

JOHN FOWLES



The
Magus

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JOHN FOWLES

John Fowles won international recognition with *The Collector*, his first published title, in 1963. He was immediately acclaimed as an outstandingly innovative writer of exceptional imaginative power. This reputation was confirmed with the appearance of his subsequent works including *The Aristos*, *The Magus*, *The French Lieutenant's Woman*, *The Ebony Tower*, *Daniel Martin*, *Mantissa* and *A Maggot*. John Fowles died in 2005.

ALSO BY JOHN FOWLES

Fiction

The Collector

The French Lieutenant's Woman

The Ebony Tower

Daniel Martin

Mantissa

A Maggot

Non-Fiction

The Aristos

The Tree

The Journals: Volume 1

The Journals: Volume 2

JOHN FOWLES

The Magus

A Revised Version

With a Foreword and Afterword by The Author

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Foreword

Though this is not, in any major thematic or narrative sense, a fresh version of *The Magus*, it is rather more than a stylistic revision. A number of scenes have been largely rewritten, and one or two new ones invented. I have taken this somewhat unusual course not least because – if letters are any test – the book has aroused more interest than anything else I have written. I have long learnt to accept that the fiction that professionally always pleased me least (a dissatisfaction strongly endorsed by many of its original reviewers) persists in attracting a majority of my readers most.

The story appeared in 1965, after two other books, but in every way except that of mere publishing date, it is a first novel. I began writing it in the early 1950s, and both narrative and mood went through countless transformations. In its original form there was a clear supernatural element – an attempt at something along the lines of Henry James's masterpiece, *The Turn of the Screw*. But I had no coherent idea at all of where I was going, in life as in the book. A more objective side of me did not then believe I should ever become a publishable writer; a subjective one could not abandon the myth it was trying, clumsily and laboriously, to bring into the world; and my strongest memory is of constantly having to abandon drafts because of an inability to describe what I wanted. Both technique and that bizarre face of the imagination that seems to be more like a failure to remember the already existent than what it really is – a failure to evoke the non-existent – kept me miserably aground. Yet when the success of *The Collector* in 1963 gave me some literary confidence, it was this endlessly tortured and recast cripple that demanded precedence over various other novels I had attempted in the 1950s ... and at least two of which were, I suspect,

more presentable and might have done my name, at least in my own country, more good.

In 1964 I went to work and collated and rewrote all the previous drafts. But *The Magus* remained essentially where a tyro taught himself to write novels – beneath its narrative, a notebook of an exploration, often erring and misconceived, into an unknown land. Even in its final published form it was a far more haphazard and naïvely instinctive work than the more intellectual reader can easily imagine; the hardest blows I had to bear from critics were those which condemned the book as a coldly calculated exercise in fantasy, a cerebral game. But then one of the (incurable) faults of the book was the attempt to conceal the real state of endless flux in which it was written.

Besides the obvious influence of Jung, whose theories deeply interested me at the time, three other novels were of importance in the writing. The model I was most conscious of was Alain-Fournier's *Le Grand Meaulnes*, indeed so conscious that in the course of revision I suppressed a number of too overt references. The parallels may not be very striking to the literal-minded analyst, but *The Magus* would have been a profoundly different book if it were not for its French forebear. The capacity of *Le Grand Meaulnes* (for some of us, at any rate) to provide an experience beyond the literary was precisely what I wanted to instil in my own story. Another failure in *The Magus*, which again I can't now remedy, was my inability to see that this is a characteristic longing of adolescence. At least the adolescence of Henri Fournier's protagonist is open and specific.

The second influence may seem surprising, but it was undoubtedly that of a book which haunted my childhood imagination, Richard Jefferies' *Bevis*. I believe novelists are formed, whether they know it or not, very young indeed; and *Bevis* shares a quality with *Le Grand Meaulnes*, that of projecting a very different world from the one that is – or was to the middle-class suburban child I had outwardly to be. I cite it as a reminder that the deep pattern, and mood, of such books remains long after one has graduated from them in more obvious ways.

