, and engraved on the disc, the word BOOTS. And our phone number.

I had to remove the collar. I had to get Boots back.

Downstream there was a large play area, landscaped into terraces. A winding path connected the bays - one for swings, one for a Wendy house, one for a frame; others I couldn't make out. There were no lights, and I couldn't see the steps. They were so shallow and needless, I couldn't predict where they'd be. Twice I stumbled.

The fence separating the playground from the towpath was only just above waist-height. There were trees growing near the fence so scaling it wasn't a problem.

Boots wasn't much further downstream than when I'd left him, but he'd moved further into the middle.

I cast round for something - a stick, anything - to pull him into the bank. I tried breaking a branch off a tree. The bark cracked easily enough, but the green wood within tore wetly and wouldn't give. I tried twisting the branch and got a mouthful of leaves. It was too heavy to twist with one hand anyway - in my hurry I'd snapped off about a third of the tree.

The striking of a match brought me back to reality.

There was a boy on the footbridge. He was sitting astride a mountain bike, lighting a cigarette. He took in a lungful of smoke, and blew it over the match. The flame guttered and died. He flicked the dead match idly into the water.

He didn't take his eyes off me once.

I dropped the branch. The leaves, hitting the gravel, made a sound like rain.

The boy tapped ash over the rail.

I walked along the canal towards him. Silhouetted by streetlight, his face was unreadable. I avoided his eyes and kept walking, under the bridge and out the other side. I heard the rhythmic clicking of his back wheel as he rocked back and forth on the bike. As I came out from under the bridge I looked up,

nervously, expecting to see him there, but he wasn't. The towpath opened out for a strip of grass and some benches, some trees: the ground was white with blackthorn blossom. I looked back again.

The bridge was empty.

The Narrowboat was barely five minutes' walk upstream. I looked for a way up to street level, but it turned out I didn't need one: the pub had a narrow yard which gave onto the towpath; the door was open and spiral stairs led up to a veranda with a view of Wenlock Basin.

Inside, blackboards offered 'good food', board games, and After Noah playing live on Friday night. I ordered a large Lamb's and used the wallphone by the bar. I lost my only small change straight off because I didn't realise it was one of those phones you pay only when the other party answers. Which meant getting more change from the barman and another double.

I said, 'Is he back yet?'

'No. Where the hell are you?'

'I've been round everywhere. You sure he's not in the garden or something?'

'Adam, I don't understand this. I'm sure he didn't get out while I was upstairs. You'd have seen.'

'Maybe I didn't.'

The jukebox kicked in.

'What's that music?'

'The Champions, I think.'

'What?'

'It had William Gaunt in it. Look, I'm coming home. I can't drive much more with this hand.'

'Is that a jukebox?'

'I'll see you in a few minutes.'

'You're in a pub!'

'Well of course I'm in a bloody pub,' I said, 'It's got a bloody phone, hasn't it?'

She slammed the phone down on me.

I got a third large one, stared down the barman, and looked for somewhere quiet to sit. The back room was carpeted and done out like a barge, with wooden sloping walls and a wooden ceiling. There were old prints of canals on the walls, and a photographic blow-up of a rustic lock-gate on the back wall. Most of the tables were free: a table of students, one of whom thought Merce Cunningham was 'crap'; a middle-aged couple in pebble glasses, nursing their drinks in silence until the woman started describing the pins and needles down the backs of her knees.

I nursed my rum, working up the courage to open that morning's letter. It had been burning a hole in my pocket all day. Finally I got it open.

It was official enough. On ICAC letterhead, no less. They were even offering to pay my air fare. They had a contact number for me to ring in London 'at your earliest convenience'. Underneath there was a PS.

'Call me first - DW.'

Daniel White: typical of him, still keeping things so friendly so long after the event. I missed him.

I screwed the letter up and dropped it in the ash tray.

Which left me with my only other alternative.

I got my wallet out and counted through my small change.

Directory Enquiries had no number listed under Money or Jimmy Yau.

'Try Yau Wai-hing,' I said, and spelled it out, stretching the operator's patience. Yau Wai-hing - Money's Cantonese name.

'Here's your number,' she said.

I let the number repeat, so I had it. I took a deep breath - and I dialled

Hong Kong 1989

12.

When I first arrived in Hong Kong, in March 1989, it was with the idea that I'd be lecturing on management culture or business ethics or some such thing - a junket, basically.

It was a view my boss, Frank Hamley, seemed happy to encourage. He wasn't a policeman - he had no law enforcement background at all - but had joined the Serious Crime Group straight from a stint pen-pushing for Legco. When I arrived, Hamley's unlikely empire consisted of a handful of underpaid, overworked pen-pushers in an annex off the old Serious Crime Group building.

Massive expansion in the Far Eastern exchanges had snapped the old lines of corporate accountability; nobody, inside or out of these vastly distended companies, knew how to maintain effective control of them.

'We're the ones with our fingers in the dike,' Hamley told me proudly, over deep-fried oysters on the terrace of a restaurant in Lau Fau Shan. 'We're the ones at the sharp end,' he added - he had an unhappy knack of mixing his metaphors.

The job excited him. You could see it was a game with him. He didn't have to work. Hamley had money - he was born into it. With that came certain social expectations, which he seemed determined to foil. Still, joining the Serious Crime Group hadn't seemed to spoil his social life any. Had he joined an outfit more obviously targeted at the Establishment - the Independent Commission Against Corruption, say - reactions would have been quite different.

Hamley did a lot of entertaining, those first few weeks of my stay, and he was never slow to show me around. I shook hands with Chris Patten and talked dogs with his wife Lavender. A minor Jardine invited me to Bermuda. At a piano recital in the China Club Hamley, staggeringly drunk, insisted to David Bonavia that I was the man he had to talk to for his latest volume of punditry.

Everyone wanted the novelty of knowing him. Even minor royalty like Victor Pang.

'I met him at Jardine's,' Hamley told me. He had a way of talking about his business contacts as though he'd stumbled across them at a cocktail party. 'Miserable old sod. Mind, his daughter's good for one.'

Victor Pang Ka-Shing was an anomaly. Born in Hong Kong during the Japanese occupation, he was brought up by his mother in Shanghai. A fervent and romantic Maoist in his teens, he joined the PLA straight from school, and it was only during the Cultural Revolution that he fled to Hong Kong. A self-made man, he proved himself as much of a workaholic as any of his peers. But he broke the mould early on, using his money to create a private world far away from their influence.

They despised him for that. In the Lusitano Club he had become a 'character', for which crime his wife had never forgiven him. But that wouldn't stop the Lusitano Club nor his wife, come to that driving here tonight and eating his food and drinking his brandy.

While we ate, the sun mellowed into late afternoon over the Chinese mainland. On the shoreline, a hundred metres off, the waves spat and rattled, sculpting dunes from the town's beach of a billion discarded oyster shells.

'So what went wrong in Rio?' Hamley said.

Rio was my last job - a consultancy post with KPMG. I enjoyed the city more than my job, but Hamley's question mystified me. 'Nothing went wrong,' I said, pursuing an oyster round my plate.

I looked up at him. He'd gone back to his food. A drop of sauce ran down his slightly receding chin - he wiped it off with his hand. He leaned back into the late sunlight. Tiny crumbs of golden batter clung to the chest hairs poking luxuriantly out of his open-necked shirt. 'You left pretty suddenly, they said.'

'My contract expired.'

'Our friend Harold said you're an adventurer.'

Harold was my old boss. It was his reference had got me my posting.

'A bit of a buccaneer, he said.' He shovelled rice into his mouth and swallowed it without chewing. 'Only you don't know it yet.'

I pushed my plate away. 'Very Harold,' I said.

'Really?'

'Dramatic. He spends his weekends writing screenplay proposals.'

'I didn't know that,' Hamley admitted.

'They don't sell,' I said.

Essentially, the Serious Crime Group were an anti-Triad office, fielding two hundred detectives - many of them in deep cover - all over the New Territories. They had few establishment connections, and no background in finance. So how had they managed to recruit Hamley, a leading market consultant?

Today, the arrangement seems quite natural, because we're much more used to the idea of crime as an industry. The south-east Asian crash of '97-'98, for example, is directly related to a global criminal recession: between ten and thirty per cent of all Japanese non-performing bank loans are gang debts.

Back in '89, though, the arrangement was unprecedented, and not a little spacy. Somewhere - working undercover in a hong, ransacking secret data cores - an SCG detective (this is what I fantasised) had stumbled across something. A hint of what was to come. I imagined it: a laundering network so big, the markets themselves were at risk!

I ironed my shirts very diligently in those days, and trawled Golden Arcade for the most fuck-off counterfeit RayBans I could find.

'The Rolex too?'

Coyly, I flashed my fifty-dollar timepiece in the sun.

Hamley shook his head. 'I can never keep my focus in those places. The last time I went in for a watch I came out with a Shrap Elsmate calculator and a five-CD set of Anita Mui.'

Before sunset, we drove on. Hamley wrestled the Saab through eddies of traffic bound for Un Long and Sheung Shui. It was turning seven when we turned left onto a gravel road and wound round a hill bright with suburban overspill and night-time construction. Another turn-off took us onto an older road, once metalled, now pitted and rough. The Saab's cultivated suspension wallowed and pinged in distress.

I pulled the shade down against the setting sun. We were driving straight into it now, away from the suburbs of Yuen Long and into a region of market gardens.

The windscreen was tinted, browning out the sunset, and mellowing the raw electric lights of the villages. The road dipped sharply. We rounded a bend, and the sea came back into view. It burned like blood in the dying light.

'A pretty place, don't you think?'

I nodded.

'Make the most of it. Most of our clients have land deals round here. Here and Shenzhen.'

'Pang actually lives around here?'

'Why not?'

'It's a way out of town,' I said. I'd expected an exclusive retreat; I was disappointed.

'He got fed up of Shek O,' Hamley said. 'or maybe he got fed up of his wife. She lives there, anyway, doing the Shek O thing.'

About half way down the hill we joined the queue of big cars pulling into sandy lots along the beach. Flames leapt from iron drums, screwed into the shingle every twenty metres.

Hamley led me up the bank, hands shoved casually in his trouser pockets, and down again towards the party. Old oil drums gave way to bespoke iron braziers, camp fires to barbecues. The coconut matting laid over the beach must have run to a couple of acres. Paper lanterns, swinging in the sea breeze, lit the way from pavilion to pavilion, barbecue to barbecue. Tibetan prayer-flags fluttered against bamboo poles, marking the tide line.

We passed a servant in whites carrying a silver tray. Hamley picked up a couple of glasses and handed me one. I drank, and snorted, as the champagne went up my nose.

'Victor?'

Victor Pang stood sentinel at the head of the path, absurdly formal in a black linen suit and a shirt so flat and shiny it might have been made out of plastic. He had one of those childlike, despotic faces you find leering through the fog in old Sherlock Holmes serials. Hamley introduced me. Pang squeezed the blood from my hand.

Hamley and Pang caught up while Pang greeted the new arrivals. They came from private islands off Lantau, from casinos in Macau and car dealerships in Shenzhen and private galleries in Central. They'd acquired their wives the way you acquire expensive sports cars - late in life and with a degree of embarrassment. Their wives, like their cars, had a skittish look about them, as though at a sharp bend they would cheerfully tramline and send you flying over the crash barriers.

'Come on,' said Pang, already bored of his role as host, 'Let's eat.'

The first fire we came to stank of burnt feathers. Foetal chickens lay in neat rows, charring over white charcoal.

'Try it,' Pang insisted. 'Go on.'

I glanced at Hamley but he wasn't going to help me.

I capitulated. A soft baby skull burst its sweetness over my tongue.

'Come on, Frank,' said Pang.

'You must be kidding,' Hamley laughed. We followed Pang to the next barbecue. Hamley took me by the arm and whispered in my ear. 'Don't try and compete with this monster. You'll end up eating cat.'

Pang heard. 'Cat? That peasant crap?' A boy in whites handed him a plate of spare ribs. He offered it round. 'Monkey, Adam?'

I looked at him.

'He's only joking,' Hamley said.

'Come on,' said Pang, 'meet the vultures.'

I hovered at a discreet distance, fascinated by the women, picking their way uncomfortably across the shingle. They were dressed to impress, their simple, sleek clothes sculpting mere wayward flesh into forms out of Vogue and Tatler. Their ungainly approach I found disarming, though I wondered if the beach setting - the raw smoke and the uncertain ground - were not some subtle misogynistic joke on Pang's part. The men talked to me, found my salary wanting, smiled and moved on; their wives, wise to me from a glance, struck a pose, as pretentious as fashion models and somewhat thinner.

I kept trying to withdraw but Pang, presumably because I'd arrived with Hamley, had taken a shine to me.

'You're going to have to come up with a job title,' he said. 'You're frightening everyone off.'

I should have found it patronising, being talked to like this. Maybe Pang's irony was seductive; maybe I was just intimidated.

'But I don't have a job description.'

'You can't keep saying you're a consultant. Nobody will ever trust you.'

'What do you suggest?'

'How about "spy"?''

'That'll make people trust me?'

'Oh Adam, we're all spies or thieves here. You should read your le CarrŽ.'

A guttural croaking interrupted us. It was supposed to be laughter. 'Talking of the honourable schoolboy, where's Patten?'

The voice came from behind and above us. I turned round. Pang winced as though someone had drawn their fingernails down a blackboard.

The stranger was Chinese, but not of any caste that I had seen. He was taller than me. His teeth were jagged, grey and shiny like steel. Unusually, he was bald: what hair was left to him was shaved close to his skull. His ears were too small: delicate pink shells. He picked at one with a thick, dark workman's finger.

'Adam Wyatt.' I held my hand out to shake.

His calluses scraped my palm.

Pang, making no effort to keep the sigh out of his voice, introduced us. 'James Yau Sau-Lan,' he announced, deadly formal.

'Call me Jimmy,' said Jimmy Yau, cutting Pang out. 'Have you been in Hong Kong long?'

'Just a couple of weeks.'

'One of Rob's boys, eh? Fresh from SIMEX?'

'SCG,' Pang told him, stiffly. 'He's a police spy.'

