

Cambridge Blues

I fell back on to the sofa, exhausted, and wiped my dripping forehead with my hanky. It was hard work, moving house, especially with no one to help. Still, I was in now, and my new life could start in earnest.

The sofa on to which I fell was in the living room of a small, two-bedroom house in Milton, on the outskirts of Cambridge. Maybe when I got settled, I would think about buying, but for now I was renting the modern, brick construction, semi-detached house. The owner was working abroad, in California I think. I gathered from the rental agency that, like me, he was a computer programmer, so it seemed kind of fitting that I should end up here.

Looking around the room, I took in the furniture and decorations for the first time – at least that which was visible between the scattered boxes of my belongings that I'd lugged in from the rented van outside. There were two small sofas at right angles to each other, cream coloured with a green and violet flowery design. In front of them was an off-white, solid-looking coffee table with two drawers. I opened them, but all I found was a loose screw rattling around inside.

The walls were painted with the generic magnolia finish that seems to be standard issue in modern houses, and there were marks where pictures had been attached with something sticky, and which had peeled the paint off when they were taken down. An empty pine bookcase stood next to the door that led to the kitchen, and on the other side of the door frame was a large drinks cabinet-cum-bookcase. Its finish matched the coffee table. I got the impression the furniture hadn't been selected with an eye for co-ordination or style; maybe they were hand-me-downs from friends or relations. The carpet on which all this rested was a nondescript light-brown short pile.

I got up, still breathing quite hard, and went to the kitchen. It had the usual contents: gas oven, cupboards, a small fridge, sink etc. Nothing to write home about. There was no microwave, but that was all right because I'd brought my own. There was a washing machine/tumble dryer, which I was pleased about; it would save tiresome trips to the launderette.

The window over the sink looked out on to the small garden. It was the width of the house, about 20 feet, and 30 feet long. It comprised a fairly unkempt lawn with a few straggly, dead or dying plants that grew up the side wall of the house backing on to the yard. They were making these houses closer and closer together; I'm surprised sometimes that they still bother with gardens. The fridge was making a reassuring humming sound that told me the rental agency had kept their promise and arranged for the electricity to be connected for the day I arrived.

Before exploring upstairs I decided to make myself a quick sandwich; I had to get the food I'd brought from Oxford unpacked and put into the fridge anyway. After eating an egg and bacon sandwich, I registered some disappointment that there was no dishwasher, though it would have been an unexpected bonus if there had been. Oh well, there wasn't much to wash, just a frying pan and plate, so I stacked them in the sink for later.

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I spent the rest of the afternoon unpacking and distributing my belongings around the house. Actually, it shouldn't have taken even that long. Once the boxes of books, compacts discs, and assorted accumulated junk had been taken care of, there were just a few clothes (tee-shirts and jeans mainly, that being the standard programmer attire) and toiletries for the bathroom. Oh, and the computer, of course. It took longer than it needed to because I stopped fairly frequently for a Coke break. Even with most of the house's windows open, the air was stifling from the blazing Cambridge summer sun outside. It must have been the official British Summer Weekend, because I don't remember any more of them that were so hot and free from clouds and rain.

Occasionally I would find myself stopping what I was doing, and start to think about Liz. After all, she was the main reason I was here, so it was only natural that my thoughts would stray back to her. It was still fairly painful to think about, the way it ended so suddenly, before we'd had a chance to see if it could work out between us. I remembered her in the pub, that first time we met properly. I'd seen her a few times before then because she would do her food shopping in Marks and Spencers on Wednesdays, when they stayed open late. I worked in the offices above the shop, and would often pop down to get a sandwich or pie to heat up in the office microwave if I was doing a late stint at work.

OK, I admit it, I engineered the encounter, the time we ended up in the pub. I didn't go in the shop, but stood in the ill-lit alley at the side where our office's entrance hid, waiting for her to re-emerge from the store. I mistimed my "casual" appearance from the alley slightly and nearly sent the poor girl flying, but she soon recovered her composure. It gave me a good excuse to offer to buy her a drink to steady her nerves, and after a little indecision (I think she was planning to take some work home) she agreed. I told her I'd seen her in M & S before, and she said she recognised me too, which was gratifying to hear, because at least it meant I wasn't invisible to her.

I forced myself to stop reminiscing, and got on with the unpacking. I had to drop the van off at the rental company's Cambridge office by five, and it was past four already. It was a nuisance having to rent the van, but it would have taken at least three tips from Oxford to transport all of my belongings in the Metro. As it was, I'd have to take the train to Oxford the following weekend and pickup the car.

I locked up my new home with one of the sets of keys that the rental agency had given me, and climbed into the high cab of the van. I glanced around at the dead-end street. It was called The Rowans, presumably in an attempt to distract the people who lived in its Lego-land houses from the fact that planting trees was the last thing on the planners' minds when they designed the estate. As I got in, I noticed a couple strolling hand-in-hand up the narrow cul-de-sac in which the house stood. They were the first people I'd seen here, even though there must have been six or seven houses in the little cluster at my end of the street. I watched them in the side mirror as they disappeared round the back of the van, and saw them go into the house that was exactly opposite mine.

The woman was attractive. Her head was framed by shock of long red hair and she had a

pale complexion, except for the few freckles. The phrase “a bonny Scottish lass” popped into my mind as I gazed at her, but of course I could have no idea if she really was Scottish. Her jeans and tee shirt showed off her slim waist, and the rest of her body was well proportioned. The guy (husband? boyfriend? It was impossible to say) was quite a muscular looking fellow, and tanned; I had him down as a bricklayer or road-worker, one of these out-of-door types who does a lot of physical work. All brawn and no brain. His hair was very short, almost a skinhead, and I was surprised not to see a Swastika tattooed to his forehead. I wondered what such a nice-looking girl was doing with a thug like him. (Not for too long though; I decided years ago that women invariably go for the wrong type of man, leaving the nice guys like me to fight for the attention of the few women with good enough taste not to fall for the first charismatic ‘rough diamond’ of a bastard who comes their way.)

The van rental office was easy to find – I could hardly have missed the bright orange Budget sign on the front – and I got directions into town from the guy who took the van’s keys from me. He said it wasn’t much of a walk, maybe a mile down Newmarket Road, but I was still a bit tired from the box lifting, so I waited for a bus. When one finally came it was full of Saturday shoppers with their carrier bags full of groceries, and mothers with screaming kids on their arms and at their feet. I was squashed up against an ugly fat woman for most of the journey. She had a protruding brown mole just below her left nostril from which sprouted thick black hairs. I was repulsed by it but at the same time transfixed. I would try to look away for a while and stare beyond her at the traffic outside, but my eyes would be drawn inexorably to her unsightly growth. I was relieved when she got off, both because it enabled me to breathe properly, and because it gave my eyes some respite.

The bus driver announced “Lion Yard” which was where the car rental guy said the centre of town was, and fought my way through the crush of short-tempered shoppers to the bus exit. Some people can be very rude. A mother snapped at me just because I inadvertently brushed past her toddler and sent him sprawling onto the dirty floor of the bus. I could tell that it wasn’t worth explaining the principle of the conservation of momentum to her (which says that if a small tot is careless enough to get into the path of an oncoming adult who’s in a rush to get off a claustrophobic bus, then the child is going to come off much worse), so I just gave her one of my blank, uncomprehending looks as though I was slightly simple. That normally does the trick.

I explored Cambridge city-centre, such as it was. Lion Yard turned out to be a small shopping centre, with the eponymous bright-red-painted sculpted animal standing high on an unobtrusive metal column in the middle of the complex. He was so high, in fact, that I’d imagine most people wouldn’t see him at all, unless they had cause to look up and check out the second floor of the public library, which seems unlikely. There was the usual array of chain stores: WH Smith’s books and stationery, Dixon’s electrical, HMV records, Mothercare, a Sketchley’s cleaners. Pretty dull, really. I spent some time in HMV, but of course they had exactly the same selection of CDs as the HMV in Oxford.

The Market Square was a little more interesting. The market itself had about 30 fixed stalls selling clothes, second-hand books, fruit and vegetables, dodgy-looking jewellery. (I always imagine market traders are slightly dishonest; this is probably grossly unfair on

them, but if they want people to think they're totally legit and above board, they should shave more often and wear cleaner clothes, is all I can say.) The south side of the square was taken up entirely by the Guildhall. It was a wide, dirty brown, stone building, four storeys high with a fairly impressive looking entrance in the middle. It was all closed up and deserted looking, this being a Saturday. The clock face that took up one side of the short tower on top of the building showed 5.45, and, impressively for a clock maintained by a public body, it was correct.

On the west of the square was a Barclay's bank, which was useful to discover because I banked with them, and a small church with a high tower. This was called Great St. Mary's, and marks the centre of Cambridge. In the gap between the church and the bank I could see the ancient sand-stone walls of one of the big colleges, possibly King's. I decided to explore it another day. Opposite the church across the market square was a row of shops, one of which was a Marks and Spencers. Again the memories of seeing Liz in the Oxford branch on those many Wednesday evenings before I effected our forceful introduction came flooding back to me. I was overtaken with the urge to go and buy something, just for old times' sake, so I bought a slice of their "American-style" Cheesecake. I've no idea why they use that adjective. It wasn't the least bit loud or boastful about what a great country it came from, and it certainly didn't carry a gun or try to sell me some crack cocaine. Oh well, marketing, I suppose.

The shops were starting to close, so I did a quick tour of a street that kept on changing its name. It started off as Regent's Street, then became Sydney Street, and finally Castle Hill. There were a couple of very large bookshops, which delighted me. One of them had a good computer section (though I had to climb three flights of stairs to get to it; I only discovered the lift when I got to the top). There were also banks and building societies and other dull institutions, another record shop (an Our Price this time) and, tucked away in a little alleyway off the main road, a Belgian Chocolate shop. I only noticed it because it was next door to a shop that sold nothing but teddy bears, outside of which was a teddy so large and eye-catching that several small children could, and indeed did, climb on it together.