The third book that lies behind *The Magus* I did not recognize at the time, and can list now thanks to the percipience of a student at

Reading University, who wrote to me one day, years after publication, and pointed out the numerous parallels with *Great Expectations*. What she was not to know is that it is the one novel of Dickens for which I have always had an undivided admiration and love (and for which I forgive him so much else I dislike in his work); that during the earlier writing of my own novel I was even teaching it, with great enjoyment, as a set book; and that I long toyed with the notion of making Conchis a woman – an idea whose faint ghost, Miss Havisham's, remains in the figure of Mrs de Seitas. One small new passage in this revised text is in homage to that unseen influence.

Two other more considerable changes need a brief word. The erotic element is stronger in two scenes. I regard that as merely the correction of a past failure of nerve. The other change is in the ending. Though its general intent has never seemed to me as obscure as some readers have evidently found it – perhaps because they have not given due weight to the two lines from the *Pervigilium Veneris* that close the book – I accept that I might have declared a preferred aftermath less ambiguously ... and now have done so.

No writer will happily disclose the deeper biographical influences of his work, which are seldom those of outward date and occupation, and I am no exception. But my island of Phraxos (the 'fenced' island) was the real Greek island of Spetsai, where I taught in 1951 and 1952 at a private boarding-school – not, in those days, very like the one in the book. If I had attempted a true portrait of it, I should have been committed to a comic novel.*

The well-known Greek millionaire who has now taken over a part of Spetsai is in no way connected with my fictional one; the arrival of Mr Niarchos came much later. Nor was the then owner of the villa of 'Bourani', some of whose outward appearance and whose superb site I did appropriate, in the least the model for my character, though I understand that this is now by way of becoming another

* Another, and curious, novel about the school exists: Kenneth Matthews, *Aleko* (Peter Davies, 1934). The French writer Michel Déon has also published the autobiographical *Le Balcon de Spetsai* (Gallimard, 1961).

local legend. I met the gentleman – a friend of the elder Venizelos – only twice, and very briefly. It was his house that I remembered.

It is probably impossible today – I speak from hearsay, never having returned there – to imagine Spetsai as I have pictured it just after the war. Life there was lonely in the extreme, though there were always two English masters at the school, not the one of the book. I was fortunate in my chance-brought colleague, and now old friend, Denys Sharrocks. He was exceptionally well-read, and far wiser in the ways of the Greeks than myself. He first took me to the villa. He had recently decided to kill a literary ambition of his own. ‘Bourani’, he declared wryly, was where he had on a previous visit written the last poem of his life. In some peculiar way this fused a spark in my imagination; the strangely isolated villa, its magnificent setting, the death of a friend’s illusion; and as we approached the villa on its cape that first time, there came a very bizarre sound indeed for a classical landscape ... not the august Pleyel harpsichord of my book, but something much more absurdly reminiscent of a Welsh chapel. I hope the harmonium is still there. It also gave birth to something.

Foreign faces on the island – even Greek ones – were then great rarities. I remember a boy rushing up to Denys and myself one day to announce that another Englishman had landed from the Athens steamer – and how we set off, like two Dr Livingstones, to greet this unheard-of arrival on our desert island. On another occasion it was Henry Miller’s Colossus of Maroussi, Katsimbali, whom we hastened to pay our respects to. There was still a touching atmosphere of a one village about Greece then.

Away from its inhabited corner Spetsai was truly haunted, though by subtler – and more beautiful – ghosts than those I have created. Its pine-forest silences were uncanny, unlike those I have experienced anywhere else; like an eternally blank page waiting for a note or a word. They gave the most curious sense of timelessness and of incipient myth. In no place was it less likely that something would happen; yet somehow happening lay always poised. The *genius loci* was very similar indeed to that of Mallarmé’s finest poems of the unseen flight, of words defeated before the inexpressible. I am hard put to convey the importance of this experience for

me as a writer. It imbued and marked me far more profoundly than any of my more social and physical memories of the place. I already knew I was a permanent exile from many aspects of English society, but a novelist has to enter deeper exiles still.