Jimmy Yau didn't bat an eye - maybe Pang was right. 'London, then,' he said, brightly. There was such strength and certainty in his face, I didn't like to contradict him.

I looked to Pang for help, but he was glowering into the middle distance. I said, 'Do you know Frank Hamley?'

'Frank? Sure.'

Pang barked, humourlessly. 'Oh Jimmy's great friends with Frank,' he spat. He was still facing deliberately away from us. 'Aren't you, Jimmy?'

Jimmy Yau shot Pang an amused, supercilious glance, like a small dog had just yapped at him. 'Been to Shenzhen?' he asked me.

'This winter,' I said, too eagerly.

'Carry a gun,' he said.

Pang wandered off. Jimmy Yau watched him go, and smiled.

'So how come you know Frank?' I said.

'Just business.'

'So - '

'I'm in import,' he said.

'For?'

'Have you been out to Lantau?'

'Not yet,' I said.

'We specialise in land reclamation. Pumping equipment and pipework.'

'Uh-huh.' I wondered what possible business he had with the Serious Crime Group.

Jimmy Yau yawned. 'Want a drink?'

Pebbles crunched dully beneath the matting as we walked. He was a big nasty man, in a big nasty suit, and I felt dwarfed and child-like beside him. Fireflies and moths as big as my palm dive-bombed the linen curtain. Jimmy Yau pulled it back for me and we went inside. A bar ran the full length of the tent. Chandeliers hung from the roof, filling the space with creamy light. Below the buzz of conversation came the purr of a petrol-driven generator. A string quartet was assembling itself out of a pile of cases and music stands in the far corner.

'Brandy?'

'Whisky.'

'When in Rome - '

'I'm afraid brandy makes me sick.'

Jimmy Yau shrugged and got me a Glenlivet.

He was so tall, he must have come from the North - from Shanxi or Manchuria, where the mildest clerk cracks his knuckles sometimes, and dreams of rape and wild horsecraft, the sun setting on a Mongol camp. 'So you know Shenzhen well?' I said.

Things could only get more asinine after that, but it was hard to get away. Pang was deep in conference with Lavender Patten and he was hardly going to come over and rescue me; I hadn't seen Hamley since we'd arrived.

Saved in the end by my bladder, I made my excuses and left the tent. The toilets were little pavilions, arranged in a horseshoe facing the sea. They might have been changing rooms in an upmarket Edwardian resort. When I was done and pulled the braided curtain aside, it was like I was stepping out onto a flame-lit stage. Everything was theatrical here: a fancy-dress party where everybody had come as more vivid versions of themselves.

The barbecued chicks had done for my appetite and I was too nervous to drink any more. Overpowered, I headed towards the sea. The matting stopped just out of the circle cast by the last brazier. My feet sank unsteadily into the shingle. I moved slowly, finding my feet, while my eyes adjusted to the dark.

I wasn't alone. People were walking back and forth along the tide-line, where the shingle gave way to sand. Most were in couples: men in Sam's dinner jackets, women glimmering in dresses from Sogo and Matsuzakaya, shoes hanging from their hands like necklaces. Against the stars, against a sea bright with reflections, they moved, poised and slow as ghosts.

But inland, it was clouding over: the sky had turned orange beyond the hill-line, reflecting the streetlights of Shenzhen. I imagined that dead glow, sweeping over us. It was only a matter of time before the developers got here, too, sank marinas into the sand and blurred the sky with sodium.

Back out to sea, a ghost woman passed, all soft cream curves, barefoot, carrying a flame in her hand. She brought it to her lips and drew in, lighting a cigarette.

'Have you got a spare?' I said.

She turned to me, taken aback. A real princess. 'Of course,' she said. She opened her purse.

Her shoes were slung round her wrist by their straps. They sparkled like glass when she lit her lighter for me.

I looked into her face. Her mouth was red like a wound. She crinkled up her eyes against the light of the flame. She looked so vulnerable.

I took a deep drag from the cigarette and my head reeled.

'Are you all right?'

'A bit strong,' I said.

'It's only Silk Cut.' She smiled. The flame was gone, I couldn't see her properly only the dark, provoking crescent of her mouth. God had slapped and beaten her into shape, puffing up her lips in bee-stings, bruising her eyes into bedroomy slits.

'I'm Adam,' I said, stumbling and bearish.

'Eva.' Her hand was cold and smooth.

'I'm new here,' I said.

'I'll show you around.'

'Please don't.'

'The governor's here.'

'I met him.'

We didn't have anything to say.

'Adam, is it?'

I threw the stub into the waves.

'What do you do?'

Land reclamation. Import-export. Futures. I work for a Saab dealership.

'You're not a merchant banker, are you?'

'I'm a police spy.'

'Oh,' she said.

'Apparently.'

'Is it exciting?'

'Yes,' I said. 'No. I don't know.' I looked out to sea. 'I only started this week,' I said.

I was surprised when she didn't laugh. 'I'm sure it must be,' she said.

'What do you do, Eva?'

'Me?' She laughed. 'Oh, I don't do anything. I lunch.'

'Oh.'

She studied me in the light coming off the sea. She wrinkled her nose. 'That's sweet.'

'What?'

'You're intimidated,' she said. 'Most gweilos just take the piss.' Her hand found mine in the dark. 'Take me for a walk,' she said.

It was about three when I got back to the car. Hamley had picked up a couple of accountants from somewhere. The girl, a blonde in an pencil skirt that did little to hide her generous backside, had her face pressed to the boy's chest and her hand down the front of his pants. The boy had beefy, blown, ruggish looksthe sort that deteriorate as soon as schooldays end. He fixed me with a wild, blind blue eye. I didn't engage. When Hamley saw me he unlocked the rear door and poured them into the back. They entered the vehicle like a single defective animal, arms and legs flailing. I went round to the passengers' side and strapped myself in.

Hamley put the car into Drive. 'Enjoy yourself?'

'Some.'

Behind me, a zipper whined open.

I caught Hamley's eye and gestured with my thumb to the couple in the back. He just shrugged.

He gunned the car and we wallowed out onto the track, trailing distant tail-lights over the hill and deep into the darkness of Lau Fau Shan.

'Saw you with Jimmy Yau,' said Hamley.

'Call me Jimmy'!

'Fucker.'

'How so?'

Hamley shook his head.

'Is he a friend of yours?'

'Jimmy Yau doesn't have friends.'

A knee dug into the back of my seat.

Hamley adjusted the rear-view so he could watch.

'Pang left me with him,' I said.

'As lizards leave their tails behind.'

'There's no love lost between them, I noticed.'

'Jimmy's dad got Victor's dad executed by the Japs.'

'You're kidding.'

'It's the way Victor tells it. You seemed to make an impression.'

'On whom?'

'Victor.'

'I hardly spoke to him,' I said.

'You were all over his daughter.'

'Eva?'

A belt-buckle rattled. The girl in the back started making 'Mmm' noises.

Hamley let go the wheel. 'Hold this a sec.' He loosened his tie.

I seized the wheel in a panic and held it steady against the rightwards pull of the camber.

I was just thinking that maybe we'd get away with it, when the road slid suddenly to the left. A single concrete post marked the turn. Behind it, the hillside fell away.

I yanked the wheel. I practically fell in Hamley's lap to make the full turn. Hamley hit the brake and the safety-belt snatched my throat like a hand. 'Jesus Christ.'

Hamley shot out his thumb and gave the wheel a life-saving nudge. He went back to his tie, pulling it off and away in a single gesture. He took back the wheel and checked his mirrors. 'Ugh.' He reached up and knocked the rear-view askew. I glimpsed skin; maybe it was upholstery.

'In the glove compartment.'

'What?'

Hamley undid his collar button. 'In there. In there.'

I opened it.

'Oh shit.'

Was that the boy or the girl?

'Oh shit...'

'Go on!'

The bottle was still cold; there was sweat on the glass. I tore off the foil and unwound the wire. The cork ricocheted off the edge of the sunroof and into the night. Foam ran down my hand.

'Go on, then.'

I didn't want it, but I took a swig anyway. Bubbles shot up my nose.

'Not you,' said Hamley, exasperated. 'Them.'

I looked back.

'Cool those little fuckers off.'

13.

Any ideas I had about becoming a latter-day Harry Palmer were quickly scotched, those first few weeks in the office. It was modern enough for its time I suppose, its workspaces arranged in little islands, its coffee point a comfortable if smoke-laden lounge where all the real work went on. But if at first this all seemed very Silicon Valley, very Bill Gates, I soon learned there was a good reason for it: for we were as severely desk-bound as any code-monkey rattling the bars at Microsoft, and our work was as far away from 'police work', as it's popularly imagined, as it is possible to get.

There are three stages or levels of laundering. First, there's the messy business of actually finding somewhere secure to hide your ill-gotten loot. Second there's what's euphemistically called 'layering', which is a middle-class way of saying 'burying'. The more layers of mind-numbingly complex transactions you make with your dirty money, the cleaner it seems, if only because anyone who tries to follow the paper trail quickly ends up on Prozac. Then there's integration: now your dirty money is indistinguishable from clean, you can feed it back into the economy: legitimate money making more legitimate money, the way Adam Smith and Margaret Thatcher intended.

At the dirty end of the business there's a vibrant and well-lubricated social scene. A criminal mastermind

(at least by his own estimation) meets a sharp broker (ditto) at some cocktail party or other - usually in Happy Valley - and gets him good and plastered. The next day the broker, all pie-eyed, is buying hair-of-the-dog for all his office pals on account of he just pulled this really great new client at last night's shindig. And it's only weeks or even months later, when his instructions get all muddled up - full of last minute changes, investments in unrelated third parties, purchased outside a regular custodial system, cancelled early, refunded to third-party accounts, or what you will - that your credulous broker starts getting a nasty taste in his mouth.

At the other end of the business - the end we had most to do with - is the slew of strategies, practices, legal obligations and compliances that are supposed to prevent this kind of scenario from ever happening. If companies don't put safety procedures in place, or more usually if they fail to comply with their own safety procedures, then they're breaking the law. And the only way you find out about that is by chasing paper. Lots of paper. Mountains of bloody paper.

Maybe my old boss in Rio had a point about my buccaneering instinct, because soon my disappointment and frustration began to show in my work.

'You can't go pulling people around in bars. You haven't the authority.'

'For God's sake, Frank,' I said - and sank uninvited into the chair opposite him - 'he knew when they approached him that the deal wasn't straight. What kind of investments were they suggesting anyway? Two-per cent. Who the hell invests clean funds at such a shitty rate of return? If we can only - '

'You're not a policeman and you're not empowered to question witnesses.'

'Frank, the paper trail's cold, like I said. Haven't you read my report?'

There was a moment's impasse and then, quite unexpectedly, Frank Hamley grinned. 'You're a little monkey, Adam.'

'Oh?'

'Don't take it as a compliment. Right now you're my office's biggest liability.'

'Because I meet someone in a bar?'

'Because you scared the life out of him.'

'Well - '

'Tipping off a suspect carries a jail term, Adam.' He left that hanging over me for a good long while. It soaked in well enough. At last he relented: 'I can't use you in here,' he said.

I stared at him. I'd never been sacked in my life.

'Oh don't look so gobsmacked,' Hamley complained, waving away my astonishment. 'It's not like we're going to stick your head on a pike.'

My dad was delighted when I told him I was moving desks. I tried playing it down, but it didn't do any good. 'It's not a promotion, dad. It's a secondment.'

'Do you get more money?'

'No, dad.'

Hamley had been very friendly, very avuncular. He promised to smooth things over at work about what he dubbed my 'over-zealous approach'. And, since I was not 'a natural team player', perhaps it would be best, he said, if he gave me 'more of a roving brief.'

This wasn't unusual. With few resources of its own, Hamley's Serious Crime Group team regularly provided expert assistance to other Hong Kong agencies. 'ICAC would really benefit from your perspective,' he said.

'I don't know anything about them.'

'Four legs and a tail: what's the difficulty?' Victor Pang took a final slurped spoonful of bird's nest soup and leaned back in his wing chair, weather-eyeing the monitors strung above the restaurant bar.

For now he was laughing at me, but if I didn't place a bet soon he'd think I didn't know how to enjoy myself. I tried to make sense of the odds spooling across the distant screen. I wished Hamley were here. 'How about Fool's Money?'

'An accumulator would be safer.'

'A what?'

Victor Pang hid his frustration behind his brandy glass.

Spoiled by Hamley's toting me around everywhere, I'd expected this evening to be spent, if not in a private humidor fug high above the track's vast public video screen, then at least buoyed up by champagne in the Lusitano Club's private quarter. (I knew Pang was well established there; he had inherited Portuguese connections from his bereaved mother's remarriage in the late Forties, and maintained several business interests in Macau.)

But Pang took his gambling seriously, the way his wife and her American cronies could not. Once the races started and they all started jumping up and down like game show contestants, he'd shot them a look of contempt worthy of the surliest Gerrard Street waiter, and led me by the arm out of the club and into a public restaurant barely one level from the public stands, 'where we can concentrate'. Where he could concentrate, and I could look like a lemon.

Now, it seemed, I'd failed the restaurant test. 'Come on.' He stood up, left an insultingly large tip, and led the way from the terrace restaurant straight down to the members' enclosure. So much for waiter service and highballs under the stars.

I'd expected an hour, maybe less, in Pang's company: the usual glancing social contact. Not an entire evening of painful misconnection. I couldn't see why he was bothering with me in the first place, unless it had to do with work. But he had friends more powerful than I to lean on, hadn't he?

Hadn't he?

I'd never been to a race before, and obviously this was the place to start. At Happy Valley, even the horses have private swimming pools. As I watched the gates spring open on the huge public video screen in the centre of the track, I thought maybe all this gloss and brilliance and high-tech was missing the point of the place, but then Pang elbowed us a path to the rail and I got my first real taste of occasion.

The riders appeared, rounding a bend in the track: a terrifying, hectic blur of limbs and leather. The ground shook. I didn't know to expect that. The horses thundered past, and the sound of them rose through my feet, and something fluid and free stirred inside me.

Maybe that's why I asked him.