All in all, I decided, Cambridge didn't look like a bad place. It wasn't dissimilar to Oxford, just a bit more compact. I don't think there's anything significant in the fact that I'm drawn to the great University towns. It's where the work is. I moved to Oxford immediately after graduating from the University of East Anglia because Research Machines were hiring enthusiastically at that time. My next few jobs were with other Oxford-based start-ups. Mummy was disappointed that I didn't find a job nearer home in Hove, but as I told her, there just aren't that many high-tech openings in that sleepy seaside retirement paradise (and I don't think she even realised I was being ironic when I called it a "paradise"). Then, when I decided it was time to move on, partly for my career but mainly because of what happened with Liz, Cambridge seemed like an obvious place to look. The university's Computer Lab had spawned a coterie of exciting start-ups, though I must admit working for Meditek Research could hardly be described as a high-risk job. At 25, though, I'd decided that I'd like to work for a company which had a bit of history behind it. The job was just hacking Unix device drivers in C, which I could do with my eyes closed, so it promised to be well paid, secure *and* cushy.

To my amazement I'd missed the last bus back to Milton. It was only 6:30 PM, but the timetable on the bus stop told me the last one left at 6:10. Milton must have been a smaller suburb than I'd imagined, if that was all the bus service it warranted. I took a taxi instead, which set me back £13.90. I thought that was a total rip-off, so I didn't tip the driver, even though it would have been easy with the change from the £15 I gave him. He was one of those cabbies who insist on trying to hold an unwanted conversation with you for the whole journey. The tenet by which he lived his miserable life appeared to be "Bloody niggers, we should scoop them all up into a huge net and drop 'em in the North Sea, if you ask me." Now I'm not saying I have strong feelings about that one way or the other, being middle of the road politically speaking, but the point was I hadn't asked him to share his views, and it annoyed me that he insisted on doing it anyway.

I was exhausted by the time I got in, so I watched a bit of telly (the appalling "Blind Date" where the girls always choose the most Neanderthal guy and the blokes always choose the girl who sounds as though she might sleep with them if they choose her; and the even worse "Your funniest home videos" thing with Jeremy Beadle, on which the brain-dead British public prove their willingness to subject themselves to an infinite amount of humiliation if it means they can get on TV). Depressed that I'd actually sat through such dross, I switched on the computer and put in some solid hours writing the interpreter for the new object-oriented language I'm designing. I got to bed at about 2:30 AM, I think. As I drew the curtains I was surprised to see the bedroom light of the house opposite where the young couple lived was still on. Maybe I wasn't the only night owl in Milton.

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Sunday morning was bright, sunny and fresh. At least it was by the time I awoke at 10:30. The ground outside my bedroom window was wet in patches, so there must have been a summer storm in the night. It had relieved the atmosphere of its sultry oppression. I picked up my jeans and tee shirt from the floor, put them on, and had a leisurely breakfast of Frosties followed by a fried egg on toast and a couple of cups of coffee. Feeling suitably invigorated, I stacked the dishes in the sink, then did what I'd been putting off since yesterday and phoned mum.

It wasn't that I didn't like talking to her, but she was such a worrier. She seemed to think that I couldn't survive on my own, and always pumped me with questions about if I was eating properly (yes) and did I have any friends (not yet, but I had hopes of the couple across the road – or the girl anyway, but I didn't tell her that), was I doing my laundry (give me a chance, I've only just arrived) and so on, *ad nauseam*. I wasn't too hard on her; she meant well. And I must admit, I did enjoy popping down to see her on the South Coast once a month or so, just so I could relax in the warm waters of her pandering nature. I promised I'd phone again in the week, but had my fingers crossed as I said it, just in case I didn't get round to it. It wasn't as though she was lonely, I told myself; she had her paying guests to keep her company.

On the way to Cambridge the previous day I'd noticed a bus-stop on the corner of The Rowans and the main road, so I took a stroll to check out the times of the buses into town for Monday. I didn't want to be late for my first day. If it was anything like my previous

jobs, I'd get it at nine for the first week, until I'd determined what the latest acceptable arrival time was, then slide towards that over the next month or so. Being a nocturnal type, I prefer being able to get in at a reasonable hour, like 11 AM, and work a bit later in the evening.

The 100 yard walk to the bus stop was pleasant enough, at least in the comfortable rain-freshened air of the mid-day sun. Some children played on the swings that had been erected on the token patch of green dog-walking land, which had presumably been unsuitable for building on. The walk wouldn't be much fun in the freezing cold of an English winter though, and nor would standing at a bus stop stamping my feet to try to get the blood flowing through them because the bus was an hour late because its diesel had frozen up. I was glad I'd only have to catch the bus for a week.

It appeared that there was a bus at 8:20 in the morning that would get me into the town centre with enough time to walk out to the Meditek offices again by 9 AM. That wasn't too bad. I could set the alarm for 7:50, maybe even 8:00, and be up and out in time for the bus. I could always grab breakfast in the cafeteria after I'd got settled in.

Across the street from the bus-stop was a general store. I envisaged I'd do most of my shopping at the Tesco's supermarket that lay on the edge of the housing estate, about half a mile from my new home, but it was always useful to have one of these all-purpose shops close by. This one appeared to sell the usual items: magazines and papers, greetings cards, videos, sweets and cigarettes. I thought I'd pop over and get a Mars bar.

Just as I got to the other side of the road, who should appear from inside the shop but the young couple I'd seen the previous day. I thought I might as well introduce myself, so I stood in front of them and said, "Hello. I'm your new neighbour!"

They looked a bit taken aback; I suppose I did rather block their path as they exited the store.

"Oh," said the girl. "That's what the removal van outside Pete's house was. Well, nice to meet you. I'm Alison, and this is Mike."

"Hello," said Mike. He didn't hold out his hand, so I kept mine by my side too. Looking back, even at that early stage, I could detect something unfriendly about his attitude, as though some instinct told him a rival for Alison's affection had made his first appearance.

"My name's Matthew," I told them. "I'm sure we'll see quite a bit of each other, living opposite."

"Erm, yes," Alison said. "Well, being seeing you around."

"Yeah, bye Matt," added Mike.

"It's Matthew," I told him. I knew then this guy was going to be trouble.

As they walked away I thought I heard them sniggering about something. Probably an embarrassed laugh because I'd corrected him about my name.

My initial impressions of the couple were reinforced by that encounter. Mike was the bone-head I suspected him to be, and Alison was the beautiful paragon I'd likewise imagined. Her face had a strange beauty. You wouldn't look at her in the street and go "Phwoar!", but if you took a little longer to appreciate her subtle features (and I pride myself on having the sensitivity to do that), her inner qualities became apparent. Her voice had a soft, lilting, almost musical quality to it. Her eyes were hazel in colour, and possibly just a little too close together, but even that was endearing if you looked at it in the right light. Her lips were pale and thin, but I could imagine planting a romantic kiss on them nevertheless. I sighed as I thought of the prospect of getting to know her.

In the shop – "Stop Shop" it was called – I spent a while checking out the nudie mags on the top shelf. They had an OK selection. I nearly bought one, but decided against it in the end. I'd probably be a regular customer there for milk and bread and other things that run out when you're least expecting it, and I preferred to buy my porn somewhere they wouldn't know me so well. Also, I didn't want to risk bumping into Alison when I had a *Men Only* tucked under my arm, obviously. I'd have to check out the shops around Cambridge to find one that had a good selection but in which I was unlikely to bump into anyone who would recognise me from work or Milton. I'd brought a few jaz mags with me from Oxford anyway, so there was no hurry.

I feel I should set the record straight on my attitude to porno magazines in case I'm thought to be some sort of raving pervert. I think that the girls that appear in them are nothing less than disgusting sluts. They totally demean their sex and themselves, not to mention the concept of true, romantic love. But I realised early in my teens that you have to wank a lot to keep yourself from exploding, and it's easier with the help of a few pictures of cheap tarts spreading their legs (especially when one has limited actual experience to go on), so why not take advantage of it? That doesn't mean that I automatically think all girls are 'like that', as the anti-porn brigade would have us believe, or that I'm going to rape the first woman I meet after 'reading' a nudie mag. In fact, I think the sluts in those magazines do a valuable public service, at least where I'm concerned, because they help me relieve my sexual frustration while at the same time enabling me to appreciate nice girls like Liz and Alison for their innocent beauty.

Anyway, in the end I just bought a Mars Bar, and a Kit Kat for later.

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The rest of Sunday dragged a little. Nothing on the telly, nothing that really did anything for me out of my music collection. I tried Swervedriver, Catherine Wheel, Blur, The Cure; even The Smiths didn't inspire me. I hate days like that. It was too hot to work on the computer or walk for any distance. I don't think there was much of Milton to see anyway. From the main road as you approach the town from Cambridge, there's just a sea of red roof-tiles stretching into the distance. The estate got built during the housing boom of the late 80s, which is why the houses are so small and close together, I'd imagine: the property developers were trying to milk the land they'd bought for as much as possible. I'm glad I couldn't afford to buy at that time, because in the wake of tumbling house prices after the market collapsed, a lot of people were left with very large mortgages and a house that wasn't worth anywhere near enough to cover it.

There was an old part to Milton, the village that had been there before the housing boom, but it wasn't much to look at: just a couple of pubs and a village green and some old Victorian houses. From the Ordnance Survey map of the area I'd bought, it looked as though the River Cam flowed just to the south of Milton, probably within walking distance of the house, so I decided while lying on the sofa and gently playing with myself through my jeans that it might be worth taking a stroll down there one evening. Rivers are often a good place for spotting pretty girls, especially if there are ducks around for them to feed.