In most outward ways this experience was depressive, as many young would-be writers and painters who have gone to Greece for inspiration have discovered. We used to have a nickname for the sense of inadequacy and accidie it induced – the ‘Aegean Blues’. One has to be a very complete artist to create good work among the purest and most balanced landscapes on this planet, and especially when one knows that their only conceivable human match was met in a time beyond re-entry. The Greece of the islands is Circe still; no place for the artist-voyager to linger long, if he cares for his soul.

No correlative whatever of my fiction, beyond the above, took place on Spetsai during my stay. What ground the events of the book have in reality came after I had returned to England. I had escaped Circe, but the withdrawal symptoms were severe. I had not then realized that loss is essential for the novelist, immensely fertile for his books, however painful to his private being. This unresolved sense of a lack, a missed opportunity, led me to graft certain dilemmas of a private situation in England on the memory of the island and its solitudes, which became increasingly for me the lost Eden, the *domaine sans nom* of Alain-Fournier – even Bevis’s farm, perhaps. Gradually my protagonist, Nicholas, took on, if not the true representative face of a modern Everyman, at least that of a partial Everyman of my own class and background. There is a private pun in the family name I gave him. As a child I could not pronounce *th* except as *f*, and Urfé really stands for Earth – a coining that long preceded the convenient connection with Honoré d’Urfé and *L’Astrée*.

The foregoing will, I hope, excuse me from saying what the story ‘means’. Novels, even much more lucidly conceived and controlled ones than this, are not like crossword puzzles, with one unique set of correct answers behind the clues – an analogy (‘Dear Mr Fowles, Please explain the real significance of ...’) I sometimes despair of ever extirpating from the contemporary student mind. If *The Magus* has

any 'real significance', it is no more than that of the Rorschach test in psychology. Its meaning is whatever reaction it provokes in the reader, and so far as I am concerned there is no given 'right' reaction.

I should add that in revising the text I have not attempted to answer the many justified criticisms of excess, over-complexity, artificiality and the rest that the book received from the more sternly adult reviewers on its first appearance. I now know the generation whose mind it most attracts, and that it must always substantially remain a novel of adolescence written by a retarded adolescent. My only plea is that all artists have to range the full extent of their own lives freely. The rest of the world can censor and bury their private past. We cannot, and so have to remain partly green till the day we die ... callow-green in the hope of becoming fertile-green. It is a constant complaint in that most revealing of all modern novels about novelists, Thomas Hardy's agonized last fiction, *The Well-Beloved*: how the much younger self still rules the supposedly 'mature' and middle-aged artist. One may reject the tyranny, as Hardy himself did; but the cost is the end of one's ability to write novels. *The Magus* was also (though quite unconsciously) an out-of-hand celebration of acceptance of the yoke.

If there was some central scheme beneath the (more Irish than Greek) stew of intuitions about the nature of human existence – and of fiction – it lies perhaps in the alternative title, whose rejection I still sometimes regret: *The Godgame*. I did intend Conchis to exhibit a series of masks representing human notions of God, from the supernatural to the jargon-ridden scientific; that is, a series of human illusions about something that does not exist in fact, absolute knowledge and absolute power. The destruction of such illusions seems to me still an eminently humanist aim; and I wish there were some super-Conchis who could put the Arabs and the Israelis, or the Ulster Catholics and Protestants, through the same heuristic mill as Nicholas.