'God, no,' he laughed, 'it wasn't my idea.' Like he wouldn't be so dumb as to invite me. He glanced around. 'Where is she, anyway?'

I knew straight away who he meant. If it wasn't him had invited me here, there was only one woman in his circle it could be. Adolescent paranoia swept over me: My God, what if she's?

The ground trembled a simple, regular rhythm this time. I turned to look. A single, laggard horse, so far behind the pack it might have been running a different race, scrambled past.

Pang squinted. 'Isn't that Fool's Money?'

I crumpled up my card.

'Don't take it too hard, Mr Wyatt.'

'Get back on the bloody horse, is that it?' I meant it to come out ironic. Funny, even. It didn't. I smirked like a prat to cover my embarrassment and went inside to place yet another blind wager.

Eva was waiting for me, just inside the glass doors. She was experimenting with Laura Ashley, and it wasn't working. She kissed me on the cheek and came with me to the line for the teller. It was hard for us to say what we had to say.

'He prefers wet ground,' she warned me, as my pen descended uncertainly toward Secret Service.

'It pissed down this morning,' I said.

About four people ahead of us, the teller was explaining complex accumulators to a pair of befuddled Australian tourists.

'The track's synthetic,' she warned me, but I bet anyway.

I lost again, and just to rub the pain in it started to spot with rain. 'Told you,' she sighed, leading the way from the rail into shelter.

'Yes, you did.'

'Don't be down.'

'I'm no gambler,' I said.

'You wouldn't have come here if you weren't.' Typically Eva: so aphoristic, so Noel Coward.

'I was invited,' I said. 'You invited me.'

Her smile was shy and adult and I felt as though I was falling into it. 'I'm talking about Hong Kong,' she said.

The rain came to nothing, so we went back to the rail. It was deserted now. Unlit. We were alone. She said, 'We're always wandering off into the dark.'

'It does seem that way.'

Her hand was tiny and strong. Not a child's hand at all.

'One more race,' she said.

'Not again.'

'Forget your plastic?' The rain glistened in her hair.

'I like it here,' I said.

'In the dark?'

'With you,' I said. 'I thought I wasn't going to see you again.'

She glanced around. Her father was standing behind us, in a pool of light, yards away. Rainwater drizzled from the balconies. It was like a curtain, cutting him off. I made to raise a hand but Eva stopped me with a touch. He hadn't seen us. We turned back towards the track.

She said, 'I wasn't pregnant, incidentally, if that's what you're thinking.'

I shrugged.

'Sorry. That was a rotten thing to say.'

'No it wasn't.'

She leaned against the wet rail, her hands clasped, very earnest. She said, 'I wouldn't have minded.'

'What?'

'You can fuck me as much as you want. I love you. I've been a cow.'

'What was that about'

'I want to be your girl,' she said.

I glanced round, nervous as hell. Pang was still standing there, still looking in the wrong direction. It

couldn't last. 'Can't we do this somewhere else?'

She led me into the shadow of the stewards' social club, and down a covered alley, out of the rain. It was very dark. I had to touch her just to figure out where she was. There was a sweet refuse smell coming from somewhere. Above us, cheap cigarette smoke and muffled Cantonese wafted from a kitchen window.

'I'm going to tell them,' she said. 'Everybody. Friends, parents. I want you to come to lots of parties with me. I want to show you off. I don't know why I was so afraid. It wasn't you, it was me'

I shut her up with a kiss. Big lower-middle-class brute that I was.

'Your dad'll think I've buggered off,' I said, when we were done.

'Don't be so nervous of him.'

An unpleasant thought struck me. 'God, you don't want me to ask him for permission or anything, do you?'

She laughed and kissed my nose.

'He thinks I'm a wuss as it is.'

'Let me choose you a winner then.' Out in the middle of the track, the big video monitor was screening odds for the next race. She tried to read them over my shoulder. 'Get your hand out my knickersthere.' She bobbed up on tiptoe and squinted. 'Who do you fancy?'

'I daren't look.'

'It's only a race.' She led me out of the alley and back into the Jockey Club building. 'Pride of Asia?'

'Sounds like a fruit company.'

'Lucky Jim?'

'Too Kingsley Amis.'

'Hmm?'

I picked blindly.

'Oh Adam,' she cried, despairing of me, 'It's forty to one.'

'Double Happiness or nothing.'

'Adam, why?' Victor Pang cried, drawing level with us in the queue. I practically had a heart attack.

Pang, on the other hand, seemed quite unsurprised, finding Eva and I with our arms round each other. She must have told him about us. Or had he seen her unhappy these past weeks, and set this up himself?

I thought about Pang's notoriously snobbish wife, Eva's motherhow he had arranged it so that she was still blithely ensconced with her Vanderbilt/Stepford mob...

'Yes, Adam,' Eva chipped in, 'why?'

The worst chip shop in the world is the Double Happiness in Mile EndI was hardly going to tell her that.

'Okay,' Eva sighed, admitting defeat. She reached into her purse and pulled out her plastic. Dad contained himselfjust. 'I'll match you,' she said.

It was a big wedding; even the Hong Kong Tatler said so. Our winnings barely paid for the reception.

ICAC's choice of offices - above a fortress-like multi-storey car park on Garden Road - might indeed have been invented by John le CarrŽ. High in their forbidding concrete eyrie, Hong Kong's Independent Commission Against Corruption answered to no-one. No-one had even bothered to tell them how long they could entertain their suspects without trial - an oversight that caused more than one Hong Kong broker to glance up nervously as he crossed Statue Square of a Friday night.

'Adam?'

I turned from the window.

His suit was reddish brown; a metallic thread ran through it, lending the material a strange, hectic bloom. 'Daniel White,' he said. 'How're you doing?' I came and shook his hand.

He was your typical FinCEN yuppy, fresh from some Tony Robbins-style leadership course in Key West. They were all bastards. I hadn't met one yet who didn't own a video of Wall Street.

He leaned his head to one side, squinting at me from under thin, gingerish eyebrows. His eyes were the blue of oxidised egg yolk. 'You want to see him now?'

'Sure,' I said.

ICAC needed bodies to beef up its investigation into Top Luck, a local film investment company. Hamley had recommended me, for his own reasons; I impressed at interview, and I was in.

It turned out that Daniel White, my immediate superior, was on secondment, too, though he'd been working at ICAC full-time for a couple of years now. I followed him through an open-plan office and past a line of rooms, none of them occupied. I watched my reflection bounce back off every glass panel. White saw. 'Why do office doors these days all have to have windows?' he complained. 'What do they think we'd do in there? Mainline?'

I smiled a beatific smile.

He cracked, eventually: 'You don't say much, do you?'

'I have my moments,' I said. I was only obeying orders. Back then, British officials were required to feel a lot of animosity towards their US counterparts. All through the Cold War the CIA had thought it was running the government, and no sooner was that over then these FinCEN yuppies turned up thinking they were policing our economy.

We entered a conference room, startling its sole occupant: a young man with a cheeky, freckled face.

'John Pollard, this is my colleague Adam Wyatt.'

There were huge bags under his eyes, and when he reached out to shake, his hand trembled. Imagine Richmal Crompton's William once he's discovered masturbation. His palm was so damp, as soon as he wasn't looking I wiped my hand on my trousers.

He unpacked his squash bag onto the big central table: files and notebooks and a handful of computer disks. By the look of him, he hadn't used the bag for its intended purpose since arriving in the colony. When he bent over the bag, his gut folded itself over the table.

Three extremely scary Chinese women from ICAC followed us in. We only ever addressed them by their family names because their first names were all Suzy. Privately, ICAC staff had nicknamed them the Weird Sisters.

Pollard must have been made stupid by the intimidating surroundings because it took him half the interview to realise White and I were mere observers, and it was up to the women whether this belated whistle-blowing of his was enough to keep him from prison.

'And as far as you've been able to ascertain,' the first Sister began - a shark could not have smiled an uglier smile - 'your firm has had no previous dealings with Top Luck?'

'No. Ma'am,' he panted, his eyes flicking back and forth as he tried to keep all three predators in his field of view.

It took us the best part of two hours to assemble an order of events from the records Pollard had copied for us, and they made unedifying reading. No wonder he was blushing as we returned to run it through with him.

'When were you first approached?'

'Five months ago.'

'Where?'

'A wrap party in Chatham Square.'

'"Wrap party"?' The third Sister made it sound like a pyjama party, or worse.

'Yes, a film party,' Pollard explained, and added, unwisely, '"Double-barrelled Vengeance", I think.'

The Sisters sneered collectively.

'Who approached you?'

'One of the directors. Yau Sau-Lan.'

Call him Jimmy, I remembered, and a cold thrill went down my spine.

Sau-Lan was his Chinese name. Jimmy was the name he went by. Jimmy. Jimmy Yau.

'And Mr Pollard, did you know that Chatham Square is notorious as the headquarters of Sun Yee On triad?'

Pollard swallowed. He looked to me like I could help him. Like I wanted to.

Pollard had agreed to do business for Top Luck Investments after only the most cursory of verifications. A lot of it was his company's fault: their compliance systems were culpably shoddy and this wasn't the first time they'd failed in their legal obligations.

Nevertheless, Pollard only had himself to blame for what followed. Soon he was receiving instructions to redirect funds to random-seeming accounts in Switzerland and the Caymans, sometimes as little as half an hour before those transactions were due to process. No-one Pollard spoke to at Top Luck ever showed the slightest interest in the relatively poor rate of return they were getting from their investments. So at last - this was his story - the penny dropped. Poor sod. His only available defence was that he was a complete idiot.

It was a straightforward case on the surface, and the amounts involved were positively trifling. If it wasn't for the bizarre personal connection - Jimmy Yau's dad getting my girlfriend's granddad slain on Stanley beach - I wouldn't have been that excited. 'And besides,' I asked White, when we were done, 'what's a straightforward compliance failure got to do with the ICAC?'

White hit the button for the third floor. He looked at me, enquiringly.

'Same,' I said.

The lift slid shut and jerked into life.

'Maybe Pollard's paranoid,' White admitted, as we rode down. 'ICAC's the only body he says he trusts.'

'Yes, but this is hardly ICAC's scale: you'd think with an ordinary case like this ICAC would refer him down to the SCG,' I said.

White fixed me with his discoloured eyes. He smiled. 'They did,' he said.

The doors opened.

He said, 'Frank Hamley's had this on his books for two months now.'

I was so surprised, I nearly got stuck in the doors.

'So when you run your paperchase,' said White, as I caught up with him, 'on Top Luck and these brokers, you might keep a weather-eye open for Frank Hamley. See how he reacts to what you're doing. Yes?'

I felt dizzy.

White stopped. 'This is mine.' He pushed the remote button on his car key, and a nearby white Porsche 911 blinked and serenaded him.

I found my voice, somehow. Maybe it wasn't my voice. Maybe it was someone else's. It sounded very odd. 'Are you accusing Frank of obstructing an investigation?'

'Whatever,' White said, losing interest in me. He crossed to his car.

A bolt of anger shot up my throat. 'I don't answer to you,' I said. 'I don't have to tell you what my boss does or doesn't do.'

'Well of course you don't.' He looked at me like I was stupid. 'You got seconded to the Weird Sisters, didn't you? I'm just the errand boy. It's them you have to tell.'

'Well, why the bloody hell would they think Frank's obstructing?' I pleaded.

'How the fuck would I know?' He shed his suit jacket. Its metallic thread caught the lights. It glittered, like it was wet. He opened the driver's door and threw the jacket over onto the passenger seat. 'It's you that works for him,' he said.

TWO

London Summer, 1998

14.

Boots never turned up. Eventually Eva gave up puzzling over his disappearance. Did she accept that he'd run out, in the couple of seconds the door had stood open that day? Or had she consigned the puzzle to whatever part of her couldn't see the bruises on my neck, or hear the Wray and Nephew bottles clinking about in the trash? I didn't know, and I didn't care to know. I was still waiting for Boots's mummified tongue to turn up one day, mulching a flower-bed or blocking a drain.

There were no more little warnings. I tried not to think about it too much. The work, incidentally, was as Money had promised: clerical, easy, almost legitimate.

When Jimmy Yau vanished under the waves, he left behind a hotel in Mauritius, fifty-one per cent of the shares in a Salt Lake City bottling plant, and interests in tea plantations in Kenya, titanium sands in Malawi, container shipping in Nagasaki and oil from the Gulf. These were the major businesses, and at a first glance they seemed legitimate. Big enough, anyway, to employ a real workforce and keep up at least

a pretence of normal trading.

The scary part of the animal was its soft accretion of dormant, shell and holding companies. Funds passed through them all including the dormants, which was far from sensible but where from and why and to whom these funds were eventually to go, it was next to impossible to find out.

Jimmy Yau had functionaries in the usual places: Hong Kong and Macau, Belgium and Amsterdam, Toronto and even Miami; their names kept coming up as directors, treasurers, company secretaries and so on. They were courteous enough on the phone, because why wouldn't they be? They were getting their take from the cash flow; in return, it was their names on the paperwork and it was they would be carrying the can should the authorities trip over whatever it was they were doing.

Money wanted me to set about liquidating any company that couldn't show a legitimate yearly trading record. 'Import-export,' she sneered, reading off my scratch-pad, 'is that all you could elicit?'

'He owns the company, Money,' I said. It was 11am too, too early to have my balls broken. 'As far as he's concerned I'm just some curious gweilo at the wrong end of a phone line. If I tell him to pack up and he calls my bluff, what am I supposed to say? Either we find what it is Jimmy had on these people or we let them get on with it and look suitably blank when they implode.'

I glanced down my crib sheet. That 'import-export' business had no warehousing and had paid nothing to manufacturers since 1978. 'And that's only the start of it,' I said. 'Once we get control of bastards like this, once we start laying off staff...'

'Staff?' Money barked, incredulously. 'This company employs people?'

'That's my point,' I said, gently. 'The paperwork says yes. Instinct says no it says that this is simply a laundering outfit. But if its paperwork has created the illusion of employees, we have to maintain that illusion. We have to make these paper employees redundant. We may even have to pay them. All so the tax records tally. Believe me, if this outfit is a laundry if its import-export business is entirely fictitious closing it down is going to be like defusing a bomb.'