I made sure I had an early night (I was in bed by 11) so that I'd be fresh for work in the morning. I thought about having a bath, but it was still too warm for that, so I decided to have a good wash in the morning if I had time. As it turned out, I did oversleep slightly. I'd forgotten set the alarm, but something inside me made me snap my eyes open dead on 8 AM so I quickly pulled my clothes on, brushed my hair, and got myself down to the bus stop.

There was quite a queue for the bus, including – oh joy! – Alison. She didn't recognise me as I walked past, so I tapped her on the shoulder and said “Hi! Remember me?”

She looked at me for little while and said “Oh. Mark, isn't it?”

“Matthew,” I corrected her. “Do you get this bus too then?”

“Not usually, no.” That explained her pained expression; she obviously wasn't used to standing around waiting for buses. “Normally Mike, that's my boyfriend who you met yesterday, takes me, but he worked late last night and I didn't want to wake him up early, so I thought I'd get the bus in.”

That was encouraging. She'd called him her boyfriend, letting me know that they weren't married.

“Oh,” I said., “Where does he work?”

“Well he just helps out behind the bar at the *Pike and Eel* in Chesterton at the moment, while he's looking for a proper job. He does a few evenings a week, and unfortunately sometimes that includes the weekend.”

Ha! He was even more of a loser than I'd imagined. He wasn't even a bricky, but just an unemployable yob who had to work in a pub to earn his keep. Things were starting to look promising. I thought I'd push the knife in a bit, to see how she reacted.

“So you're the bread-winner at the moment?”

“Yeah, I'm afraid so. Mike's finding it a bit tough at the moment, but he's got some applications in, so I'm sure something will come up.

“Where do you work?”

“The Department of Experimental Psychology on the Downing Street site. I'm a post-doc researcher.”

My God, I thought, the woman's a genius and she's attached herself to some thick moron just because, presumably, he had the physique of a body builder. How typical, how sad.

Alison looked me up and down in an appraising sort of way.

"Actually, we're always looking for volunteers for experiments, nothing dangerous of course. So if you ever wanted to earn some lunch money, just ring the lab and we'll put you on the list."

This was more like it! She might just as well have said "Look, I'm getting a bit fed up with Mike sponging off me, so why don't you and I get together?"

I decided to play it cool though and said noncommittally "Sure. It's in the book is it?"

"Here, the number's on this card."

She handed a plain white business card which said simply "Dept. Exp. Psy. - Comp. Beh. Res. (0223) 210212"

"Great!" I said, carefully placing the card in my wallet.

The blue Cambus double-decker had arrived and people started to shuffle on to it. To my astonishment just as I was about to climb up the rubberised step onto the bus, the driver said "Full up, there's another behind," and shut the automatic doors. I was furious. Not only would I not be able to cement my relationship with Alison, but I'd probably be late for work. As the bus pulled off, Alison waved. She looked relieved, because she had just managed to get on to the bus.

When the driver had said there was another bus behind, he was being accurate in a literal sense, but not with his implication. The next Cambridge bus was 45 minutes behind, and I didn't get to work until 9:40. Luckily the office was only a short walk from the town centre bus terminus and I'd passed it in the van on Saturday, so I knew exactly how to get there.

The receptionist greeted me in the cool, formal way that receptionists seem to do, and called Mr. Brackenburg, my boss. He seemed astonished when he saw me. I suppose I did look a bit flustered, having got steamed up waiting for the bus, and I'd walked as briskly as I could to the office. He shook my hands in one of those limp shakes where the other person just grasps the ends of your fingers as though they're frightened of catching a transmittable disease from you. A "girly's handshake" I always call it.

The offices were arranged according to department. There were six rooms on each of three floors, and each room was laid out in an open plan fashion, with work areas separated by chest-height partitions. There were five stations in my office on the first floor, and Mr. Brackenburg introduced me to my other three co-workers. It appeared they were all at work already, which didn't bode well for my being able to ease into reasonable working hours later on.

My co-workers were Steve, Simon and Brendan. Mr. Brackenburg's name was Ron. It seemed to be a fairly informal office with the minimum of hierarchy, which was good. In

fact, even though Ron was notionally my boss, that was just because he was team leader for this project, and in the eyes of the company we were all simply programmers of varying years' experience. Our real boss was an Indian guy call Mr. Bannerjee. He wasn't around much, and it was Thursday before I even met him.

The other programmers looked OK, but I wasn't going to make any hasty judgements. I'd thought that the team I joined at my previous job had been friendly, but they soon showed themselves to be unwilling to accept outsiders into their cosy little group. I was slightly surprised that Ron (who was tall, dark and Dutch), Steve (tall, fair and from London) and Simon (medium, dark and a Jew) all wore suits. Brendan, who was nearer my age and spoke with an unmistakable Irish accent, dressed somewhat more casually, which relieved me. The last thing I wanted was to have to go and get a suit made just for going to work. I'd rented one for the interview, but that was just by way of lip-service to the tradition in which job applicants dress and behave totally differently in an interview from the way they intend to if they get the job.

I spent the morning reading through manuals and familiarising myself with their systems: all the usual non-productive things you do on the first day at a new job. The company made medical equipment and my team was writing the software for a treadmill that's used to exercise patients with heart conditions while monitoring all their vital signs – a bit like a standing-up version of Dr. McCoy's scanner in Star Trek. My job was to write the software which would interface the brains of the unit, which was a Silicon Graphics workstation, to the various measuring devices that monitored heart-rate, breathing etc.

Ron joked that when the prototype was delivered by the hardware team in a couple of weeks, I could be the first volunteer to put the machine through its paces. The others seemed to think this was very funny.

Lunch time came soon enough, and Ron suggested we go to one of the local pubs, *The Zebra*. This meant I couldn't check out the cafeteria food, but I was pleased that they were making to effort to be at least slightly sociable on my first day. We'd see how long it lasted.

The pub was a fair walk from the office, and we passed a couple of others on the way that looked perfectly acceptable, so I assumed the *Zebra* must be pretty special. It turned out to be rather nondescript. There was a single bar behind which stood a lugubrious barman. We stood on bare, grimy floor boards with a smattering of saw dust. A lone drinker was perched on one of the stools at the bar, an old man who sipped slowly at the almost full pint in front of him, staring at the optics behind the bar. A group of three, very young, be-suited guys occupied one table. They looked and sounded like juniors from one of the many estate agents' offices that lined the street.

We took one of the remaining tables, the one closest the door and furthest from the office boys, and Ron got the drinks in. All the others were having pints of Greene King IPA, so I decided to forego my usual Coke and join them. Beer at lunch time doesn't usually agree with me because it makes me very windy and slightly dizzy, but I didn't want to offend my hosts. I noticed that my four colleagues sat together on the long bench that rested against the wall of the pub, leaving me to sit across the table from them in a small,

uncomfortable chair. I took it as a sign that I'd have to work at being accepted into the group.

Conversation was OK, just small talk. It turned out that Ron, Steve and Simon were all married with small children. Brendan had a girlfriend in London who was trying to find a job up in Cambridge so they could live together.

“What about you, Matthew? Got anyone special back in Oxford?” asked Ron. He seemed to adopt an ironic tone when asking questions, but I decided that was just due to his slight Dutch accent, which he'd managed to remove most traces of, probably through having a British wife.

“Well, there was someone,” I told them, “but it didn't work out.” Again, the memories of those evenings seeing Liz and the final, fateful night when we had the big argument came back to me.

I think I looked regretful because Brendan said, “Well I'm sure someone like you won't have any problems finding a nice girl round here.” Simon must have taken too large a gulp of beer, because just as Brendan said that, he spluttered and started to choke.

When his coughing fit had subsided he said “Sorry, must have gone down the wrong way.”

Steve stayed relatively quiet, as though he was sizing me up discreetly rather than trying to find out all about me in one go. I appreciated that. Maybe he would turn out to be a friend.

The rest of the afternoon was a bit blurry, the second beer having been a mistake. I don't think anyone noticed though. I was a bit worried when everyone was still there at six, though by 6:30 Ron and Simon started to pack up to leave, and not long afterwards Steve and Brendan logged out of their workstations, so I took my cue to leave. They didn't suggest going for a pint or anything, so I said good-bye at the entrance to the building and walked alone to the bus station.

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I quickly developed a routine, where I managed to get to work just before nine and left between six and half past. I didn't see Alison again at the bus stop, so I was glad I'd have the car after the weekend – there was no incentive to get the bus. The work became interesting when I started to actually write code instead of reading manuals, and the days passed quickly. The team didn't go to the pub every lunch time. Sometimes they used the caff; on other days they didn't appear to eat anything, except maybe a bag of crisps from the vending machine. On those days I'd go to the canteen on my own. It was usually quite busy, though I preferred to sit on my own and look for attractive girls. There was the usual computer company paucity of females: just a couple of middle-aged women from the accounts department, the General Manager's assistant, who was in her thirties and dressed in intimidating business suits, a couple of typists and the receptionist. The last three, on the days when they used to cafeteria instead of meeting up with their boyfriends, would sit together and have animated conversations. Occasionally they would

erupt into hyena-like laughter. Once or twice I caught them glancing over at me when they did this, as though they expected me to get what they were laughing at from that distance. Although one of the typists, Helen, was very pretty, I decided they were all too tarty for me to bother with.

The evenings could be boring. If there was nothing on TV I would read, either a science fiction book or a computer magazine. One night I sorted out my magazine collection from the boxes I'd brought them in, and was quite surprised that my stack of nudie mags was almost as tall as my collection of Bytes. That reminded me, I must find a discreetly situated newsagents' to be my porn purchasing outlet. Some nights I had a wank, others, if I was feeling too tired from work, I didn't.