I do not defend Conchis's decision at the execution, but I defend the reality of the dilemma. God and freedom are totally antipathetic concepts; and men believe in their imaginary gods most often

because they are afraid to believe in the other thing. I am old enough to realize now that they do so sometimes with good reason. But I stick by the general principle, and that is what I meant to be at the heart of my story: that true freedom lies between each two, never in one alone, and therefore it can never be absolute freedom. All freedom, even the most relative, may be a fiction; but mine, and still today, prefers the other hypothesis.

1976

JOHN FOWLES

The Magus

Un débauché de profession est rarement un homme pitoyable.

De Sade, *Les Infortunes de la Vertu*

1

I was born in 1927, the only child of middle-class parents, both English, and themselves born in the grotesquely elongated shadow, which they never rose sufficiently above history to leave, of that monstrous dwarf Queen Victoria. I was sent to a public school, I wasted two years doing my national service, I went to Oxford; and there I began to discover I was not the person I wanted to be.

I had long before made the discovery that I lacked the parents and ancestors I needed. My father was, through being the right age at the right time rather than through any great professional talent, a brigadier; and my mother was the very model of a would-be major-general's wife. That is, she never argued with him and always behaved as if he were listening in the next room, even when he was thousands of miles away. I saw very little of my father during the war, and in his long absences I used to build up a more or less immaculate conception of him, which he generally – a bad but appropriate pun – shattered within the first forty-eight hours of his leave.

Like all men not really up to their job, he was a stickler for externals and petty quotidian things; and in lieu of an intellect he had accumulated an armoury of capitalized key-words like Discipline and Tradition and Responsibility. If I ever dared – I seldom did – to argue with him, he would produce one of these totem words and cosh me with it, as no doubt in similar circumstances he quelled his subalterns. If one still refused to lie down and die, he lost, or loosed, his temper. His temper was like a red dog, and he always had it close to hand.

The wishful tradition is that our family came over from France after the Revocation of the Edict of Nantes – noble Huguenots remotely allied to Honoré d'Urfé, author of the seventeenth-century

best-seller *L'Astrée*. Certainly – if one excludes another equally unsubstantiated link with Tom Durfey, Charles II's scribbling friend – no other of my ancestors showed any artistic leanings whatever: generation after generation of captains, clergymen, sailors, squirelings, with only a uniform lack of distinction and a marked penchant for gambling, and losing, to characterize them. My grandfather had four sons, two of whom died in the First World War; the third took an unsavoury way of paying off his atavism (gambling debts) and disappeared to America. He was never referred to as still existing by my father, a youngest brother who had all the characteristics that eldest sons are supposed to possess; and I have not the least idea whether he is still alive, or even whether I have unknown cousins on the other side of the Atlantic.

During my last years at school I realized that what was really wrong with my parents was that they had nothing but a blanket contempt for the sort of life I wanted to lead. I was 'good' at English, I had poems printed pseudonymously in the school magazine, I thought D. H. Lawrence the greatest human being of the century; my parents certainly never read Lawrence, and had probably never heard of him except in connection with *Lady Chatterley's Lover*. There were things, a certain emotional gentleness in my mother, an occasional euphoric jolliness in my father, I could have borne more of; but always I liked in them the things they didn't want to be liked for. By the time I was eighteen and Hitler was dead they had become mere providers, for whom I had to exhibit a token gratitude, but could muster very little else.

I led two lives. At school I got a small reputation as a wartime aesthete and cynic. But I had to join the regiment – Tradition and Sacrifice pressganged me into that. I insisted, and luckily the headmaster of my school backed me, that I wanted to go to university afterwards. I went on leading a double life in the Army, queasily playing at being Brigadier 'Blazer' Urfe's son in public, and nervously reading *Penguin New Writing* and poetry pamphlets in private. As soon as I could, I got myself demobilized.

I went to Oxford in 1948. In my second year at Magdalen, soon after a long vacation during which I hardly saw my parents, my father

had to fly out to India. He took my mother with him. Their plane crashed, a high-octane pyre, in a thunderstorm some forty miles east of Karachi. After the first shock I felt an almost immediate sense of relief, of freedom. My only other close relation, my mother's brother, farmed in Rhodesia, so I now had no family to trammel what I regarded as my real self. I may have been weak in filial charity, but I was strong on the discipline in vogue.