'And how many companies like this are there?'

'Altogether, or the ones that make no sense?' I didn't want her to panic. If she did she might be tempted to throw in the towel and give evidence at the enquiry. If she did that, she wasn't going to be able to protect herself, let alone me.

Besides, the more she bought into the dream of legitimising her dead husband's concerns, the longer and better I got paid. So far she'd been more generous than I had expected. She'd even arranged me an alibi for the time I spent working for her. I was now the proud manager of a long-dormant software publisher in Holborn.

'The ones that are obvious trouble,' said Money. 'How many companies?'

'One hundred and forty-seven,' I said.

Eva was impressed when she saw my job offer, the letter-headed paper, the address. 'Darling, you're back in the City.'

'It's hardly that,' I said. The aliens in my chest squirmed with embarrassment. They scabbled at my chest wall, desperate to bail out.

'How did you find out about this?'

'I rang Mike,' I lied. 'He's just back from Hong Kong. He said that time he phoned he might put some business my way.'

'Well?'

'Well what?'

'So come on,' she insisted, eagerly, 'tell me.'

Luckily for me, I'd spent that afternoon reading the company's scrapbooks.

'Telex verification,' I told her. And, 'Their platform-independent financial software ran on the Arpanet.' All true. I hazed and hazed, and meanwhile the taste in my mouth got worse and worse.

At least Eva was pleased, more pleased than she'd been in a very long time - and the sheets didn't smell of dog any more.

Afterwards she said, 'Are we going to ask Mike and Ylwa over for dinner?'

15.

I started work most mornings at 6.30am, which meant I could ride into work with Eva. But the main reason for the dawn start was Hong Kong's punishing time difference. Nobody takes you seriously out there after lunch, and they're five hours ahead of GMT. I worked best in the mornings, fuelling my way through a solids-free business day with take-out cappuccinos laced with Wray and Nephew. I was drinking a whole lot less now I wasn't having to keep the bottle in a hole in the wall.

Money agreed I should have my own office, and paid the deposit for a room above a sandwich shop opposite Southwark Cathedral. A spot of brinkmanship, that - a little touch of the old Hong Kong gambling ethic my working so near Eva's cafe. It wasn't long before I began to enjoy my double life. Fooling Eva wasn't something I felt good about, but it sure as hell helped me nail the lid shut on the emasculated duffer I had been. After a year pouring wine for Kwok and Flora and the rest of Eva's Hong Kong cronies, like Max in Sunset Boulevard, I deserved a break or two.

There's great pleasure, I discovered, in propping your feet on your forty-quid office-surplus steel desk, leaning back in your broken-down swivel chair with foam busting out of the arm-rests, and telling a silk-suited poacher on the other side of the world not to bother shipping his container of oh-so-innocent leather goods this month, or next month, or come to that ever again.

Money had learned most of her management techniques from her husband: more often than not, it was I who had to go visit her. Brian and Eddie stomped around madly as soon as I crossed the threshold. The moment my calf-skin bag hit the living-room table, Eddie would do this yuppie riff with his mobilerunning

through stored number after stored number until he found someone he could say 'Hell, mate, yes,' to and then they'd take off, Eddie and his talented animal assistant Brian, tearing the gravel drive to shit in their 4X4.

'Little farts.'

'Zoe.'

'Sorry, mum.'

Dinners were tense affairs. Money and I had nothing in common. Zoe said little; her blind grey eyes paralysed me.

'And how is Justin?' Money asked, every time. If my wife could have seen her flat expression as she trotted this line out, time after time, it would have allayed all her fears.

'Oh,' I said, 'much the same.' Once or twice I had launched into an account of life at the school hygiene lessons, singing games, group outings, gym-work on and on, until you could have cracked the glaze on her eyes with a teaspoon. It never made any difference. Every time it was the same.

The same.

'Oh, much the same,' I said, with my brave little smile.

She never quite knew what to say next. Week after week, the formula she sought eluded her. 'Oh good,' she'd say, and then qualify it immediately, realising she should have said, 'Oh dear,' and then she'd qualify the qualification, figuring that, as there was no hope for him, it was rude of her to be rubbing it in.

It wasn't how it once was between Eva and I. The smart young shark in his suit and his cellular phone; his adoring young wife reading Hong Kong Tatler at home: we could never be that way again, thank God. What we had now was new and uncertain.

Eva had sensed the change in me, and liking it, gave it a chance to grow. Relieved of the need to beat up on me, able somehow to trust me again, her own pain receded, and something youthful and bright returned to her crinkled, bedroommy eyes.

We didn't know how to behave with each other. We floundered happily, shaping out the new space we were making together. At night, we grappled with each other, drowning and saving each other at once. They were nights when the sex got us so high, I really didn't care very much whether I was getting away with whatever it was I was doing. Afterward, of course, my heart was in my throat.

Awaiting judgment, I kicked the duvet off the bed and tried to pry ropes of twisted sheet out from under my back. Eva was moving about the en-suite bathroom in a shambling, beat-up sort of way. 'Jesus Christ.'

'What?'

'My face.'

'What's the matter?'

She came in and posed for me, red cheek turned, eyes shining. Proud. 'Vicious sod.'

'Let's see your arse.'

It was very red. I stroked her buttocks with the backs of my fingers; let them ride down the backs of her legs; drew a circle in the small of her back, round and round. She crumpled onto the bed.

She couldn't keep her tongue out of my mouth. It was like the first times. No it wasn't. It was tougher than that, raw and scary and honest. More violent in its demands than any play-rape.

'Christ you're impossibly hard.'

We didn't know what to do with it. She was too sore; I was scared of her teeth.

'Don't worry about it,' I said.

'But I love it.'

'I know you do.'

'I do.'

'It knows.'

She wrapped her legs around me. I moved, touching her cunt with the tip of my cock, withdrawing, touching. Her hair prickled me. She pulled me close and laughed into my ear, until after a while the laughter grew regular and desperate, and I knew she was crying.

I kissed my way across her neck to her chin, her cheeks, her eyes.

Ironic, that the dreadful threats we'd lived through should have given us this: a new start, after all. Strange, that by my deceiving her, we could be more properly ourselves.

She had waited for me for so long. So long, she had waited for me to come back to her. Did what she could to keep me whole. Failed, yes: but failed while meaning well. I felt no gratitude towards her: nothing so cold as that. No guilt, either, for turning out the way I had - the bottles hidden in the wall. All that mattered in the end was that she had waited and I had weathered, and now we were here, together, and her tears had stopped and I was still licking her face and it was starting to get ticklish and awful and she was laughing and trying to push me away -

'Ugh. Get off.'

I pinned her hands to the bed and gave her mouth a wet lick.

'Drink!' she squealed, thrashing about under me.

'What?'

'I thought that'd stop you.'

I tried to lick her again. She fended me off. 'Drink! Drink! I want to get pissed!' She crawled off the bed. 'I'll be back in a sec.'

'Love you,' I sighed, as she went out the door.

'Love you too.'

'I Love you.'

'LOVE YOU.'

It went on like this, stupidly, the way these things do. It was a long way down to the kitchen and we were screaming at each other just to be heard.

'I fucking love your cock.'

Clink. Smash.

'Oh fuck...'

'Are you okay?' I shouted. I sat up. 'Zoe?'

The aliens flexed and tittered.

'Yeah.'

Zoe...

Had she heard?

They were laughing, oh yes. They were rolling around. They were splitting their sides.

'Adam?'

'Yes?'

'Ice?'

'Yes, yes.'

She hadn't heard. She hadn't, hadn't.

'Here I come.'

I heard her on the stairs. I strained for breath. The aliens were still laughing, they were sucking up all my oxygen. She stood in the doorway, her arms full of bottles, lovely green bottles. I gasped it out.

'I love you, Eva.'

Eva smiled a melting smile. 'I love you too, Adam,' she said.

16.

The next day, Money phoned me to say that her father-in-law had just died.

'I'm sorry to hear that, Money,' I said.

It was early in the afternoon, twenty-five degrees in the shade, and outside it sounded like the world was ending. Builders from Rattee & Kett were taking down their scaffolding from round the newly restored Southwark Cathedral. An ambulance had got log-jammed on London Bridge and was trying to blast a path clear with its siren. Two doors down, a bunch of boorish suits had strayed across the river for a boozy lunch outside the Mug House wine bar. Normally around now I'd have cooled off with a walk by the river, but only yesterday at this time I had seen Hannah walking towards me down Park Street, laden with bags from Neal's Yard Dairy, and I'd barely time to get out of sight. I didn't dare take a risk like that again.

'I was wondering,' said Money, 'whether you'd feel able to go and take care of his things for me.'

I balked slightly at that. 'Well, I'm not sure I'm really the person - '

The sun beat in through the dust-bleared sash window. The back of my neck was burning. The air in the office was unbearably close now, but the heat had warped the window shut and besides, there were too many wasps in the room as it was. While I watched, one crept drowsily in through the ventilator grille in the ceiling.

'I don't know the family - '

'It's simply impossible for me to get away at the moment, Adam. I really need you to take care of this for me.'

The wasp swung drunkenly towards the window. I levered myself out the way. The office chair dropped an inch or two under me as I rose.

'Adam?'

Yau Zhenshu. I wondered how on earth I was going to explain this one to Eva.

Physicist; informant; traitor; radio engineer; spy. Over the years, provoked by Eva's framed photograph of her grandfather, I had collected snippets about the man they said had caused his death. Zhenshu's life - pieced together out of scraps and hints from Jimmy, Money, Hamley, Victor and the Hong Kong grapevine - belonged to the darker, Dashiell Hammett end of a Thirties serial.

'His affairs may take some time to sort out,' Money warned me. 'He has property in Hong Kong.'

I had to admit, I was curious. Money was unwittingly pressing all the police-paperchaser buttons in me. There would not come another opportunity like this, to test Zhenshu's heinous reputation against reality.

I said, 'You won't want to sell anything.' Property prices there had fallen to a third of their Handover levels.

'I'm always very grateful for your advice, Adam.'

I thought about it some more. 'Where did he live?' I asked.

'Wye, in Kent.'

It was just about commutable. Maybe I wouldn't have to say anything to Eva.

The wasp, frustrated, turned and dive-bombed my head. I dodged, tugging the phone across the desk on a toboggan of loose papers.

'There's no immediate family. I can give you the number of his carer - '

The wasp landed on the armrest of the broken-down chair and caught its leg in the burst foam. It wrestled and fizzed, uselessly. If I had to spend another day in here I would surely melt into the lino.

I took a biro from out my shirt pocket. 'Sure,' I said. 'Go ahead.'

Outside, a scaffolding pipe struck the pavement. It rang like a bell.

If you have to lie, lie in detail. The last time I visited Money I told Eva that Richard Kitney had invited me to Imperial College's new medical school for a demonstration of Dicom 3.

Today, I told Eva I was attending a symposium on emotional interfacing chaired by Kevin Leicester at Reading University. Eva was so impressed she offered me the car. The mileage discrepancy between Reading and Wye was too great, so I chose the train instead, and was punished for my deceit by getting trapped in a window seat on the sunny side of a carriage that had probably carried my grandfather to the Great War. By the time I arrived my skin was rendered to glue. I tried straightening my shirt and the back of it was soaking.

The town was far too small for taxis: I was walking up the street to where the shops seemed to be - antiques, antiques, and, yes, no doubt about it, antiques - when a silver MX5 flew round the bend and slid to a halt, impossibly fast, like a CGI effect, against the opposite pavement.

That car - there was probably a button to shoot knives out of the hubcaps.

Of course, I could guess who it was.

'Hop in.'

'You should have got a 5-series,' I told her. 'Then you could kill yourself in real comfort.' I strapped myself in. It felt like I was sitting on the road.

Zoe sniffed and reached down to scratch her ankle. She was barefoot. 'You know who buys them?'

'Who?'

She gunned the engine, paddled the wheel, and car leapt round like a cat to face the way it had come. 'Restaurateurs.'

'What the fuck are you doing here, Zoe?'

She took my mood in her stride. 'Mother sent me.'

'Yeah, sure.'

'She figured I'd know who to invite to the cremation.'

'For that you needed to come all this way?'

'It didn't take long.'

She slewed the car around a couple of back streets to show me how little time it would have taken her.

'Christ's sakes.'

She laughed. She was nowhere near as good as she thought she was. 'Nearly there.' She turned down a narrow lane between old high walls and hit the brakes so hard, I could feel my guts being strained out through the seat-belt webbing.

I looked around, dazed. Zoe had teleported us out of town entirely. I could see nothing but trees. A dirt driveway led left.

'Down there?'

'Peaceful, isn't it?'

Suddenly we were doing barely ten miles an hour, over the dirt and onto a poorly-maintained drive. Zoe wanted to show the place off to me. The avenue was old, untended for years, and the chestnut trees had bust up the tarmac; roots rippled the surface. The MX5's rock-hard suspension jounced us about as we approached the house.

It was old, rebuilt and refitted so many times, it had lost all memory of itself.

Zoe shod herself and climbed out of the car. She didn't bother with the door. The heel of her Miu Miu sandal left an oval dent in the seat leather. Her outfit today was by her standards pretty restrained: a kitsch floral summer dress, probably Sogo. She picked her way across the crazed tarmac. She was so small, so childishly thin - the girl in the Hello Kitty comic strip. You will see her sort any fine day on Shaftesbury Avenue, slumped, bored as a supermodel, in the trophy seat of a yacht-white Audi.

I tried not to think of the time she had sat there for me.

She fanned through the keys Zhenshu's nurse had given us, looking for a Yale among the heavy, eccentric shapes. I sat waiting on the low brick wall which framed the portico. The gardens were all overgrown. Roses, long-since outgrowing their pyramidal frames, threw off a faint perfume from scant, sickly flower heads. The dominant scent was of loam and damp.

'Here we are.'

I thought Zhenshu was supposed to be the money-man of the family,' I said, following her into the front room. The furniture was cheap and old-fashioned, unworthy of these high-ceilinged rooms with their painted dado rails and elegant ceiling roses. Zhenshu hadn't so much lived here as camped out.

'He didn't want much for himself.'