On the Thursday evening of my first week in Cambridge, I'd bought the new issue of Personal Computer World at lunchtime, so I spent the evening reading that. I was surprised when I looked up, having read the last article, to see it was 1:10 AM. I dropped the magazine on the coffee table and stood up to pull the living room curtains. Glancing up, I noticed that the bedroom light of Alison's house was on, and this time the curtains weren't drawn. My heart raced as my mind picked over the possibilities. I quickly turned the living room light off and felt my way up the stairs to my bedroom, breathing heavily, my heart pounding.

My bedroom curtains were open, so as soon as I entered the darkened room I could see clearly across the street, into the bedroom opposite. I couldn't see anyone at first, then a figure crossed the aperture of the distant window. It was too quick to see who it was; I think it was Mike. I held my breath as though the sound of my rapid inhalation and exhalation would alert the couple opposite to my presence. I wondered if they could see me if they looked – a ghostly figure barely visible in the diffused orange street-light glow. I decided not, as from their brightly lit room the outside would just appear as a black void.

I had a brain-wave. One of my teenage hobbies had been aircraft spotting, and buried deep in one of my boxes of miscellaneous items was a pair of 8 X 30 binoculars, a relic of that youthful pastime. I dashed to the spare room, risked turning the light on because it faced away from the neighbours, and scabbled around inside the boxes I'd dumped there for the binoculars. I found them at the bottom of the last box, their mottled black body looking dented and scratched, but they were apparently optically sound.

I stood well back from my bedroom window and tried to focus on the scene from across the street. The results were disappointing. No matter how I set the focussing wheel, the image seemed to be distorted. At first I thought maybe the binoculars' optics *had* been knocked out of true, but then I realised that it was the glass of my bedroom window that was causing the distortion. Normally you don't notice the effect window glass has on the view outside, but when it's magnified by eight times, the unevenness of the glass causes visible refraction effects. I felt pleased that my razor sharp technical mind had enabled me to see the problem before I blamed the binoculars and gave up.

I ducked down and crept over to the window, still filled with an irrational fear that the couple opposite were as aware of my presence as I was of theirs. I unhooked the latch of

the window and opened it out on its vertical hinges. I hoped that it didn't sweep out of beam of reflected street light that would shine into my neighbours' bedroom. I put the window back on the latch at its fully opened position and stepped back to my viewing post, leaning back against the bedroom door for support.

My brilliant deduction was rewarded by a clear view into the distant bedroom. I could see what looked like the headboard of a bed in the middle, and through a door next to the bed, another door and a light green sink. That made sense. If their house had the same layout as this one, the bathroom would be down the short passageway from the front bedroom. My hand twitched in a spasm of delight as Alison came into view, emerging dripping from the bath. She stood by the wash basin and wrapped a pink bath-towel around her long red hair. As she did so, she gave me a wonderful view of her small, shapely breasts, tipped with glistening pink nipples. She turned her head away and down, and moving my gaze to where she would have been looking, I saw Mike's head, just visible above the bottom of their window frame. He must have been sitting on the toilet while talking to her, the disgusting animal.

I watched rapt as Alison dried herself off. She almost appeared to be stroking herself rather than rubbing, as though it was a sensual act. And she was facing me, so I could believe she knew at some level that I might be watching and was doing it to tease or entertain me.

The couple finished in the bathroom and came into the bedroom. They were both naked. Mike nodded at the curtain and Alison moved over and closed it. For a split second I had the most wonderful view of her upper body, hair dry now and flowing down the back of her milky white shoulders, pink tipped breasts moving slightly as she walked. For a split second she appeared to look directly at me and I nearly dropped the binoculars, but her lack of reaction revealed she hadn't seen me. Then there was nothing but the yellow translucence of the thin bedroom curtains.

Disappointed, I dropped the binoculars and gazed lovelorn across the street. Alison had looked so sweet and pure. I imagined holding her in my arms, her soft feminine body pressed against mine. I quickly checked to satisfy myself that there was no chink, no gap in the curtains that I could use to gain access to my love. There wasn't, so I quickly got undressed and went to bed.

I felt elated and very excited, but I didn't masturbate. It would have cheapened what I felt for Alison to use her in that way, the way I used the slags in the magazines. Alison's image must remain pure and unsullied until I could hold her in my arms and tell her that I loved her.

* * *

After that night, I kept up a regular vigil, looking for signs of invitingly open curtains opposite. Most nights though, when the downstairs lights went off at about 11:30 PM, and the upstairs landing light was switched on seconds later, it would reveal that the bedroom curtains were already closed. It was very frustrating. The only glimpses of Alison I got were when Mike drove her to work in the mornings. I'd gone to Oxford on

the train on the Saturday to pick up my car, so at least didn't have to rely on the vagaries of Cambus to get me to and from work. Even better, I could wait until after they'd left before I set off, so I could be assured of seeing her. I hoped that one day Mike would be too tired (or was it really hungover; I was having my suspicions) to take her to work, and I could conveniently appear as she started to walk to the bus top and offer her a lift. It never happened though.

Using the times I saw Alison and Mike together in the mornings, I built up a picture of their relationship. Mike didn't love her, that much was clear. He didn't open the passenger door for her when she got into the car, and just from his eyes, the way he looked at her, I could tell he didn't feel the same way that I did. As for her, I decided she was slightly frightened of him. He looked as though he had a cruel streak, and it was easy to picture him using that muscular body against her soft femininity to force her to do all sorts of unspeakable acts against her will. It was this realisation, I think, that led to the conception of what I had to do, though it would be while before the idea reached the embryonic stage and made itself known to me.

The next couple of weeks were frustrating. Work rapidly receded in importance. I got the work done, but the others in the group didn't seem interested in socialising beyond the occasional lunchtime at the pub. That suited me; my evenings sitting waiting to catch a glimpse of Alison were far too precious to be wasted on some guys from work. Even at the pub lunches I detected a constant distance between the rest of the team and me, as though I wasn't yet accepted into their clique. It would either come in time, or more likely, it wouldn't. It didn't bother me; I didn't need their friendship to make my life worthwhile. I had Alison, and that was *all* I needed.

* * *

On the Wednesday of my third week, I was emptying out my wallet of unneeded receipts and Visa slips, and I came across the card that Alison had given me with her work number on it. I kicked myself for having let it slip my mind. It was nearly lunchtime, so I decided to call the number. Maybe Alison herself would answer.

A male voice said, "Experimental Psychology."

Hiding my disappointment, I told him that Alison had mentioned some experiments I could help with, and asked if there were any coming up that I could volunteer for. He told me there was one the next day at 11 AM that they still needed subjects for. He told me where to go (it wasn't far from Lion Yard as it happened) and said he looked forward to seeing me the next day.

"Does Alison herself do the experiments?" I asked him.

"No," he said, "Doctor Wilson may be there to supervise, but her PhD. students will actually lead you through the procedure."

So I might see her, or I might not.

The next day I told Ron that I had a dentist appointment at 11 and drove to the

Department of Experimental Psychology. It was one of a number of large brick buildings in the Downing College complex. Other buildings carried names like “Anthropology”, “Dept. of Tropical Diseases” and “Genetic Research Labs”. I felt uneasy. It all sounded very clinical and biological, a far cry for the electronic predictability of the computers that I was used to working with. The buildings were made from grey, soot-stained stone, as though they hadn’t been cleaned since they were built late in the last century.

Inside the decaying academic building, I found the room that the guy on the phone had described to me. On the mustard yellow door was a sign saying “Compulsive Behavioural Research” and underneath “Dr. A. Wilson”. A plain receptionist greeted me diffidently and when I told her why I was there, she led me to a row of uncomfortable metal seats that were lined up outside a green door, above which was an illuminated sign flashing “Experiment in progress. Quiet please.” There were already two people waiting, a boy and a girl. They were young-looking, probably undergraduates earning some cash for drink money. That was certainly the last reason that I was there; I couldn’t believe the researchers only paid £1.50 for a thirty minute experiment. Still, if Alison showed up, that would be reward enough.

The corridor in which we sat had a hushed, oppressive air, as though the ghosts of earnest Victorian scientists were still present, regarding us over their pince-nez and fretting that science isn’t what it was. The many layers of chipped paint on the walls didn’t hide the antiquity of the place, but rather served to remind me that you can’t plaster over the past.

A buzzer sounded and the sign stopped flashing. Moments later, three dazed looking youngsters emerged blinking into the fluorescent light of the corridor. They were followed by Alison, who was saying “.. and if you go with Tracey into the office, she’ll get you to fill in an anonymous questionnaire about yourself, then she’ll sign you off and give you your fee. Thanks very much.”

Alison looked at us and said, “So, who’s the next group of willing victims? Don’t worry, there’s nothing painful going to happen.” She saw me and said “Oh hello, Mat... .. thew. So you decided to volunteer. That’s good, it will help balance the numbers a bit.”

I simply stared. She wore a long lab coat that covered her body, but had tied her hair up and was wearing glasses, which I hadn’t seen before. The effect was to make her seem very intellectual. I was more convinced that ever that Mike was ill-suited to her in every respect.

“Right, then,” she continued. “Ah, Dawn. Can you deal with the victims, I mean volunteers,” she smiled reassuringly, and I smiled back, conspiratorially. “I’ve got a department meeting in five minutes.”

At that she turned and walked off down the corridor, back towards the reception area. Dawn, who was also in a lab coat and looked about 23, led us into the darkened room. There were three desks separated by partitions, so while sitting at one you couldn’t see your neighbours or be seen by them. On each desk sat a monochrome computer screen, but no keyboard. Instead there was a small metal box that had three green square buttons labelled ‘Neg’, ‘Neutral’, and ‘Pos’. A pair of headphones lay next to the box.