At least, along with a group of fellow odd men out at Magdalen, I thought I was so. We formed a small club called *Les Hommes Révoltés*, drank very dry sherry, and (as a protest against those shabby duffel-coated last years of the 'forties) wore dark-grey suits and black ties for our meetings. There we argued about being and nothingness and called a certain kind of inconsequential behaviour 'existentialist'. Less enlightened people would have called it capricious or just plain selfish; but we didn't understand that the heroes, or anti-heroes, of the French existentialist novels we read were not supposed to be realistic. We tried to imitate them, mistaking metaphorical descriptions of complex modes of feeling for straightforward prescriptions of behaviour. We duly felt the right anguishes. Most of us, true to the eternal dandyism of Oxford, simply wanted to look different. In our club, we did.

I acquired expensive habits and affected manners. I got a third-class degree and a first-class illusion: that I was a poet. But nothing could have been less poetic than my seeing-through-all boredom with life in general and with making a living in particular. I was too green to know that all cynicism masks a failure to cope – an impotence, in short; and that to despise all effort is the greatest effort of all. But I did absorb a small dose of one permanently useful thing, Oxford's greatest gift to civilized life: Socratic honesty. It showed me, very intermittently, that it is not enough to revolt against one's past. One day I was outrageously bitter among some friends about the Army; back in my own rooms later it suddenly struck me that just because I said with impunity things that would have apoplexed my dead father, I was still no less under his influence. The truth was I was not a cynic by nature; only by revolt. I had got away from what I hated, but I hadn't found where I loved, and so I pretended that there was nowhere to love.

Handsomely equipped to fail, I went out into the world. My father hadn't kept Financial Prudence among his armoury of essential words; he ran a ridiculously large account at Ladbroke's and his mess bills always reached staggering proportions, because he liked to be popular and in place of charm had to dispense alcohol. What remained of his money when the lawyers and the tax men had had their share yielded not nearly enough for me to live on. But every kind of job I looked at – the Foreign Service, the Civil, the Colonial, the banks, commerce, advertising – was transpierceable at a glance. I went to several interviews. Since I didn't feel obliged to show the eager enthusiasm our world expects from the young executive, I was successful at none.

In the end, like countless Oxford men before me, I answered an advertisement in *The Times Educational Supplement*. I went to the place, a minor public school in East Anglia; was cursorily scrutinized, then offered the post. I learnt later that there were only two other applicants, both Redbrick, and term was beginning in three weeks.

The mass-produced middle-class boys I had to teach were bad enough; the claustrophobic little town was a nightmare; but the really intolerable thing was the common-room. It became almost a relief to go into class. Boredom, the numbing annual predictability of life, hung over the staff like a cloud. And it was real boredom, not my modish ennui. From it flowed cant, hypocrisy, and the impotent rage of the old who know they have failed and the young who suspect they will fail. The senior masters stood like gallows sermons; with some of them one had a sort of vertigo, a glimpse of the bottomless pit of human futility ... or so I began to feel during my second term.

I could not spend my life crossing such a Sahara; and the more I felt it the more I felt also that the smug, petrified school was a toy model of the entire country and that to quit the one and not the other would be ridiculous. There was also a girl I was tired of.

My resignation, I would see the school year out, was accepted with resignation. The headmaster briskly supposed from my vague references to a personal restlessness that I wanted to go to America or the Dominions.

'I haven't decided yet, headmaster.'

‘I think we might have made a good teacher of you, Urfe. And you might have made something of us, you know. But it’s too late now.’

‘I’m afraid so.’

‘I don’t know if I approve of all this wandering off abroad. My advice is, don’t go. However ... *vous l’avez voulu, Georges Danton. Vous l’avez voulu.*’

The misquotation was typical.