In the kitchen, the fridge and the cooker were old models - an Electrolux, a Belling - kept spotlessly clean. The table was a nasty wood-effect laminate effort that folded up against the wall when not in use. There were net curtains over the windows, and nasty china figurines gathering dust on the window-sills.

It reminded me of Arnos Grove, and of the house where I grew up when mother was still alive, dusting every day.

Upstairs, the rooms smelled of glue. Out in the hall, damp had got into the plaster, and a corner of the ceiling had fallen in.

'Nice to see he was being looked after properly.' I toed through the pile of plaster and Artex beneath the hole.

'He never used the rooms upstairs.'

I looked up into the hole, where the attic had to be: a wire crate had fallen onto the unsupported part of the ceiling and cracked it open. There were papers poking through the mesh of the crate. I stood on tiptoe and pulled one free.

'Adam! You'll have it down on top of you.'

I stepped smartly away: my Indiana Jones moment. Nothing happened.

'I'm hungry,' said Zoe, already bored with this.

'We can go grab some lunch in a minute.' The letter was full of technical details: an argument about tolerances, too involved to make any immediate sense. 'If you like.' It carried the Nabeshima letterhead. I showed it to her.

'Oh,' she said, unsurprised, 'yes, there'll be tons of that here.'

I looked at her, blank. 'I thought he was a teacher.'

'He worked at the University of Hong Kong, but he invented stuff, didn't you know?'

'No.'

'That's what caused all the nastiness in Hong Kong. He was forced to work for Nabeshima during the occupation. That's when the rumours got started about him being a traitor.'

I looked at the letter again. 'This is dated '55.'

'He rejoined the company when he moved to Japan.'

'Your dad told me they lived on the bread-line in Abashiri.'

'Oh, that was only to start with.'

I remember thinking, just how complicated were Zhenshu's affairs going to be? I wondered how many more crates were waiting for us in the loft.

We drove to Dover for lunch. Zoe wanted to rediscover a tea shop she remembered from when she was little - a pig-tailed, six-year-old tourist armed with a Nikon camera Jimmy had bought her for her birthday. 'It was a proper camera, lenses and everything. It weighed a ton.'

'A strange sort of present for a little girl,' I said.

'You know that's how he was with me,' she said, without rancour. I felt petty.

We were walking along the top of the sea wall. The sun was so bright, the sea was full of shattered mirrors. I thought about Jimmy, the Praya, the car swerving and falling. 'How were you two getting along? Before he died?'

'He gave me money for my car.'

I looked at her. She shrugged.

Poor Jimmy: the third time around, he finally got a child worthy of him, and it was a girl. She had nowhere he could make his scars.

'No,' she said, 'things were fine. I thought maybe when I went to study in London it might have got easier between us, but whenever I answered the phone all he ever said was, "Can I talk to your mother?"'

'That's not Jimmy,' I said, 'that's men, period.'

'Really?'

'Well, my dad - '

I stopped myself.

'Were you often here as a child?'

'Only once,' she said. 'Zhenshu took me to the Isle of Wight.' She swung her sandals in her hand. I had forgotten that about her: how she was always dancing. 'There's a castle there, and a lighthouse. It was open, and the lighthouse keeper showed me round. I don't suppose he was real - aren't they all operated by machine now?'

'I suppose' I said, watching her dance.

'I ate sugared almonds,' she said. It was strange, hearing her account of these ordinary places; even now,

they had a kind of foreign glamour for her. 'I remember he took me sailing once,' she said. 'It was very rough. You wouldn't think it, would you? It's such a pretty stretch of water.'

'Yes.' I was thinking about my father: his collections of things; his tiny, meticulous handwriting. The formal gestures he used with people to hide his fear.

The concrete had weathered and crumbled here, and there was a big puddle in front of us. I jumped across it and offered Zoe my hands. 'Jump,' I said.

She jumped, and snatched my hands. I overbalanced and stumbled into the puddle. She leaned into me, struggling to regain her balance. Her hair smelled of salt water and seaweed. Her breasts brushed me. She looked up at me; her eyes were blind eyes, the pupils pin-point small in grey irises. They expressed nothing.

I tried to smile. My mouth gave way. 'I - '

She laughed. 'I'm soaking.'

Water glistened on her ankles.

17.

My feet were wet through and my socks were balling around my toes as we wandered from street to street in search of Zoe's cafe. Every road seemed to lead us further away from the sea-front, into closes lined with four-wheel drive cars and ornamental conifer hedges and ruched blinds in every window.

'There's nothing here,' she said, turning a full circle as she walked. 'What do people do? Where do they shop? It's like an episode of Sliders.'

'They all have cars,' I said. 'It's like this everywhere now.'

We went back to the coast road and entered a greasy spoon we had passed earlier. It wanted to be a Fifties diner, with American number plates screwed to the walls and Jimmy Dean on the front of every plasticated menu.

'Egg and chips.'

If Money could have heard us, she would have approved. Zoe, missing her studies at the LSE, wanted me to recall my days with KPMG. I gave her the usual milk-round pep talk about pension funds, ethical investments, and the rest. It was strange, seeing her on the threshold of that world, taking it all on board, drinking it in.

She said, 'I did an ethics paper last year on affinity cards.'

It was a strange conversation.

I can't remember at what point I started not to believe in it. It just snuck up on me somehow: the anger,

the desire to confront whatever it was I thought was really going on behind these niceties.

'Why did Money kill my dog?'

'What?'

'I guess it was Brian and Eddie got their hands dirty. It seems their style.'

'What dog?'

'You mean they're working through a list?'

'Adam - '

'Eva's dog. Eva's Yorkshire terrier.'

Her fork was loaded with ham. She let it fall back on her plate. 'What are you talking about?' She knew it was something bad. Her face had paled already. But it was too late now. 'Eva's dog was crucified against our garage wall.'

Zoe swallowed.

'It was the day after the meal. It was the day I called your mum and said I'd work for you, after all.'

'You didn't say anything about a dog.'

I shrugged. 'Never show a hit,' I said.

'You know,' I said, 'she didn't have to do that. It's fucking crude, apart from anything else. Jimmy would never have done anything like that.'

'She didn't do it!' It was almost a shout.

'Come on, Zoe...'

'She didn't.' There were tears in her eyes.

It was no good. I couldn't stop. 'She has Hamley killed, because he was dumb enough to let the inquiry catch up with him. And when it looked to her like I might get out of line - '

'It's not true.'

I smiled. She had so much to learn. 'Eat your chips,' I said.

She was crying openly now. 'It's not,' she kept saying.

'She more or less told me, Zoe. She's been waving Hamley's accident in my face every time we've spoken.'

'She told you she didn't do it.'

I wiped a scrap of bread round my plate.

I was there when she phoned to invite you round. She said, "I wasn't the one who ran - who ran over -". Her jaw trembled.

'She felt she had to force me into working for her.'

'Stop it.'

'I suppose she didn't have anyone else she could threaten.'

Zoe stirred her coffee with a spoon. She wiped her eyes. She waited.

There isn't much you can do with a blanket denial, especially when there's no other evidence to hand. Besides, there's only so long you can feel good about making a pretty girl cry. So though the paranoia was still there inside me I packed it back into its box and put it away and began the long climb down.

'I'm sorry,' I said.

'You can't blame me for being on edge,' I said.

'Friends?'

'Please, Zoe,' I said.

She shook her head. 'It doesn't matter whether we're friends or not,' she said.

'It matters to me.'

'I mean it's not the point.' She looked at me. Anyone else, it would have been what they call a 'significant' look. But her blind grey eyes were useless for that - they conveyed nothing. 'Did you mean it about your dog?'

'I had to get rid of him before Eva saw.'

'Then it's like mum said, isn't it? Someone somewhere is calling her bluff.'

It had never occurred to me that Boots's death might be intended as a warning, not for me, but for my protectors the Yaus. 'Well, who would want to do that?' I protested.

Zoe tasted her coffee, grimaced, and pushed the cup away. 'How am I supposed to know?' she said. 'You're the spy.'

I'd wanted to clear the air, but all I'd done was stir up more dust. So I did my best to crow-bar the conversation back onto its original track. Zoe joined in. But nothing either of us said after that had much to do with what we were really thinking.

'I'd like to go back to Hong Kong one day,' she said. 'Start my own business there. If the bust bottoms out.'

It startled me, how quick she was to forgive my accusations. I wanted to thank her but I didn't know how so I followed her lead and pretended nothing had happened. 'More than half China's trade spills through Hong Kong,' I said. 'Sure the bust'll end.'

'Just so long as I can lose our heinous family reputation.'

Well, I thought, I guess I deserve that. 'If we do our job well,' I said, 'you won't owe anybody anything.'

'God,' she said, pushing her plate away, still half-full, 'they certainly give you enough.'

We walked back along the main road and through a public marina to the car park. The wind was damp and feverish, and lines tinked against their masts, setting my nerves on edge.

'The thing is to keep Brian and Eddie out of it,' she said, picking between the puddles and flotsam. My trainers and socks were soon so sodden through, it didn't make any difference, and I slopped along untidily beside her. 'They wouldn't have a clue.'

'They seem pretty entrepreneurial,' I said, ineffectually polite. Only five minutes before I'd been calling them dog-killers. 'Especially Eddie,' I offered - a limp olive-branch.

'Eddie imports snowboards,' she said.

'There you are.' My feet were so wet, I felt blisters forming.

'He stuffs them with dope.'

I didn't know what to say.

'He has a sculptor from Central St Martin's hollow them out for him with a plaster saw. Meanwhile he sends Brian over on the Dieppe Ferry in a Ford van with a clapped out gas heater in the back. When he returns it's crammed to the gills with beer. No-one ever notices the Calor canister's stuffed with cocaine.'

'Does Money know?'

'Mum's not good at asking the right questions. They keep the empties in her garage.'

'Have you talked to them about it?'

She shook her head. 'I dropped Eddie's mobile phone into the toilet once.'

I laughed. 'That must have given him pause.'

'He's going to land mum in trouble.'

'And you,' I said.

She said, 'They've got this idea Hong Kong's hassle-free, "catch-as-catch-can, mate".' Her impersonation of Eddie was merciless. 'They want to become film producers. The new Heung brothers. They'll be eaten alive.'

There was nothing to say. Brian and Eddie worshipped their father. If they wanted to follow in his footsteps, there wasn't much anyone could do except try and contain the damage.

Back at Zhenshu's house, I shed my shoes and washed my feet in the shower. There wasn't a towel, so I made do with a flannel I found, folded up, clean and fresh, on the shelf by the sink.

When I came out I found Zoe struggling with a stepladder she had brought in from the garage. 'For the attic,' she explained.

I put that off as long as I could, but Zhenshu had been very organised, and it didn't take long to gather the papers in the ground floor rooms. His insurance and pension certificates were arranged in alphabetical order in a series of concertina files. Even his cheque stubs were kept in a box labelled 'Stubs'.

'Shall we have a look in the loft now?'

It was all a big game to her. She was irresistible.

I went first up the stepladder. The stairs were warm under my bare feet. There was no lock, and the panel lifted easily enough. I slid it out of the way.

'Can you see anything?'

'There's a pull-cord here.' I reached up and tugged. Nothing happened. 'The electricity's off,' I said, feeling foolish.

'No.' Zoe went and flicked the hall light on and off, proving her point.

'Well the bulb's gone.'

Zoe found a torch and a spare bulb under the sink and handed them up. The socket was live when I pushed the bulb home. 'Fuck.'

'What is it?'

'I hate doing that.' I looked around. The boxes were stacked so close together, there wasn't even space to walk between the stacks. 'Bloody hell.'

'What?'

They were Viking archive boxes. I pulled the lid off the nearest. Inside lay a stack of neatly typed technical specifications; a laminated Nabeshima company brochure from the mid-Fifties; a dot-matrix printout in hexadecimal.

I looked for a way through the stacks.

'Can I come up?'

'Let me make some room.'

An MDF floor had been laid over the joists. I started making a path and found that the stack was only two boxes deep. Beyond, narrow paths of chipboard off-cuts made meandering paths from beam to beam, over fungal, bulbous pools of old insulating felt.

'How's it look?'

'Manageable. Come on up.' There was an old tricycle under a drop-leaf table. 'I thought he didn't have kids,' I said.

'What have you found?' Zoe's voice was bright and excited. She came up the ladder. I made room for her.

'He kept it!' she said. She rushed over to examine it, jumping from board to board. I winced: they weren't even nailed down. She ran her hands over the handlebars. Her fingers almost fitted the brakes, still. I felt something melt inside me, leaving me hollow inside.

Leather trunks and plastic bags, rolls of carpet, a wardrobe rack on casters, jam-packed, the clothes hidden behind dry cleaning bags. I said, 'I don't think he ever threw anything away.'

Behind the table were three tea chests. The first was full of technical drawings, rolled neatly into cardboard cylinders. Zoe helped me unwrap a couple: blueprints for radios, or what looked like radios.

The next chest was covered with a blanket. There was no lid. I looked in. It was as if Zhenshu had taken a bunch of old radios to pieces and thrown the bits in here.

I stirred around in the junk; it meant nothing to me. 'You think all those boxes of letters and print-outs are about this?'

Zoe came over to look. 'God,' she said, 'what a depressing idea.'

The third chest contained crockery.

In an old leather trunk we found notebooks written in Cantonese interspersed with mathematical equations, amended, scribbled over and crossed through again and again in angry black ink until surely even Zhenshu couldn't have made any sense of them. There were hardback diaries, used as scribbling pads, and a pile of school exercise books tied with string. When we opened them we found a journal, again in Cantonese, interleaved with photographs, most so faded and blotched we couldn't make out the images.

Old ornaments. Prints. A box full of Goss china. A schoolroom globe minus its stand, wrapped in newspaper. The map petals were lifting off the ball. We smoothed them down and read off forgotten names. Rhodesia. Sudetenland.

Zoe found a pile of 78s wrapped in brown paper, but we couldn't find a player. I opened a Lloyd Loom laundry basket and it was full of silk cheongsams. I held one out for her.

She held it against her. 'It's lovely,' she said.

I said, 'Put it on.'