When we had seated ourselves, Dawn began to speak. “Right, it’s very simple what we want you to do. You’ll be wearing the headphones and looking at the screen. At irregular intervals, a noun will appear in the centre of the screen, and you’ll hear it spoken in the headphones. As quickly as possible we want you to press the button that most closely describes how you feel about that object. For example, if you feel negatively about the thing, press the ‘Neg’ button. If you feel positively about it, press ‘Pos’, and if you don’t have any strong feelings one way or the other, press the middle one marked ‘Neutral’. We want you to press as quickly as possible, but not before you’ve taken the word in. Any questions?”

The two students shook their heads. I just smiled. It seemed too ridiculously easy for words. We did a trial run of twenty words just to make sure we could operate the buttons, and then the proper test, which must have amounted to 300 words. By the end of the test I was having trouble concentrating on the screen, and began to start thinking too much about the meanings of the words, which left me distracted for the next one. The words themselves seemed to be entirely random. The ones I can remember are “sausage”, “car”, “woman”, “terminal”, “house”, “potato” and “blouse”, but there were hundreds more.

When the test finally ended we were led into an office decorated with cut-away pictures of the human brain, where we filled out a form with about 40 questions, some of a highly personal nature. I tried to answer it honestly, as they assured us it was anonymous, but I may have deviated slightly from the truth on some of them.

After that, we had to sign a sheet of paper saying that we’d taken part in an experiment and had received our £1.50 compensation. I took the money even though I had no need to. It gave me longer to look around for Alison, but she must have still been in her meeting.

On the way back to the office I used the money from the experiment to buy a triple-decker Marks and Spencers sandwich for lunch.

* * *

That evening I felt low. I knew there was the potential for something to happen between me and Alison, but I couldn’t see how to arrange a meeting where we could get to know each other properly. That had been easier with Liz because, although she had a boyfriend, he worked in London and only came up to Oxford at weekends. I think she was pleased for the company when I suggested we go for a drink. I’d tried all the ways I could think of to get close to Alison though, to no avail. If only Mike wasn’t around.

At around 10.30 PM I took up my by now habitual position of standing in my darkened bedroom, binoculars at the ready. I realised immediately that something was different. Although their Ford Escort was parked in its usual spot, there were no lights on in the house, as though they’d gone to bed already. I couldn’t believe that; it didn’t tie in with their normal habits at all. Maybe they’d taken a taxi somewhere. I decided to sit tight till at least midnight to see what developed. It was a lonely vigil, but I passed the time thinking of Alison’s beautiful hazel eyes, glinting at me through the weak lenses of her glasses.

My patience was rewarded. At 11:25 PM I heard a sound of girlish giggles through my open bedroom window. I ducked down. There were voices: "Ooh, look, he's left his window open." That was Alison.

"Yeah, probably trying to get some fresh air in there." That was Mike. They both sounded drunk.

"Shh!" said Alison. "He might hear you!"

I heard the ratcheting sound of bicycles being pedalled backwards, then another giggle as Alison said "Watch it! You can be done for being drunk in charge of a bike, you know."

There was more laughter and more shh's, then the sound of their front door opening and slamming shut. I exhaled, realising that I'd been holding my breath since I'd first heard their voices. I waited for a while and slowly raised my head above the level of the window, so I could see the house opposite. The bedroom light was on already, and I could see Alison and Mike in the bathroom. This time Mike was at the wash basin, splashing water over his stubbly face, and Alison was on the loo. She flushed, stood, and barged Mike out of the way of the sink in mock impatience. He grabbed her and I assumed he kissed her; he had his back to me and his large frame totally hid Alison's delicate body. More horse-play ensued, and finally they got to the bedroom.

They stood framed in the square window and silhouetted by the yellow tungsten glow of the bedside lamp behind them. Mike had turned the dimmer for the main bedroom light down but not fully off. I saw Alison raise her arms high above her head, and Mike peeled the tight tee-shirt she was wearing from her slim body. She wasn't wearing a bra and once again I had a view, if slightly muted this time, of her delightful breasts. Mike ducked down and I could just make out the top of his head at what must have been at her waist level. He was helping her out of her tight jeans, which became clear when she bent down and raised her right leg at the same time, then pulled the jeans off her leg and threw them to the other side of the room.

Mike's head stayed down much longer than necessary, I thought. Eventually he resurfaced and to my surprise, jumped onto the bed. He led Alison on to it, pushing her against the far wall, so she must have been standing on the pillows. I could see her body from the shoulders down to the knees. Her legs were parted and she bent them slightly at the knees. Mike dropped to his knees and began what seemed to be a long and very intense conversation with Alison's private parts. I knew what he was doing really, of course. Licking her, there. I just couldn't believe that she would let him do that. Not Alison; she was a nice girl, I was convinced of it. Her hand was on top of Mike's head. I was sure she was trying to push him away. I ducked down so I could see her head in the top of the window frame. I was right. Her back was arched and her shoulders were pressed into the pink flowery wallpaper behind her. Her head was tilted back and with her free hand she stroked the back of her neck and ran the fingers through her hair, clearly trying to take her mind off the anguish she was feeling. Her mouth was pulled back into a grimace, almost a snarl, and I could see her chest heaving, as though she was frightened of what would happen if she tried to stop her sick boyfriend from abusing her body.

I could hardly bear to watch the scene of suffering before me, but forced myself to. Eventually Alison had clearly had enough because she arched her back one final time then doubled forward, clasping both hands around Mike's head as she did so. It may have been my mind playing tricks on me, but I could swear I even heard her scream out, a pitiful yelp of sorrow for her violated body. Mike's head stayed resting on her tummy for a few seconds, possibly imploring her to forgive him, then it disappeared beneath the window, and Alison slid slowly down the wall. Finally she disappeared altogether. They didn't re-emerge, and after half an hour gave up watching and went to bed, feeling slightly sick.

At least the tawdry episode crystallised in my mind the course of action that I had to take. Mike had to be eliminated. Now I know what people will think, that I just wanted him out of the way so that I would be free to have Alison. That makes it sound like a selfish plan. No, I was as much concerned for Alison as for me. Her life must have been a living hell, having that barbaric bar-tender running his rough working hands all over her pale soft skin, and doing *that* to her whenever he felt like it. I was amazed that she ever managed to look happy. Now I thought about it though, her eyes did have a haunted quality sometimes. When I'd seen her in the lab that day, she smiled with her lips, but she knew sadness as well. Now I knew why. So by removing Mike from her life, I would not only give myself the opportunity I needed, but I would be setting her free from his cruel tyrannical grasp too.

I decided to sleep on the plan, and give it time to form properly in my head. It would require careful preparation. There were factors to be taken into account, variables to be analysed. Pre-meditated murder was a new avenue for me, and I would approach with the same slow, methodical precision that I lent to my programming. After all, a bug in this procedure could land me in jail and without even the thought of Alison's love to keep me sane.

* * *

Work was a mere distraction for the rest of the week. My mind wasn't on it at all, and a couple of times I even handed over some files saying I'd finished with them, and they wouldn't even compile! Ron took me aside on Friday afternoon and asked if everything was all right. I fobbed him off, saying that my mother had been very ill and it was preying on my mind. Actually she was fine, as far as I knew, and I made a mental note to give her a ring.

The plan, when it came, was quite simple. I knew Mike worked in the *Pike and Eel*, and that he cycled along the path by the river to get there and back. All I needed to do was to lie in wait for him late one night, push him off his bike and into the river as he cycled past, hold his head under and drown him.

Naturally there was much more to it than that. There was the question of timing: how long after closing time would I have to wait for him to turn up. Then there were the physical aspects of it. He was much taller than me, and muscular. But he couldn't have weighed any more, and I'd have the element of surprise. If I chose my moment exactly right, I could use all my force to knock him sideways off his bike and down the bank.

What if he didn't go in the water? I needed a back up, so I decided to buy a knife. I went to the Youth Hostel Association camping shop in Cambridge on the Saturday and bought myself a vicious-looking nine-inch hunting knife with a serrated edge.

Once I had the plan worked out, it just remained for me to choose the time to implement it. I'd seen Mike leave the house at around 7 PM on the evenings he worked at the pub. He would set off on his bike, turn and wave to Alison, who'd be standing in the doorway, then shoot off up the cul-de-sac, pumping the pedals with his admittedly powerful legs. The bike itself was nothing special, an old racer with a dark-blue frame, and a regular "clank" as a slightly buckled or misaligned wheel scraped on the fork.

On one of the first occasions that I'd seen Mike set off, I used the opportunity to call on Alison, to get her alone. I invented a pretext, of having run out of sugar, just in case. But I was pretty sure she'd invite me in anyway. I knocked about ten minutes after Mike had left, and she came to the door dressed in old jeans and a baggy tee-shirt and nothing on her feet.

"Oh, hello," she said.

"Hi," I countered. "I was wondering, I've run out of sugar, and if you could lend me a cup I'd be really grateful."

"Oh, sure. Have they run out at the Stop Shop, then?"

Damn, It hadn't occurred to me that they'd still be open. So much for my pretext.

"Oh yes," I said weakly, "I'd forgotten about that. Never mind then. Erm..."

"Yes?"

"Well, I was just wondering if you've got any plans for tonight. There's a Woody Allen film on Channel Four if you fancy coming over and watching it." My heart was racing. I was totally winging it, and waited for her reply with almost overwhelming anticipation. I didn't have long to wait.

"Ah. Actually I've got a lab report to write up for tomorrow, and then some friends are coming round. Maybe some other time."

"Sure," I said, and turned away, crestfallen.