It poured with rain the day I left. But I was filled with excitement, a strange exuberant sense of taking wing. I didn’t know where I was going, but I knew what I needed. I needed a new land, a new race, a new language; and, although I couldn’t have put it into words then, I needed a new mystery.

2

I heard that the British Council were recruiting staff, so in early August I went along to Davies Street and was interviewed by an eager lady with a culture-stricken mind and a Roedean voice and vocabulary. It was frightfully important, she told me, as if in confidence, that ‘we’ were represented abroad by the right type; but it was an awful bore, all the posts had to be advertised and the candidates chosen by interview, and anyway they were having to cut down on overseas personnel – actually. She came to the point: the only jobs available meant teaching English in foreign schools – or did that sound too ghastly?

I said it did.

In the last week of August, half as a joke, I advertised: the traditional insertion. I had a number of replies to my curt offer to go anywhere and do anything. Apart from the pamphlets reminding me that I was God’s, there were three charming letters from fundless and alert swindlers. And there was one that mentioned unusual and remunerative work in Tangiers – could I speak Italian? – but my answer went unanswered.

September loomed: I began to feel desperate. I saw myself cornered, driven back in despair to the dreaded *Educational Supplement*

and those endless pale-grey lists of endless pale-grey jobs. So one morning I returned to Davies Street.

I asked if they had any teaching jobs in the Mediterranean area, and the woman with the frightful intensifiers went off to fetch a file. I sat under a puce and tomato Matthew Smith in the waiting-room and began to see myself in Madrid, in Rome, or Marseilles, or Barcelona ... even Lisbon. It would be different abroad; there would be no common-room, and I should write poetry. She returned. All the good things had gone, she was terribly afraid. But there were these. She handed me a sheet about a school in Milan. I shook my head. She approved.

'Well actually then there's only this. We've just advertised it.' She handed me a clipping.

THE LORD BYRON SCHOOL, PHRAXOS

The Lord Byron School, Phraxos, Greece, requires in early October an assistant master to teach English. Candidates must be single and must have a degree in English. A knowledge of Modern Greek is not essential. The salary is worth about £600 per annum, and is fully convertible. Two-year contract, renewable. Fares paid at the beginning and end of contract.

There was an information sheet that long-windedly amplified the advertisement. Phraxos was an island in the Aegean about eighty miles from Athens. The Lord Byron was 'one of the most famous boarding schools in Greece, run on English public-school lines' – whence the name. It appeared to have every facility a school should have. One had to give a maximum of five lessons a day.

'The school's terribly well spoken of. And the island's simply heavenly.'

'You've been there?'

She was about thirty, a born spinster, with a lack of sexuality so total that her smart clothes and too heavy make-up made her pathetic; like an unsuccessful geisha. She hadn't been there, but everybody said so. I re-read the advertisement.

'Why've they left it so late?'

‘Well, we understand they did appoint another man. Not through us. But there’s been some awful mess-up.’ I looked again at the information sheet. ‘We haven’t actually recruited for them before. We’re only doing it out of courtesy now, as a matter of fact.’ She gave me a patient smile; her front teeth were much too big. I asked, in my best Oxford voice, if I might take her out to lunch.

When I got home, I filled in the form she had brought to the restaurant, and went straight out and posted it. That same evening, by a curious neatness of fate, I met Alison.

3

I suppose I’d had, by the standards of that pre-permissive time, a good deal of sex for my age. Girls, or a certain kind of girl, liked me; I had a car – not so common among undergraduates in those days – and I had some money. I wasn’t ugly; and even more important, I had my loneliness, which, as every cad knows, is a deadly weapon with women. My ‘technique’ was to make a show of unpredictability, cynicism, and indifference. Then, like a conjurer with his white rabbit, I produced the solitary heart.