'What?'

'Put it on.' I had completely lost control of my mouth. 'It looks the right size.'

At the bottom of the basket was a Huntley and Palmer's biscuit tin full of her grandmother's jewellery. She laid the pieces out in the silk nest we'd made beside the laundry basket. Jade and silver. Gold bracelets. Rings that might have been diamond, and probably were. A velvet choker with a ruby sewn into the front.

'I never knew her,' said Zoe, sadly, telling me what I already knew: 'She died giving birth to dad.'

'There's probably a photograph of her somewhere,' I said.

But we couldn't find one.

'Jesus, what a mess.'

We surveyed the damage - the pile of old clothes, the papers scattered everywhere, the globe, perched precariously on top of the pile of 78s. 'It was a mess anyway,' she said. 'Only now it looks like a mess.'

'We'd better put it straight.' I said.

But Zoe had noticed something in the junk filling the middle tea chest.

'What is it?'

She was having trouble untangling its wires. 'I'll show you if I can only - there.'

It looked like a Walkman - a bakelite Walkman, with half a dozen cloth-sheathed wires dangling from one end. Each ended in a crocodile clip.

I swallowed. I knew what it was.

How could I forget?

She misread my expression totally; she smiled, and handed the box over to me. 'Now this would be worth suing over,' she said.

The aliens inside me backed away frantically, bumping against my spine.

There was a brass switch on the side of the box, like an old-fashioned light-switch, and a metal knob with numbered settings up to ten.

'My dad had one. It's a stress-relief thing.'

I didn't dare meet her eyes. Stress?

'You know. Biofeedback.'

Maybe I was wrong. Maybe it wasn't what I thought it was. Maybe it was all one big jolly coincidence.

Maybe I was panicking.

'Zhenshu made this?'

'Yes,' she said. 'The family story goes Nabeshima wanted it but Zhenshu would never agree to a deal.' She laughed a dry laugh. 'Not very likely, is it?'

'I don't know.' I weighed the box in my hand. It was very light. "'Biofeedback"'? Zoe, the word wasn't even invented until the Sixties.'

'Maybe that's why he could never strike a deal. His work was ahead of its time.'

'How does it work?'

'You pinch the clips to your skin.'

I looked at her.

'It doesn't hurt. Dad's version has acupuncture needles, so be grateful.'

She slid off the backing plate. 'No batteries,' she said, disappointed, and put the box back together again.

I turned away and stuffed newspaper back around the globe. I had to hide my face somehow. 'Let's get on.'

I threw Zhenshu's journals into the trunk. I rolled up the blueprints. I worked steadily. When I turned round, Zoe had gone.

Downstairs, I heard a toilet flush.

Zoe had thrown the box back into the trunk. Maybe it meant nothing to her, after all. Even if it was what I thought it was, it was probably the first, an early prototype: probably it couldn't do what the models I had known could do.

I ran my hand across my eyes, trying to wipe away the images. Their needles and their eyes. Their mouths, their centres, the taste of them.

The aliens rattled my spine, shaking me awake.

I picked up Zhenshu's little bakelite box and pushed open the backing plate. The case was made to hold size 3 batteries. I crossed to the hatch and picked up the torch. I took out the batteries. I slipped them into place inside Zhenshu's box. I must have put the battery cover down someplace stupid because I couldn't find it.

I examined the casing for a light, but there was nothing to indicate that the machine was working.

I dabbed my finger against a dangling alligator clip. Nothing. I threw the switch on the side of the box. The heavy spring snapped the contacts together with a satisfying clack. I touched the clip again.

The tiniest charge sprang off my finger, like static off a TV screen.

'Adam?'

She had changed into a cheongsam. It was gold, painted with flowers. She'd had to pull it up above her knees to climb the stairs and the material was still rucked up. She stooped and pulled it down around her ankles, smoothing the silk over her calves. Her breasts moved against the front of her dress. She stood up. Her belly was flat and hard. Her hip-bones jutting sharply against the narrow cut of the dress - two bright points, sheened by the naked electric light. 'What do you think?' Her grandmother's ruby glittered at her throat.

'I think you're beautiful,' I said.

'Yes?'

'You know what I think.'

She saw the machine in my hand. She came over and sat at my feet. As she sank to her knees, the long slit at the side of her dress opened to show me her thigh. She took the box from me. She saw the batteries there, and smiled.

'What?'

'Put your hand out,' she said. She clipped the wires to my skin: one on the web of my forefinger and thumb, two to the skin below my wrist, another two to the loose skin over my knuckles. She got me to squeeze the last one between my third and fourth fingers. The clips were only weakly sprung. They didn't hurt at all - just a slight tingle as they first touched my skin.

She knew what she was doing.

'Zoe?'

There was an old trunk lying next to us. She had me lay my hand, palm down, on the worn leather surface.

'Zoe, please - '

'Do you remember Hong Kong?' she said, and turned the dial.

My hand swelled.

I felt it. It grew and grew. It became heavy. It tugged at my wrist. Pints of blood welled in my fingers. I felt the tips of my fingers filling like balloons, stretching, about to burst. My wrist twisted sickeningly. The sinew and linkage inside puffed and knotted, struggling to bear the heavy hand.

The clips were expanding too. No matter how big my hand got, the clips grew at the same rate. Great metal jaws dragged at skin grown leathery and thick, like whale hide, and I could feel the way each layer of dermis tugged and clung, resisting the pull of the teeth.

I steeled myself, and glanced at my hand.

I knew what to expect, though I still couldn't really believe it. It was lying on the trunk, attached by wires to Zoe's machine. It was exactly as it had been. It wasn't swollen at all.

I swallowed. I tried lifting my forefinger off the table.

I felt the muscles knot inside my hand, and let out a ragged breath as the tendon slid slickly along its carpal tunnel. At last the great bloody bag of my fingertip tore free of its sticky fingerprint and rose from the trunk.

'I - ' I said.

Zoe held her hand over mine.

I felt her electricity before she ever touched me. The aura of her flesh. The static hum. The hairs along the back of my hand stood erect for her. Her hand came closer and closer.

I swallowed and closed my eyes.

The weight of her crushed my hand into the trunk. Bone bulged through tissue. Nerves sparked.

She clenched her hand round mine. Her flesh was soft and insistent. It throbbed against me to an alien rhythm, her rhythm, and I could feel the pulse of her heart through her bones.

I blinked away tears. She drew my hand towards her.

'Feel what it can do,' she said - and took my thumb inside her mouth.

Hong Kong 1992

18.

All Eva had ever wanted was love. All her life she had thirsted for it. Her mother had never returned it. The first year of our marriage, I had plotted with an awful fascination the dark void it had left inside her, and, because I loved her, filled it up as best I could. But sex and words can't fill that gaping need, and so we'd had a child, both wanting it, both needing it, and both so happy when it came, we never noticed anything was wrong till well into Justin's third year. We thought for a while it was a hearing problem.

Then the results came back from the DSM-IV diagnostic interview: it was like the flame inside her guttered.

One day in early 1992, on the fourth floor of City Hall Library in Hong Kong, I came across a two-year-old paper by Chung, Luk and Lee in the Journal of Autism. Autistic children, they wrote, do unusually well in the colony, supported and encouraged by a close-knit network of relatives and friends. The trouble with Eva and I was, I had just that week cut us out of that supportive family loop - and I still had her mother's scratches to prove it.

'He's gone backwards,' Eva sobbed, that evening, 'Just listen to him.'

Alone, in the dark, Justin whirled around his room. His bare toes hoofed the carpet. He had smashed the ceiling light so often, we had stopped replacing the bulb. Besides, he hardly ever bumped into things. He looked at everything out the corner of his eye, and as any amateur astronomer or night fisherman will tell you, peripheral vision works better at night. The orange glow of night-time Hong Kong was more than enough for him to see by.

'I'm not doing him any good, Adam.'

I had known this was coming. I had seen it in Eva's face: the self-doubt, the guilt. Her own mother had spat the seeds in through her ear one Saturday when she came round to baby-sit.

'If you only treated him normally, Eva, all this would go away.'

All I could do was sit there, open-mouthed, gravy dripping off my fork. If she'd leaned over the dining table and plunged her steak knife through my wife's heart, I couldn't have been more dumbfounded or more useless.

Eva's mother was incapable of love. Justin, lucky animal, had no need of it. Needless to say Eva's mother handled her grandson better than she had ever handled her own daughter. Around him, and only around him, could she feel whole.

She blamed Eva for Justin's condition. Justin was a lovely little boy, she insisted, the night I threw her out. 'Why can't you two treat him properly?'

She withdrew the knife in time, but not without a hefty twist.

'All I know is, anyone could have done this. Anyone. I don't know a single mother who hasn't felt this in themselves.'

Not Mummy's pearls of wisdom, this time, but those of a Gestalt counsellor she got Eva to see every Thursday afternoon.

And after that I saw it fed, that useless guilt eating my wife, in fits and spurts, by every phone-call Mummy made, and every trip to psychotherapy.

Autistic children cannot show love because they do not know what it is. For a long time it was assumed that autistic children were so cold because their parents - their mothers especially - were cold to them. Autism, it was once thought, was just a symptom of emotional neglect.

Which is crap, of course. Neglected children may exhibit some autistic behaviours at first but put them in a more stimulating environment - put them together, even - and they will begin to recover very quickly. The improvements are blindingly obvious after about twenty-four hours.

But there was no point trying to explain this to Eva's mother, or argue rationally at all, come to that. She was bent on her daughter's destruction.

It was up to me then, to tear Eva's guilt up by the root. The trouble was, that 'refrigerator mother' bullshit, however dreadful it was, had at least provided Eva with a kind of explanation for why Justin was the way he was. All I could offer in exchange were scraps and snatches: a threadbare and - thanks to my own ignorance and aspirin-popping upbringing - a largely pharmaceutical hope.

For a little while, Justin had responded well to the dietary supplement DMG. I got our supplies from an outfit calling itself Cognitional - basically a worn, gangly, engaging neurologist called Michael Yildiz.

His offices were not immediately reassuring. On the coffee table in the reception there was a copy of Caduceus among the Hong Kong Tatlers. 'Healing into Wholeness', it said on the front. 'Trees for life,' it said.

'Our Ancient Guardians.'

'Can dolphins heal?'

I was just reaching for the lift when Yildiz buzzed the desk. 'You can go through,' the receptionist said, without looking at me, like it was beyond her why I should want to.

Quite what Damascene conversion had drawn Dr Yildiz into the woolly world of complementary medicine, I never found out. One minute he was performing the Wada test on bike crash victims in Bangkok, the next he was knocking down the doors of venture capitalists, buttonholing them about a crazy vision he had for a new kind of medical care - something he called 'integrated natural healing technologies'.

What this meant for Eva and Justin and I was reliable information about casein- and gluten-free diets, a video made by parents of autistic children in San Diego about the effects of taurine intake, and near-cost supplies of DMG from a Stateside health-food store.

In his pine-panelled office - it might have been a sauna in a former life - Yildiz handed me some foil strips stamped DMG. 'This stuff's been around since 1965,' he yawned, handing me a copy of Allan Cott's original paper. 'He came across it in Moscow, in the form of pangamic acid. It's not specific to autism: Blumena and Belyakova saw improvement in the speech of twelve out of fifteen mentally handicapped kids.'

I searched his face for clues. He couldn't have changed his razor in months because his neck was one big bloody rash. His clothes were expensive but ill-kempt. His off-hand manner suggested a certain professional assurance, but I was new to all this, and distrustful.

'Has this stuff been tested?' I asked him.

Yildiz smiled. 'There have been plenty of non-autism studies which show it's safe. I'm afraid no-one's

going to spend quarter of a million dollars sponsoring a double-blind study for its effects on autistic children.'

'Why not?'

'Because no-one owns exclusive rights to manufacture it. It's a health-food, not a pharmaceutical.'

He was telling the truth, and he was ahead of the game. Eva and Justin and I were already out the other side of the DMG roller-coaster when the hype about it hit the press. A Los Angeles mother crashes her car when her five-year-old autistic mute son shouts 'No! No baby-sitter!' At a Moscow funeral, a mentally retarded girl asks her younger brother why he is crying.

It's officially a food, not a drug, you can't overdose on it, and no-one owns exclusive manufacturing rights, so it's as cheap as spit. It works, too, just like the stories say - for a while, at least.

If researching my son's condition was consuming all my free time and draining my already much-beleaguered bank balance, at least ICAC provided a certain amount of light relief.

'Spying' on Frank Hamley meant little more than accepting his invitations. A bar here. A strip club there. It was never my style, and it was refreshing, to have Hamley draw me out of myself this way. I tried claiming my evenings on expenses but White wasn't having any.

'I'm not doing this for fun, you know.'

'You could just try paperchasing him, Adam. We want a report, not a tabloid exclusive.'

It got silly. He used to set me up with cocktail waitresses. I wasn't very interested, but the attention was flattering. We used to go eat where the lap-dancers got intimate with the desert trolley. He was a Virgil of bad taste, leading his Home-Counties Dante from one unedifying venue to another, abandoning him whenever the mood took him. He used to get me drunk and I'd wake about three in the morning to find myself being carried out of some porno theatre by weary bouncers.

Around about this time, Eva's mother found out that Eva was spending her allowance on Justin, and stopped it.

I shrugged the news off and gave Eva a cheque of my own, like it was nothing, someone else's tantrum, nothing to do with us, something we could easily cover.

It was half my monthly salary.

It was time to sober up, to close down the hatches, to tighten the belt.

I told Hamley I was going on the wagon for a while, I borrowed a cheap laptop from work, and did my researches into Justin's illness from the living-room table.

'Come to bed, love.'

'In a minute. It's a really good site.'

'Adam, please - '

'Have we any more paper?'

Hamley took it hard. 'I mean, you know the one I'm talking about, don't you? You have seen her, haven't you?'

'I'm married.'

'I promised her.'

'I can't come out tonight.'

'I've got the entire personnel desk hot for you. They're drooling into their soups.'

'Have a good time.'

'Not even a spritzer?'

'Goodnight.'