I kept an eye on the house, and didn't see any friends arriving. It dawned on me later that she just didn't want to be with me in case Mike came home unexpectedly and caught us together. Who know what he might do in a fit of jealous rage?

* * *

I didn't have long to wait before I could implement my plan. I saw Mike leave the house on Sunday, at 6:45 PM. He waved as usual to Alison. All I had to do now was wait until shortly before closing time, drive to the Milton end of the river, walk along the tow path away from the sounds of traffic and towards Chesterton, find a bush to hide behind, and

lie in wait until I heard Mike's bike approaching. It would be so simple.

The wait for closing time was a long one. I couldn't do anything that required lucid thought, so I watched TV. I trembled with fear and excitement: fear from the risk I was taking if it went wrong and people didn't believe that my motives were pure, and excitement as I looked forward to a successful outcome and the path that would open for me and Alison to follow.

Finally it was 10:45 PM, which I judged would give me ample time to get to the river and set my trap for Mike. It was still warm out, but I needed a deep pocket for the knife, so I wore a light but sturdy nylon jacket. Earlier in the day, I'd parked the car around the back of the house so no-one in the cul-de-sac (in particular, Alison) would see me drive off. It's attention to detail like that which distinguishes a fine analytical mind like mine from your everyday dullard, the sort of person I imagined Mike to be. Oh yes, he may have the edge over me in strength, but I had the brain power. I also had a change of clothes in the car. If I did have to use the knife, it might get messy, and I'd have to dispose of the clothes I was wearing.

I left the car a little way from where the river path joined the road, because that area was too well lit. I walked, hands in pockets, head down, towards the open gate across the path, and turned deftly on to the short pathway that led to the river itself.

Although the summer sky never gets completely dark, away from the roadside lamps there was little light to see by. I was fortunate with the moon (which I hadn't thought of, I must admit). It was only a few days from new, and rapidly followed the sun on its journey below the horizon. It was harder than I'd envisioned to find a suitable place to hide. The council had hacked back the summer foliage to make the path more passable, destroying many of the places where you could conceal yourself.

Eventually I found a tree around which the council workers couldn't be bothered to trim the bushes, and by placing myself behind it, I could remain concealed. What was even better was that the way from clear coming from the Milton direction, so I could leap out from behind the tree and hit my quarry side-on without being obstructed by branches or being given away too soon by rustling leaves.

I stood and waited. 11 PM. If he left the pub at 11:10, he'd be here by 11:15. I tried to keep my breathing shallow and even to calm my racing heart, which was responding to the adrenaline coursing through my body. I felt super-sensitive. The sounds of the still summer night were amplified: I could here the tinkling flow of the river 15 feet away, the warm, gentle summer breeze disturbing the leaves of the bushes around me. I even fancied I could here the sounds of insects whispering to one another, wondering what was going to happen in their usually quiet undergrowth tonight.

My eyes were fully accustomed to the dark now, and I could see about 20 feet down the river path before it disappeared behind a slight bend. That should be enough. I didn't need much warning to time my surprise appearance. I could see the river too now. It reflected the lights of a house far away on the opposite bank. The reflections danced crazily as the black waters swirled and eddied around protrusions from the river bank and

unseen objects beneath the surface.

At last I heard the sound of an approaching bicycle. In fact it sounded like two bikes, and I could hear voices. I felt annoyance rise within me. Alison had met Mike at the pub again and they were coming home together. But as the couple rounded the bend towards me, I saw that it was two men, neither of whom looked like Steve. I span round as they became aware of me and pretended to pee against the tree. As one of them hurtled noisily past he shouted "Having a slash, mate?" and they both erupted into guffaws of laughter. People think they're so witty when they're drunk.

My nerves jangled. My breathing was heavy and laboured now, in spite of all my attempts to control it. My head throbbed with a primitive jungle rhythm. I could feel the sweaty palms of my shaking hands even as I gripped the handle of the long steel hunting knife for reassurance. I felt a temptation to abandon the plan, to go home and try to think of another way to win Alison's heart, but a voice deep inside told me that this was the only way, and I knew it was right.

As the mechanical and human cacophony from the drunk cyclists faded to become but a faint accompaniment to the other night sounds, I discerned ahead the regular scraping sound of metal on metal. The time signature of Mike's old bike was announcing his arrival and helping to seal his fate. I held the knife tight. I would use my shoulder to push Mike off course into the river, and would keep a firm grip on the knife in case I needed to use it quickly.

Clank, clank. He was approaching the bend. I tried to judge his speed from the sound the bike made. Not too fast. Clank, clank. I saw him appear behind the tree at the bend in the path ahead. Clank, clank. The noise of the bike joined the buzzing sound in my ears, conspiring to deafen me. Clank, clank. At the exact moment I calculated I should leap out, his eyes met mine. They widened in surprise, and the bike wobbled as his arms twitched in a nervous reflex reaction. I was already on my way, hands held to my chest, shoulder firmed against the impact. The slight change in his course made me mis-time the collision and instead of impacting full on with his body, I merely glanced it and collided with the metal frame of the bike. The hub of the rear wheel tore a gash in my knee as it sped past. I started to scream in agony, but quickly suppressed it.

But Mike was off course and out of control. The bike veered right, towards the bank. I saw Mike desperately trying to correct by moving the handlebars to the left, but he overcompensated and the front tyre lost its grip on the damp riverside. The bike slid from under Mike, the momentum dragging them both down the bank towards the river. His legs were trapped in the bike frame and I heard a crunch when they landed at the bottom of the bank, inches from the river. As the bike tried to bounce into the air, Mike's leg held it down, until the joint at his knee gave way and splintered bone cut through his flesh and jeans. The scream he emitted sounded like an animal being slaughtered. I was afraid it would wake half of Chesterton. I needed to act quickly.

I hobbled down to where Mike lay, the bike still resting on his thighs. The broken leg was at a strange-looking angle and I could see thick blood oozing from it, spreading a dark stain over his ripped jeans. His scream subsided and he was whimpering like a dog now.

As I approached he looked at me with pleading eyes and held his arms up beseechingly. He was trying to speak: "Pl... please... help... me."

"I wish I could, Mike, I wish I could." I felt strangely calm now. There still a sense of urgency, but the deed had been done. He was as good as dead, so I was as guilty as I'd ever be.

Mike's head lay inches from the gurgling river. I'd decided to go for the death-by-drowning approach, rather than using the knife. Drowning would look much more like an accident, and I was keen to keep the police out of this as much as possible.

I stepped into the shallow waters of the river with my back to it and placed my arms underneath Mike's armpits.

"Let's get you a bit wetter shall we? Ready? Heave ho!"

It was hard work dragging his solid body even the few inches down to the water. At one point his broken leg must have got stuck on something because there was another gristly cracking sound as the bone gave way, and Mike let out another one of those awful screams. This time I was better placed to stifle it and I clamped my hand over his mouth.

"Nearly there," I said as his head inched close to the water. When I'd got him in the water up to his shoulders I was satisfied. He was panicking a bit, arms flailing, trying to push his head out of the polluted waters of the River Cam. I thought I'd better give nature a helping hand, so pushed gently down on the side of his head to make sure his mouth and nostrils were fully submerged. He made an awful gurgling, spluttering noise. I never realised humans could sound so much like animals in the throes of death. At last he stopped his thrashing and was still. I lifted my hand from his head. I'd been careful not to push too hard; I didn't want any tell-tail signs of a struggle. The head bobbed up and down in the water. His eye was still open and it looked up at me, glinting in accusation.

I paddled out of the water and shook my drenched trouser legs and gently fingered my cut knee. It wasn't as bad as I'd thought at first, just a narrow strip of badly scraped skin. Some disinfectant and a bandage and it'd be good as new. The wet legs were a nuisance, though. I didn't want to drip water in the car. I climbed up the bank being careful not to stand upright too soon in case I toppled over backwards to join Mike's bobbing form in the cold water. I hurried along the path, carefully listening out for any late night dog-walkers or joggers. I passed no-one.

Back in the eerie glow of the street lights I felt naked and vulnerable. I walked briskly to the relative darkness that engulfed the car. In the boot I'd stashed a duffel bag with a complete change of clothes. All I'd need was the trousers. I decided to risk changing them in the street, pressed close to the brick wall that surrounded the car park of a small block of flats. I don't think I've ever moved so quickly. My wet, torn jeans were off, and my new dry ones on in four or five seconds. I dashed from the wall to the car, started the ignition and drove as carefully as my raw nerves would allow. The last thing I needed was to be stopped by the cops, so I kept to just below the speed limit.

The drive was short and uneventful. Traffic was light; most people are at home late on

Sunday night, getting a good night's sleep to be ready for work in the morning. I parked round the back of the house again and let myself in the back door. I locked and bolted it, then leaned back against the door and felt my whole body slump as the tension drained from it. My tee-shirt was stuck to my body, not from river water but from the sweat that seeped from my pores. I looked down at my knee and cursed. It was still bleeding slightly and a dark red stain had appeared on the leg of the fresh trousers I'd just put on. I pulled the jacket, shirt and trousers off, threw them in the washing machine, and went upstairs to run the bath.

Lying in the bath, I felt the chill hand of terror caress me as I remembered the knife. Where was it? I couldn't remember seeing it after I had to climb down the bank to finish Mike off. I couldn't remember dropping it either. I quickly rose from the bath, water splashing all over my luckless landlord's carpet, and briskly towelled myself off. Downstairs I searched the jacket pockets for the knife. No luck. I looked around furiously, eyes darting from the kitchen table to the sink to the work surface. It was nowhere to be seen. Finally I had an inspiration: maybe I'd put it in the bag with my wet jeans without realising. The bag was in the car. I had to know if it was there, so I rushed upstairs, threw my dressing gown on, unlocked and unbolted the back door, and walked barefoot across the weed-infested garden to the concrete parking spaces. I pulled the bag out of the boot and rushed back to the house before some insomniac neighbour noticed my strange antics.