It turned out there was more on his mind than a works outing. He had something to tell me. I stuck to my guns. In the end he had to take a lunch hour - something he never usually did. 'Let's go for a walk,' he said. Intrigued, I agreed.

In all the time it took us to walk to the Star Ferry Terminal, I don't think we exchanged more than a dozen words. Hamley had something on his mind. The further we walked, the heavier that something seemed, so that by the time we boarded the Shining Stars his dismal, crushed body language suggested a different personality altogether from the ebullient, sensual ogre I had known. For the first time, I was struck by the weakness of his chin.

He bought me a first-class ticket for the crossing of the harbour. I was surprised. Nobody ever rides upstairs but tourists - it takes you five times as long to leave the boat. A striped awning shaded the port-side of the double-prowed ferry. Hamley swung the reversible seat-backs to face front and beckoned me to sit beside him. A gaggle of Filipina housemaids on a day-trip came and sat in front of us, drowning out, for the gweilos and Japanese businessmen and Australian tourists gathered at the rail, anything we might say.

Hamley seemed pleased with the arrangement.

The crossing only took ten minutes so he made his pitch brief. 'I want to show you something,' he said. He plunged his hand into his trouser pocket, rummaged about there, double-took, rummaged some more, half-rose in his seat and plunged his fingers further in - like a best man who's forgotten the ring. At last he found it, whatever it was, and handed it over. It was a metal disc, like a large watch battery. There was a serial number stamped on the edge, half a dozen kanji, and a name: Nabeshima.

'Thanks,' I said, stupidly enough.

'It's a tracker,' he said.

'Uh-huh.'

'You know what a tracker is?'

'Uh, no.'

'Then don't pretend that you do.' He snatched the thing off me. 'God, that's irritating.'

'I'm sorry,' I said.

'It's a tracker. People use it to track people. You know: a tag.'

I looked at the thing in his hand. I looked at him.

He said, 'I found it down the back seat of my car when I was creaming the leather last Sunday.'

'Oh,' I said. I hunted furiously for something intelligent to say. 'I guess you don't know whose it is, then.' Brilliant, I thought, even before I quit speaking. Jim Rockford lives.

'Yes,' Hamley said, 'yes I do.'

I waited. I didn't trust myself to speak.

'You can buy any number of shoddy toys like this in Golden Arcade. Some of them not so shoddy. But not this sort.'

'No?'

'No.' He weighed it in his hand. His fingers closed over it. They tightened. I thought for a moment he was going to throw it overboard. Instead, he tucked it carefully back inside his trouser pocket. He folded his arms over his chest. He looked out over the water. 'It's police issue,' he said.

That afternoon I found White in his office and pinned him there a while.

He wasn't giving anything away. 'Do we have to do this in the office?'

'No,' I said. 'If you'd rather we can both go talk this through in front of the Weird Sisters.'

'I'd rather talk about this outside.'

'I bet you would.'

I wanted to know why I'd been left out of the loop. 'You should have told me you'd put him under radio surveillance. All the while you've been playing Popular Mechanics I've been out there with my arse hanging out.'

'Oh come on, Adam, it's a lovely day, why don't we - ?'

'You told me to keep an eye on him. What's he going to think now? I don't give a shit about what you think you're on to, but if you lose me my job - '

White compromised. He hung his suit jacket over the glass panel in the door, turned on his desk fan and sat down beside it. He spoke so softly I had to lean into the breeze to hear him. It made my eyes go funny.

'It isn't us,' he said.

'But - '

'It isn't ICAC. We haven't bugged him.'

'Hamley said the tracker was police issue.'

'Did he show it to you?'

'Yes.'

'What did it look like?'

'It had the word Nabeshima on the side.'

White bit his lip.

'Well?'

'Nabeshima are our exclusive suppliers. ICAC, the Serious Crime Group, all the other spooks get their hardware from Nabeshima, via the Royal Hong Kong Police.'

'You know a lot about it.'

White grunted. 'I get their salesman drunk every quarter. Filthy job but somebody has to do it.'

'So who - who, if not us, is investigating Frank?'

White shrugged. 'If it was the regular RHKP we'd already have been told about it. One of Frank's colleagues in the Serious Crime Group, maybe? Only I don't think the SCG have the brief to conduct internal investigations. If it's not ICAC, there aren't many higher levels could order such an aggressive investigation.'

'The CIA?' I sneered. 'MI5, maybe? UNCLE?'

He turned off the fan. The Spies Like Us routine had gone sour in his mouth.

'Well?'

'Well - ' White grinned. 'Pure Schadenfreude - no humour there at all. I'm fucked if I know.'

'Justin's gone backwards,' Eva cried.

Justin's tiny, temporary gains, his flashes, his brief moments of connection that were all I won for all my reading, all my money - they brought him little enough gain, and Eva no comfort.

She wanted to mourn him, but I wouldn't let her. I kept wiring him up to the lightning conductor. I kept him jerking. I wouldn't let hope die. 'I talked to Dr Yildiz on Monday,' I said. 'I'd been doing my homework for this. 'There's an anti-convulsant called ethosuximide.'

She looked at me like I was mad.

'It's been linked to language gain. Very modest. Nothing like the DMG. But maybe a combination of that and DMG - '

'Can you hear yourself?'

'For God's sake,' I said, 'DMG's a just bloody food supplement. What harm can it do?'

Eva rubbed her face. 'How long are we going to go on like this?'

'On like what?' I had to engage her. I had to keep her enthused. Somehow.

'Justin's - it's like he's bleeding to death and we're just slapping on Band-Aids!'

'That's not fair. DMG got him talking - '

'Adam.' Her anger startled me. 'It's over.'

'It wears off, I know,' I replied, limply enough.

If I could have kept Eva in the life she was used to, things might have been easier for us. But specialist day-care and private consultants and even the workaday costs of research were pushing me so far into the red, I could barely afford to run my car, let alone my wife.

It wasn't that Eva was shallow. Material comforts weren't some kind of fetish with her. She just needed some stability in her life, some sense that we weren't spilling ourselves down the plughole of hopelessness and debt.

I hid my bank statements. Eva spent my cheques the way she had spent her mother's - on Justin.

I spent more time at home, poring over the screen in the living room. Eva, the cyberwidow, stroked Justin's forehead while he slept.

I knew she was lonely. I knew I wasn't much company for her. But I couldn't see that I had much choice. Every day I scoured the papers, looking for a loan, a deal, a way to keep our sinking ship afloat. But that, obviously, could never be a lasting solution. What I really needed was an answer, a miracle. A treatment. A cure.

That's what I was holding out for.

A cure.

The way I figured it, it was the only thing could save us.

And then, against all reason and all expectation, I found one.

'I cannot do this any more.'

She shouted it so loud, the party at the next table turned round.

'Oh Jesus Christ.' Eva hid her face behind her glass.

'So you raised your voice,' I said, 'so what?'

'For God's sake Adam, not here, please.'

I'd meant it all to be a lovely surprise: a terrace table at the Bela Vista in Macau, to celebrate our anniversary. But then, for the first and probably last time in the hotel's history, they called to confirm the reservation, and blew the surprise. Then our baby-sitter failed to show, and we had to call in the maid.

'You're right,' I said, calming her as best I could. 'Drugs and diet aren't the answer, no-one ever said they were. But Ivar Lovaas's study claims his method's cured some kids - '

We were under a lot of strain at the time. The Lovaas method is very time- and effort-intensive and parental involvement is vital. It's a behavioural programme, very intensive, forty hours a week minimum, at home and in special classes.

Lilly the maid was Lovaas-trained herself, as we had been, and had children of her own enough to populate a whole New Town, but something in Eva - some ingrained class-anxiety - wouldn't let her rest this evening. She fretted for her son, nursed by a mere amah...

'Adam, Justin - he's beginning to frighten me. Is that dreadful?'

'No,' I soothed. 'You're just reading into him what isn't there. You know' The cataplana arrived just then, the spices so heady, I lost the thread of what I was saying.

'Adam?'

'What were we talking about?' The things I said to comfort her were by now worn so smooth, I kept losing my grip on them.

Eva said, 'Yesterday, for example. I hurt myself. I cut myself. I was getting lunch. The way he looked at me - '

'But we know all this,' I interrupted, losing my patience. 'We've already lived through this. We know he doesn't understand other people's feelings. You're telling me nothing about Justin that we haven't already come to terms with.'

Eva smiled a little smile, and pretended not to mind my butting in. 'Maybe mother can help me,' she said. Her eyes glistened in the candlelight. The breeze blowing down Rua Comendador caught her hair. She was so beautiful tonight, the undisputed star of the terrace of the Hotel Bela Vista. The waiters were taking turns to serve us, just to get a look at her face. 'I know how you feel, darling, but she's so good with him - '

'No.'

'Adam - '

'Will she do the Lovaas training? Will she stick with it?'

Eva tossed her fork into her cataplana and pushed it aside. In the candlelight, the skin around her eyes looked more bruised than ever, and her lips looked bitten to a dreadful, swollen softness.

'I'm sorry,' I said.

'You want everything your own way,' she said.

'I just hate seeing you bullied.'

'Me in the house wiping food off the walls. You in the library pretending you're Nick Nolte.'

The last happy surprise I had sprung on Eva had been two tickets to see Lorenzo's Oil. Nolte and Susan Sarandon play parents reading up on a cure for their dying son: not, on mature reflection, a happy choice for us.

'I know I'm fucking up - '

'Don't do that!' Eva snapped. 'Don't back away like that. Every time I try to tell you something real, you bland me out.'

'I don't.'

'You do.'

I needed something to calm me down. To soothe me. I drank off the glass of white port I had misguidedly ordered seconds before my fish arrived. The ice had melted: I downed it in one. Alcohol, that famous marital aid.

'I can't cope with Justin in the house any more. I spoke to mother. She's prepared to pay for him to go to the Higashi school.'

Higashi's 'Daily Life Therapy'. Another very highly regarded behavioural programme, only this one is residential. And exclusive.

'Tokyo?'

'Adam - '

'I won't let that bitch steal my son from me.'

My time was now evenly spent smoking Silk Cut in the SCG lounge and getting vertigo in the ICAC car park. I was still reporting to the Weird Sisters about Hamley, and now Hamley, made paranoid by the tracker he had found in his car, had me reporting to him about the Weird Sisters. When Hamley found out I was working on Top Luck he must have seen the writing on the wall because he immediately began

his own investigation into the company. This quickly spiralled into a major - if intractably complicated - money laundering case. Hamley had me working on it on the days I was in the SCG building. Meanwhile Daniel White had me working on it when I was at ICAC. Which meant that while I was reporting on Top Luck to White I was also reporting dizzyingly similar information to Hamley.

If I was actually getting anything out of this arrangement, it might have been almost bearable. But there were no bonuses to be had with a secondment like mine, and every month saw me eating further and further into what few savings I had put by, simply to meet the household expenses.

I was earning well, but the salary transfers barely touched my account before they were gone. Everything I earned was going on Justin.

It was the only way I could keep him.

In the end, Eva's mother won. Her hatchet job on her daughter was total. The Lovaas regime we were running at home broke down in a welter of tears and recrimination. My wife was wrecked, and Justin was suffering.

Eva needed time to put herself back together. A respite from Justin, she said, needlessly ashamed; and her mother repeated her offer to sweep our son off to Daily Life Therapy in Tokyo. But that, I knew, would only be the beginning, as piece by piece she reclaimed and reconsumed her daughter.

The only way I could think of to fend her off was if we sent Justin to Tokyo and I paid for the therapy myself.

So that's what we did. I'd been sitting up long into the small hours many nights now, poring over the laptop, juggling figures, trying to make things balance. It was all so hopeless, once I phoned dad, to ask whether maybe he could remortgage his house if I paid the instalments. It turned out he had already remortgaged years before, without telling me, to pay for mum's respite care. He said he had savings. 'What do you need?' he said.

'Christ, Dad.'

'Come on. It's okay.' He knew I'd married money, but he didn't say anything. It was all I could do not to burst into tears. I said something dumb and put down the phone.

We didn't entertain any more. We couldn't afford to. It became embarrassing, not inviting people back, so Eva spent most of her time indoors.

It got so that an unannounced visit by Daniel White was a major break in routine. Eva went into overdrive. 'Another drink?' she called, hovering at the kitchen door. Her face was drawn and weary. Justin was home after his first term at Higashi, and the flight had left him nervous and irritable. But despite her weariness Eva kept on determinedly fussing around us like the perfect hostess.

'Well, I'm fine,' White told her. 'In fact it's such a nice day, shall we all take a walk?'

It was obvious White wanted to speak to me alone - appearances aside he was hardly a friend of the family, so why else would he turn up like this unannounced on a Sunday afternoon? But he extended the invitation to Eva, guessing rightly that she would have to stay in and look after Justin.

I despised him, suddenly and fiercely, for his hypocrisy. Americans are at their very worst when they think they're being tactful.

I walked him down Lugard Road. I liked White, translation problems apart, but he had begun to represent for me a nemesis I knew would come very soon, if I wasn't bloody careful.

'He's a beautiful little boy.'

'Hmm?'

'Justin.'

'Yes,' I said. 'He's autistic,' I said.

'Yeah, I know.' Absently, White broke a sprig of jasmine off a tree hanging over the path. There was a gap in the foliage here, and we stood for a moment looking down on Hong Kong. They have amazing faces, don't they?'

'You know about that?'

'My sister lives in a sheltered house in Delray Beach. Every once in a while Dad has to go rescue her. Fort Myers; once she made it as far as Orlando. She has an obsession with bus travel. Muriel. She's very bright.' He put his hands in his pockets and started walking again along the bridle track. 'Small world, huh?'

A party of Australian joggers tramped past us.

White was going back to the States for a week to see his father safely out of hospital.

'What happened?'

'Golfing accident.'

'He get hit by a ball?'

'No, an alligator bit his hand off.'

'I was - '

'Really. Bit his forefinger clean off and severed a tendon in his thumb. They sneak into the water features at night.'

'Jesus.'

'One hell of a handicap.' He turned his troubled blue eyes on me. 'I'll be away, these next six days.'

'Well,' I said, 'if there's anything - '

'Whoever's tracking Hamley, they did more than bug his car.'