Back in the house, I tipped the contents of the bag onto the brown tiled linoleum of the kitchen floor. I knew in my heart that it wasn't there before I emptied the contents. I would have felt it through the thin plastic of the carrier bag. Shirt, soaking ripped jeans, shoes. They were all present, but no knife. I sat on the kitchen floor, crossed legged, clasped my hands together at the back of my neck and wept. The knife could hurt me, hurt me badly. If I'd dropped it in the river, maybe it wouldn't be found. If it was on the bank though, or God forbid, on the path, then someone might easily spot it. It would be covered with my finger prints. Not that the police had any record of my prints, of course, but if they had some reason to suspect me, it would tie me well and truly to the scene of the murder.

I went over and over in my mind how it could have happened, how I could have been so careless. Everything else had worked so well. I even considered going back to the river, but that would be too risky. Someone may have found the body by now, and it would be surrounded by police and ambulance men. All I could do was sit tight and pray. And ask myself why gloves hadn't entered into my brilliant, analytical mind when I planned the operation.

Upstairs in bed I tried to sleep with limited success. At about 3:30 AM I was awakened by flashing lights outside of the window. My bedroom was lit in a nightmarish blue strobe. The police, of course. I had to admit to myself, it was impressive work, tracking me down so quickly. I heard an insistent knocking, but not on my front door. I risked creeping over to the window, keeping my head down. I peeked over the stained-wood window frame and saw that the police car was parked outside Alison's house. A police woman was silhouetted in the light from house's entrance hall. She had her arm around a bent figure and was gently leading it to the back of the car. So they'd found the body. I

imagined Alison would have reported Mike missing and where he'd been that evening, so matching that report to any dead bodies that turned up would have been trivial.

The police car drove off, the roar from its powerful engine gashing through the still summer night. The intrusive noise diminished as the car turned the corner at the end of the cul-de-sac and soon its accelerating tone was barely audible.

Sleep proved difficult to come by. Every time I dropped off, I would start to dream. I saw Mike's head raise out of the water. He pushed himself up, his eyes still dead, mud and river slime dripping down his grey, lifeless face. He picked up the gleaming knife that lay next to the bicycle, and started to hobble towards me, the splintered bone of his leg still protruding through the hole in his blood-soaked jeans. His short hair and gaunt face made his head look skeletal, a mask of death haunting me with a vengeful grimace.

When the hands of my alarm clock hand finally swept their languorous way round to 8 AM, I decided reluctantly to get up. There was nothing to be done other than try to act normally, and that meant going to work. I switched on the portable radio next to my bed and tuned it to a local commercial radio station, CNFM. The news would be on. I caught the end of the report.

"...signs of a struggle. Police say they found a weapon close to the body, though this doesn't appear to have been used in the crime. The dead man's fiancée is currently helping them with their inquiries, though they stress she is not a suspect at this time. The man's relatives have been informed. Police say the assailant is very dangerous and they have closed the stretch of river between Chesterton and Milton to pedestrians and cyclists until further notice. They are appealing to anyone who noticed one or more suspicious persons in the vicinity between 10 PM and 3 AM to come forward.

"The stock market opened a short while ago, three points down on Friday's close..."

Shit shit shit. I got dressed quickly and had a large fried breakfast. All the work the previous day had left me famished. I tried to calm down. There was still nothing to tie me to the dead body. OK, so they had a knife. With some prints on it. But no-one had seen me. I had no motive. My love for Alison was our secret, and she wouldn't tell them about us. I was safe. I started to relax, or as much as anyone can relax when they know that an entire city's police force is searching for them.

* * *

Just I was about to step out the back door to walk to the car, I heard a knock from the front. This time it unmistakably *was* coming from my street door. I considered making a run for it, but decided that if they were planning to arrest me, they'd have people out the back as well, and there was no-one there. I went to the front of the house to answer the door, being careful to close the kitchen door behind me; it was still a bit messy from the previous night.

A young, blue-uniformed officer with a pimply face stood in the door-way. He was intimidatingly tall.

“Good-morning sir. Sorry if I got you out of bed.”

“I was just leaving for work, actually.”

He looked surprised. “Oh. Well. Anyway, we’re making some inquiries about a recent fatal assault, and if you have a moment I’d like to ask you some questions.”

I glanced over his broad shoulder and noticed another policeman standing at the front entrance of Alison’s next door neighbours’ house. So I wasn’t being singled out.

“Of course, officer. Come in.”

I cleared some dishes I’d been meaning to put in the sink off the sofa and motioned him to sit down. He sank into the sofa and his knees stuck high into the air. I put the plates on top of a pile of magazines on the coffee table and sat on the other sofa. The policeman got out his small black notebook. It was just like in the movies.

“You may have heard the report of the attack on the news, sir.”

“What, the one by the river? That was in Chesterton, wasn’t it?”

“That’s right sir, but the victim lived here. Just over the road from you in fact.”

I feigned horror. “What, not, Mike? Oh my God, that’s terrible.”

I was quite enjoying this.

“I’m afraid so, sir. How well did you know Mr. Wheeler, sir?”

“Not very well at all, I’m afraid. I only moved here three weeks ago, from Oxford, so I haven’t met many of the neighbours. I’ve spoken to Mike and his girlfriend, Alice, I think, a couple of times in the street, oh and did go over to borrow a cup of sugar once, but that’s about it. How is she?” I had to ask.

“Very upset, as you might imagine. So you wouldn’t say you knew the couple well enough to know if Mr. Wheeler had any enemies, people who might want to hurt him?”

“No, not at all, I’m afraid. You know what these estates are like. People don’t get to know each other very well, and as I said, I’m very new here.”

“One more question sir, then I’ll let you get on. You haven’t noticed any people hanging around the cul-de-sac, people walking the street but not going into one of the houses?”

“Again, I have to say no. You, you don’t think Alison... that’s it, Alison, is in any danger, do you?”

“To be honest, sir, I don’t think so. It’s beginning to look as though, brutal as the attack was, it was unpremeditated, perhaps an attempted mugging that went badly wrong. The murder itself may have been a desperate attempt by the assailant to avoid detection, though of course he’s made things very much worse for himself when we do catch him. Well, I’ll let you get on, sir. Thank you for your time.”

“Not at all. I hope you catch him, whoever it is.”

“Oh, we will sir, we will. Good-day.”

I let the policeman out, and rejoiced at my performance. Not only did I remove any suspicion from myself, but also elicited some information from him too. If they were worried for Alison’s safety they would probably keep her at the police station, or at least have an officer checking up on the house every five minutes. If they thought it was a random attack, though, they’d much more likely leave her to her own devices.

* * *

Finally I managed to leave for work. I couldn’t concentrate though. If my mind had been wandering the previous week, now it was off training for a half-marathon somewhere. I would type a word on my terminal, then stare at it for ten minutes while I was distracted by thoughts of murder and police investigations. Eventually I could stand it no longer, and told Ron I was going home because I was feeling ill. I had a believable case because I’d announced on arriving at the office that a good friend of mine had been murdered – they’d all heard about it on the radio – and I got more than the usual amount of politeness and understanding from them.

I’d been back home for twenty minutes when a police car pulled up outside Alison’s house. She stepped out with a police woman. Alison looked terrible. Her hair was dull and matted, and I could see red around her eyes. I rushed upstairs to the bedroom window, which I knew was open, and stood behind it, listening carefully.

I heard the police woman say “Are you sure you’ll be all right here?”

“Yes, I’ll just pack a few things then go down to my parents. A friend is coming over to take me as soon as she gets off work. I gave them my parents’ address and phone number at the station. Thanks for everything.”

“That’s all right love. Don’t worry, we’ll catch him. We’ll get in touch the moment there’s anything to report.”

“OK. Thanks again. Bye.”

I heard the door close. The police car didn’t drive away for some time. The WPC must have been calling in her report, or whatever it is they do. Eventually I heard a distorted message sound over the police car radio, and shortly afterwards the engine started and the car disappeared down the cul-de-sac.

This was bad news. If Alison was going to disappear down to her parents’, I didn’t have much time to explain everything to her. I reckoned the quicker she knew everything, the sooner we could sort this whole thing out and start our new lives together. I ran my fingers through my hair and pulled my tee-shirt down towards my waist, and ambled over to Alison’s.

She took her time answering, and when she did finally come to the door, she was in a pink dressing gown and wore a towel on her head in a turban. She looked startled to see

me.

I said, "Hi Alison. Sorry to disturb you at a time like this, but I just had to come over and say how very sorry I was to hear about Mike. It must be awful for you."

She was on the verge of tears and didn't say anything. She just looked at me slightly uncomprehendingly.

"What are you doing here?" she managed to ask, at last.

"I've just come to help you. Why don't I come in?"

I knew she'd be in shock, so I had to take control of the situation. It was two thirty already so it might only be a couple of hours before her friend arrived. I walked forward and pushed her gently back into her house, closing the door behind me.

"I'm... I'm sorry," she stuttered, "I've had a terrible shock and I don't think I can..."

"Shh," I said, "don't worry about entertaining me. I just want to talk for a while. You know, just the two of us. We can be honest with each other. You don't have to cover up for Mike, as I'm sure you did with the police." I led her over to the settee. She was like a rag doll, all limp and floppy. I pressed down gently but firmly on her shoulders, making her sit.

She looked at me through confused eyes. "Do... do you know something about Mike's... murder?"

"It wasn't murder, Alison. It was a mercy killing. I did it for you, to end your suffering."

Her eyes opened wide. She appeared to be trying to speak, but all that emerged were strange gasping sounds.

"You...?!" she finally whispered. "You killed my Mike?"