I didn't need this. My life was complicated enough. 'Haven't you found out who it is yet?'

'There's a listening device in his office phone.'

I felt myself colour up. Whenever Hamley was out of the office I'd go in there and use that very phone. It was the only way, in an office as crowded as ours, that I could plead with my bank manager in private. (I'd given up my mobile. I couldn't afford the bill.)

'In his desk. In his washroom...'

'I can't be doing with this, Dan. I work for him. He employs me. I can't hear this.'

'They're all police issue so it's a piece of piss for us to listen in on them.'

'Really.'

'Trouble is, now Hamley's on his guard, it's only a matter of time before he has his office swept.'

'Not my problem.'

'And when he finds them, he'll blame ICAC. We're the only spooks are entitled to plant equipment on him.'

'Not my problem.'

'Whoever works for ICAC and has access to his office - ' White shrugged. 'Obviously, until we know who's actually bugging him, suspicion's going to have to fall somewhere.'

I couldn't believe what I was hearing. 'You're framing me?'

'Don't be dumb. I'm just telling you how things are going to look.'

'But you've got to do something.'

He shrugged. 'What can I do? I'm off to see my dad.'

We walked on a little way. 'If you want to cover your back,' he said, 'you'll have to do it yourself.'

I laughed. I couldn't help it.

'They're only bloody microphones. They're in his office. We can tell you what they look like, where to find them. Please, Adam.'

'I don't believe I'm hearing this.'

'What's so difficult?'

'You want me to save ICAC embarrassment? Daniel, I work for Frank Hamley. I'm not going to put my job on the line like that.'

Your job's already on the line. If he finds them, he's going to suspect you, isn't he?'

'Hang on a minute,' I said, using anger to conceal my confusion. 'Every month since I got here the Weird Sisters have been pumping me for everything I know about Hamley. Now they have a bug in Hamley's office and they want me to pull it out?'

'Tomorrow,' he said. 'Without fail. Adam, this is serious. We can't nail Hamley with an unauthorised listening device - '

'You're nowhere near to nailing Hamley for anything Daniel and you never have been.'

'Oh yes?'

'It's all office-politics bullshit and you know it.'

'Really.'

'What if I get caught?' I said. 'I'm sorry, Daniel. I can't get involved with things like this.'

He let me alone until my anger dissipated. Then he started in again: a different tack, this time. 'All your victories are on paper, right?'

'I suppose so,' I replied, sulkily. Let him insult my manhood, I thought. I'm British. I don't need manhood.

'Well,' White sighed, 'I guess that's where your strengths are.' His discoloured eyes had a saurian quality: he knew it and used it. 'I mean it. Frank Hamley's very impressed with your paperchasing, Adam.'

'Oh?'

'According to the last tape we lifted from that bug in your office.'

'You listened in on it?'

White shrugged. 'No crime in just listening, Adam. Yes I heard him. Hamley, I mean. Talking to Top Luck's MD Jimmy Yau.'

'He called - '

'He was in kind of a state. I've got the tape. Do you want to hear it?'

I don't know how I responded. White saw he was getting through. 'He warned Mr Yau about you,' he said. 'He said you were a very good paperchaser.'

'So?'

He said you're close to breaking Top Luck's operation. He said you would have to be dealt with.'

'Dan - '

'We can't always be holding your hand Adam,' he said. 'You're going to have to learn to look out for

yourself.'

The next day, arrived at the office an hour earlier than usual. I was the first one in.

Hamley's inner sanctum was locked. I went and borrowed the key off the cleaner, said I had some papers in there I needed. The cleaner waited for me by the door. I told him I'd bring him his keys. He told me he was leaving now, and was happy to wait. I gave him some money and told him to buy me a coffee, and something for himself. He treated me to a nasty smile and sloped off.

I looked at my watch. I had forty-five minutes.

Hamley's phone was the old-fashioned kind where the mouthpiece simply unscrews from the handset. It was stuck.

I tapped it against the edge of the desk.

It wouldn't come free. I hit it again, hard.

'Oh. Adam.' Lucy Wah, the receptionist, bit the tip of her thumb and leaned against the door jamb. 'It's you.'

'Yes.'

'You're in early.'

'Yes.'

'Do you want a coffee or anything?'

'Sorry, Lucy, I've got to make this call.'

'Hm.' She went back to her desk. Now I needed to make a call so the light would light up on her switchboard. I dialled home, got the answerphone, and let it run. I pulled my shirt-tail out and used it to get a grip on the mouthpiece.

There was a knock at the door.

'Your coffee.'

He didn't offer me any change. I didn't ask for it. 'Go away,' I said, when he lingered. 'You're not supposed to be in here.'

'I want to leave. I'm late.'

'Here. Take the keys.'

Hamley would just have to think the cleaners had forgotten to lock the door behind them. I looked at my watch.

Thirty-five minutes.

I reached forward to close the door. Lucy was watching me from her desk by the lifts. We were the only ones there still. How well could she hear from there? Could she tell I wasn't talking down the phone? I smiled at her, got nothing back, closed the door.

The handset came undone.

I tipped the microphone out so it dangled from its wires and looked inside.

There was nothing there.

The door swung open. 'Morning, Adam.'

Hamley put his briefcase on the desk, took the phone out of my hand, screwed the mouthpiece cover back on, and dropped it into its cradle. He sat down and put his feet on the desk. 'Lost something?'

I don't remember what I said.

'It's all right, Adam,' he sighed. 'I guessed it was you.'

19.

In all the time I knew him, Jimmy Yau never went nowhere for nobody. They always came to him.

Jimmy's home was a hillside retreat near Wong Nai Chung Gap, overlooking the Tai Tam Reservoir. The exclusive, tourist-crammed beaches around Shek O were just a few minutes' drive away, but up here, the worst intrusion he'd ever suffer would come from the expats who regularly hiked over these hills back to Happy Valley. After lunch near the office I took the Eastern Island Corridor along the coast, and even though I dawdled, savouring the elevated view of high-rise beach apartments, aflame with early summer light, I reached Shau Kei Wan by 2:30. Today was the Tam Kung temple's festival day and the streets were full of fish; wire head-dresses, costumes of card and crepe - it took me for ever to get through it all, and then I missed the turn for the reservoir.

It was just as I dropped the car into a mean-tempered first that I saw his turning. There was no sign, but then, there were no other houses. I could just see its grey tile roof, over the trees that lined the fence. They had been planted here in defiance of the landscape, lush and unlikely as the dressings of a film set.

There was an intercom beside the heavy, brutal gate. I got out and used it and something clanged. I pushed experimentally at the drab-painted bars. The gates rolled back on tracks mulched over with dead Gingko leaves.

The foliage went on and on, rhododendrons and wax trees and jasmine, wild indigo: the garden seemed arranged to take all the light from the earth. The drive made its final turn.

The house was intimidating. Three storeys. A cupola above the front door. Deco mouldings round each window. A portico with pillars. It might once, but for its location, have been an ambassador's residence.

The most I'd expected of Jimmy was a minimalist apartment in Good Profit Towers. Indeed, before I

saw his address, I assumed he'd conform to the usual pattern of his kind - holed up in a single, subdivided room within spitting distance of a dai pai dong, surrounded by boxes of kiddie-porn videos and counterfeit Dunhill lighters.

Wrong.

The door was opened by an old man wearing an apron over a cheap but well-cut suit. He smelled of beeswax. His lined, defeated face belied his strength; there was something hard and thick about the set of his shoulders. I followed him through a vestibule tiled with pink marble. I imagined him of a morning, wading treacle-ishly through his Tai Chi moves, splitting logs with his bare hands for firewood. Anyway, he couldn't have got those muscles from just rubbing down the Chippendale.

Garden urns converted to uplighters lit the neutrally-painted hall. Campaign-style curtains busied-up the narrow windows. It was a strange, chinzed-up house; like a society woman who can't follow the new make-up. More likely, Jimmy Yau's wife had come late to the CondŽ Nast look, and this was her attempt to fit in.

Either the front of the house was a period fake, or the back of the house had been outraged, because the room the old servant finally led me to had a wall all of glass. Outside, a teenage girl in a black strappy swimming costume was turning laps in a kidney-shaped pool. The old man shuffled out without a word.

The room was more what I had expected, but perhaps only because it revealed so little. Low-voltage track lighting hung from taut steel wires anchored lengthways across the room. The desk at the far end wanted to be a Kubrick monolith when it grew up. A notebook computer sat ostentatiously askew on its black granite surface. Behind it, the floor-to-ceiling limed ash shelves were empty.

I went to the window. The glass was tinted, lending a greenish cast to the girl's skin as she lifted herself from the pool. Water ran off her back and her legs. She was very thin, very young. Her hips were beginning to fill. She got to her feet, water puddling the pink tiles. She crossed her arms, reaching for her shoulder straps, and pulled them down. She bent, pulling the costume away. She was evenly tanned. As she stepped out of the suit she hooked it with a toe and kicked it expertly onto the table beside her sun lounger. Water Catherine-wheeled from the damp lycra. She settled on the lounger, facing the window. Her shallow breasts hardly bobbed as she moved, they were so taut. She couldn't be more than sixteen.

She was facing the window now; I turned away.

Jimmy Yau stood in the doorway.

He was wearing chinos; his white shirt was untucked. Jesus sandals bound his powerful, hairy feet. He was eating pears out of a paper bag.

I swallowed, smiled, watched as he walked slowly across the room and around behind his desk. He pulled out his chair. He sat down. 'Adam.' It was his favourite weapon - the pause. 'You got a new job, I hear.'

Before my walk with Daniel White, I would have been impressed. 'News travels fast,' I said. Now, thanks to White, I knew just how fast it travelled.

'You're making quite an impression, for a newcomer.'

'Old job. New title.'

'Up to you.' He took the last pear, bit the stalk off and spat it back into the bag

I said, 'You know I know about Top Luck.'

He looked at me, and looked, and looked. 'Are you a cinephile, Adam?'

'What?'

He leant back in his chair. 'An enthusiast of the cinema. A movie fan. Do you follow our films?'

'Frank Hamley,' I said.

Jimmy Yau blinked.

'Sack him,' I said.

Jimmy Yau's laughter was mischievous and childish. It sent a shiver down my back. 'Adam,' he chided me, 'you're supposed to be his friend.'

'If it wasn't for Hamley, ICAC would be dangling you by your ankles over Garden Road by now. Trouble is, ICAC know it. Frank's no use to you, any more. He's a liability. Get rid of him.'

He studied me, probably wondering which of my limbs to tear off first. 'And if I don't?' he said at last, very measured, very calm. I was impressed.

'How long do you think it will be before I crack your operation?'

'Operation?'

'I work for ICAC now. I know you're layering funds through Top Luck. I know how.'

'Get to the point, please.'

'Only I know how.' I let it sink in a second.

'Go on.'

I said, 'You need a player in ICAC. Someone who can cover your back.'

He smiled. 'No I don't,' he said.

'Buy me,' I said. 'I've better things to spend your money on than whores.'

Jimmy Yau bit through the core of his pear, pushed both halves into his mouth and swallowed them down.

'I'm broke, Jimmy.'

Jimmy pulled out a handkerchief and wiped his hands. He screwed the empty bag into a tight ball.

I explained about Justin. 'I can't meet the school fees,' I said. They were setting me back seventy thousand pounds a year.

From a desk drawer he pulled out a mobile phone, thumbed it on, and spoke Cantonese. Seconds later the long, defeated face that had greeted me on my arrival reappeared at the open door. He was still wearing his apron.

'Take some fruit for Eva,' said Jimmy Yau. 'It's ripe.'

I must have looked a picture.

He threw me the balled-up bag. 'Willy, take him through the garden. Send her in while you're about it.'

Willy glanced at the girl by the pool, and back to Jimmy, without turning his head. A well-trained retriever.

'Jimmy, I - '

'Okay?'

There was nothing more to say. There never had been. I wondered, with a sick feeling in the pit of my stomach, whether he'd heard a single word I'd said.

I stood up. I even managed to muster up a little dignity. 'You have my number, Jimmy,' I said.

'Oh yes.' His teeth were long and grey as old bones. 'Take some fruit before you go.'

Jimmy Yau's soldier slid open the glass door. I followed him through onto the patio surrounding the pool. The girl was still naked, stretched out on her sun-lounger. Her breasts were small and round and unfinished. The hair between her legs was sparse: she had already begun shaving it into shape.

Willy barked something in Cantonese. The girl blinked at him and stretched and smiled, but his eyes were already off her. He picked a narrow dirt path between jasmine trees and beckoned me to follow.

This wasn't the way to my car. This wasn't the way to anywhere. Willy saw my hesitation and sighed. 'Sir, you wanted some fruit?'

The girl brushed my back as she eased between me and the edge of the pool.

'Yeah,' I said. 'Whatever.' I watched her go: her towel was slung low round her back, showing off her powerful shoulders. Jimmy was waiting for her at the open door.

'Jimmy likes them young,' I said, following Willy in between the trees.

'She's his daughter.'

'Oh.'

The orchard was laid out in neat, well-maintained rows. Roses bordered the plot. The air was so thick and scented here, it was like wafting a sweet jar under your nose.

'His youngest,' said Willy. 'Her brothers are stunt fighters. Karate, all that. For Top Luck films. Here.' He picked a pear for me.

'I'm sorry,' I said, taking it. 'I didn't mean any offence.'

The fruit was soft and rotten. A wasp crawled out of it onto my hand. I cried out and dropped the pear. It landed on Willy's shoe and burst over the polished leather. Willy looked at his shoe, looked back up at me, and tried to smile. The lines on his face were so melancholy and deep, a Pierrot could not have looked more pitiable. 'You don't have to apologise,' he said. He flicked his fist into my gut.

I fell. Ash clogged my nostrils.

Willy trod on my head. My face sank easily into the forked earth. He twisted his foot over my ear, tearing it. I couldn't breathe, it felt like my lungs were ironed flat.

'Message from Mr Yau.' He lifted his foot, and stamped. Blood filled the deafened cavity.

He got off me.

'Are you listening?' He kicked me again and again until I lay face up. The sky was full of insects. Little black insects, swooping and flocking bet