With a single bound she was up off the sofa and had her hands around my neck. I was momentarily distracted when the dressing gown opened and there was her beautiful body, those perfectly shaped breasts close enough to caress. But I was becoming dangerously short of breath, so I gently pulled her hands from my throat and gave her a little shove back onto the sofa. Being fairly slight, she fell quickly. Unfortunately she banged her head quite hard on the wall behind the couch. It made a worrying thud, and she lost consciousness. That was useful because if she was going to be unreasonable about this, I would have to restrain her. This was starting to seem all too familiar. I thought Alison would be different, but she was turning out to be just like Liz.

First I closed the living room curtains, then I hunted around the house and brought a chair from the kitchen and some thick masking tape I found in a drawer. I lifted her on to the chair, being careful to make sure she was decent – the last thing I wanted was for her to think I was just interested in her body – and fastened her feet to the front chair legs and taped her wrists together behind her back. I put some tape over her mouth too, just in case she woke up screaming. I rubbed her face gently with a cold damp cloth, and she slowly

regained consciousness.

The masking tape around her mouth was a good idea because the moment she saw me she let out a muffled cry. Her eyes were blazing; she looked like a crazy woman. Eventually she realised it was pointless to struggle against the strong tape that bound her, and slumped back on the chair.

“Good,” I said, “now I’ve got your attention again. What I wanted to say was that what I did last night, I did for you, Alison. I know how you were suffering at the mercy of that... that ruffian. I alone could hear your cries for help. I set you free, don’t you see? Now you can choose someone more suitable. Someone who would love and cherish you.”

I looked down bashfully and continued. “Of course, far me it from me to make suggestions, but I happen to find myself available at the moment. I think you’ll agree that there was some... chemistry between us, even the first time we met.”

She shook her head slowly, tears streaming down her eyes. She must have been overcome with emotion.

“Now look,” I said, “I’m going to take the tape off your mouth because you look much prettier that way and I want to hear you talk. But you’ve got to promise me you won’t scream or anything, OK?”

She nodded.

“All right, then”

I removed the tape very slowly, trying not to pull at the delicate skin of her cheeks and mouth. When it was off she took several gasps of air, then took several long, slow, deep breaths.

Eventually she said, “You’re insane. You must know that.”

I shook my head slowly.

“I expected more gratitude than that from you. Liz was the same. I offered her love and adoration, and she spurned me. After I gave her lift home from the pub too. After she’d invited me in for a coffee, eventually. After I’d told her I wouldn’t stay long. I just wanted to hold her, to comfort her. She said she didn’t want that from me, that she had a boyfriend, and that if I left right now then she wouldn’t tell him anything about this, as long as I never bothered her again. But I couldn’t trust her, then, you see? She might tell him all sorts of lies about me. And she still refused to let me hold her or even touch her. What was I supposed to do? It was her fault. She was the one who broke the trust between us. I’d worshipped her for weeks, and she just threw that all away. And now she was bringing her boyfriend into it. So she had to go, you see. I didn’t want to do it, but I didn’t have any option.” I sighed sadly at the memory, Liz’s pretty face spoiled by those hideous bulging eyes where I’d squeezed the life out of her.

“Matthew,” Alison said very calmly. “Why don’t you untie me, and we’ll call the police.

You're just a bit confused, that's all. They'll understand. They'll have doctors who can take care of you. There's no need for anyone else to get hurt. Just untie me."

"God, Alison," I said, "I wish you wouldn't talk to me as if I was some kind of a nutter. I expected better from a psychologist. I'm getting a bit fed up with your ingratitude, to be honest. You haven't even thanked me for getting rid of that thug Mike for you."

She got all weepy again. "You bastard. Mike was the kindest, sweetest man I've ever met. What could you possibly know about him? How can you stand there and call him a thug?"

"Well for start he didn't even have a job. And he looked like one. Those big chest muscles, I mean, who was he trying to impress. And he worked in a pub!"

She gathered herself again. "Mike didn't have a job because he'd just finished his PhD. in anthropology. He didn't have a job because he was waiting for a post at Stanford University to be confirmed. We were going to get married and move to the States as soon as we could." Her voice was starting to rise, in both pitch and volume. "His physique was due to his being on his college's rowing team. He worked in the pub to get some money because he felt guilty about living off me for the last year of his PhD., even though I told him a hundred times he didn't have to. Any other sick delusions you'd like cleared up?"

I was getting angry now. She was just trying to make me feel bad. But I still had my ace card up my sleeve. I flourished it impressively, I thought.

"Yes, as a matter of fact," I said. "What about... what about what he did to you in the bedroom, up against the wall, down between your legs. You can't tell me you were enjoying that."

She laughed, but it was tinged with hysteria. I fingered the roll of masking tape, ready to put some over her mouth if she got crazy again.

"So you've been spying on us!? My God. What we were doing was making love. Mike was making me feel as good as a woman can feel. Can't you understand that? No, I don't suppose you can. No woman would let you get near her. That poor Liz was right."

"What do you mean? Why wouldn't she?"

Alison looked incredulous. "Are you serious? Have you taken a look at yourself? You're massively overweight, what do you weigh? 250 pounds? Your hair has enough grease to fry an egg on, as long as you like copious amounts of dandruff with your eggs. Your clothes look as though they haven't seen a washing machine or iron in months, and you have the most disgusting body odour I've ever smelt in my life. I can smell it from here. You make me sick." She paused, her eyes aflame.

She continued. "It's just hit me. It was you. In that last batch of tests. One of the results showed highly abnormal compulsion characteristics. It must have been you. If only the test had shown how dangerous you were."

I was stunned. How could she say those things? OK, so I dress casually and don't have

obsessive personal hygiene habits, and I like my food, but surely she was exaggerating? I discreetly turned my head sniffed down at my armpit. There was a slight fruitiness there, but nothing offensive, I thought. I was going right off Alison. Her face wasn't that attractive after all. And her close-set eyes made her look like a hawk.

"You're just saying that," I told her. "You're just saying it to make me feel bad because I've given you what you wanted and now you can't deal with it. You're so ungrateful. I'm beginning to think all girls are the same."

"No. You're wrong. You've done such a terrible, evil thing. You've taken away the person I loved. A lot of people loved him actually. You'll never know how much pain you've caused. It doesn't matter what you do now. Not to me. I don't want to live without Mike. They'll find out it's you, you know. If you don't kill me, I'll get free eventually and call the police. My friend will be here soon too. So even if you do kill me, she'll raise the alarm when I don't answer."

I'd been thinking about that too. So really it came down to whether I killed her or not. I decided I probably would, not for the small amount of time it might buy me, but because she'd turned out to be a bit of an ungrateful bitch. I walked round to the back of the chair to which she was fastened and quickly covered her mouth with masking tape. She twisted her head left and right and I had to clamp it across the forehead with my arm to keep her still. With her head tilted back, I picked up the sharp Stanley knife I'd found in the drawer with the masking tape. I stuck the blade in her neck, just below the jaw bone, and pull it across, left to right. After a couple of inches I must have hit the jugular because a waterfall of blood gushed from her neck. I carried on though, just to make sure. The blood bubbled around the windpipe as I the blade sliced though it and she started breathing through the slit in her throat. It sounded a bit like a pot boiling over. The fountain of blood pulsed rhythmically, varying where it hit the carpet from about three feet in front of her to nearly six feet. Ruby red blood splashed on to her chest and trickled down over her breasts, camouflaging the delicate pink of her nipples with its deep hue. Suddenly her whole body stiffened, then went quite limp. I released my grip on her head. It was done.

I washed my hands in the kitchen sink and wiped anything I'd touched clear of prints. I know it was a bit late in the day for taking those kinds of precautions, but it might slow the police down a bit.

I didn't have much time, so I quickly made sure the back door was bolted, closed the kitchen door so you couldn't see into the living room from outside the kitchen window, then left through the front door pulling it closed behind me. I glanced back just once at Alison, her head slumped on to her scarlet chest, and tutted with disappointment.

* * *

The news report on the radio said that it was now a double murder inquiry. I heard it on the drive down to London. There were still no suspects though. I'd decided it would be safest to drive to the outskirts of London, say Walthamstow, park the car as unobtrusively as possible round there, and do the rest of the journey by train. I found a street that was

well off the main road, but had quite a few cars parked on it, so an additional one shouldn't be noticed too quickly. I took the tube to Victoria Station and bought a single to Hove from there.

Mum was ever so pleased to see me. She looked smaller and greyer than ever, but the years fell off her when I told her I'd probably stay for quite a while. I explained the trouble I was in, and that the police would be looking for me soon. She understood, of course, she always did. Even when I was at school, and the girls would laugh in my face when I'd ask if they wanted to go to the school disco with me, mum understood. She explained about the types of girls that are nice, and those that are nasty. Unfortunately there were many more of the latter than the former around. She said I'd find my Miss Right eventually, I just had to look for long enough.

It's good to be back in the tall Victorian sea-front house again. The yellow paint is faded now, and peeling, but mum stopped running it as a Bed and Breakfast long ago, so that doesn't matter. The remaining guests are the mad old lady who has the flat on the top floor, and a gentleman who works at a shoe shop in Brighton and has lived in mummy's house for years. They won't be any bother, but I'm keeping out of their sight, just in case.

The police have been back three times now. I hide down in the cellar when they come. The trap-door that leads down to it is hidden beneath a rug. I can hear the policemen's questions when they come. Mum sounds very convincing about not having seen or heard from me, but I think they might be losing patience with her. The last time they were here, I think I heard one of them say "search warrant". I suppose I'll have to face them eventually, try to explain it all to them. At least I've had a chance to set it all down now, to get my thoughts in order. I can't imagine that any sane jury would convict me after reading this.