I didn’t collect conquests, but by the time I left Oxford I was a dozen girls away from virginity. I found my sexual success and the apparently ephemeral nature of love equally pleasing. It was like being good at golf, but despising the game. One was covered all round, both when one played and when one didn’t. I contrived most of my affairs in the vacations, away from Oxford, since the new term meant that I could conveniently leave the scene of the crime. There were sometimes a few tedious weeks of letters, but I soon put the solitary heart away, ‘assumed responsibility with my total being’ and showed the Chesterfieldian mask instead. I became almost as neat at ending liaisons as at starting them.

This sounds, and was, calculating, but it was caused less by a true coldness than by my narcissistic belief in the importance of the life-style. I mistook the feeling of relief that dropping a girl always brought for a love of freedom. Perhaps the one thing in my favour

was that I lied very little; I was always careful to make sure that the current victim knew, before she took her clothes off, the difference between coupling and marrying.

But then, in East Anglia, things became complicated. I started to take the daughter of one of the older masters out. She was pretty in a stock English way, as province-hating as myself, and she seemed rather passionate, but I belatedly realized she was passionate for a purpose: I was to marry her. I began to be sick of the way a mere bodily need threatened to distort my life. There were even one or two evenings when I felt myself near surrendering to Janet, a fundamentally silly girl I knew I didn't love and would never love. Our parting scene, an infinitely sour all-night of nagging and weeping in the car beside the July sea, haunted me. Fortunately I knew, and she knew I knew, that she was not pregnant. I came to London with the firm determination to stay away from women for a while.

The Russell Square flat below the one I had rented had been empty through most of August, but then one Sunday I heard movements, doors slammed, and there was music. I passed a couple of uninteresting-looking girls on the stairs on the Monday; heard them talking, all their short *a*'s flattened into short *e*'s, as I went on down. They were Australians. Then came the evening of the day I had lunch with Miss Spencer-Haigh; a Friday.

About six, there was a knock on the door, and the stockier of the two girls I had seen was standing there.

'Oh hi. I'm Margaret. From below.' I took her outstretched hand. 'Gled to know you. Look, we're heving ourselves a bottle pardy. Like to come along?'

'Oh. Well actually ...'

'It'll be noisy up here.'

It was the usual thing: an invitation to kill complaint. I hesitated, then shrugged.

'All right. Thanks.'

'Well that's good. Eight?' She began to go downstairs, but she called back. 'You hev a girl-friend you'd like to bring?'

'Not just now.'

‘We’ll fix you up. Hi.’

And she was gone. I wished then that I hadn’t accepted.

So I went down when I could hear that a lot of people had already arrived. The ugly girls – they always arrive first – would, I hoped, have been disposed of. The door was open. I went in through a little hall and stood in the doorway of the living-room, holding my bottle of Algerian burgundy ready to present. I tried to discover in the crowded room one of the two girls I had seen before. Loud Australian voices; a man in a kilt, and several West Indians. It didn’t look my sort of party, and I was within five seconds of slipping back out. Then someone arrived and stood in the hall behind me.

It was a girl of about my own age, carrying a heavy suitcase, with a small rucksack on her shoulders. She was wearing a whitish mackintosh, creased and travel-weary, and she had the sort of tan that only weeks in hot sun can give. Her long hair was not quite blonde, but bleached almost to that colour. It looked odd, because the urchin cut was the fashion: girls like boys, not girls like girls; and there was something German, Danish, about her – waif-like, yet perversely or immorally so. She kept back from the open doorway, beckoned me. Her smile was very thin, very insincere, and very curt.

‘Could you find Maggie and ask her to come out?’

‘Margaret?’

She nodded. I forced my way through the packed room and eventually caught sight of Margaret in the kitchen.

‘Hi there! You made it.’

‘Someone wants to see you outside. A girl with a suitcase.’

‘Oh no!’ She turned to a woman behind her. I sensed trouble. She hesitated, then put down the quart beer-bottle she was opening. I followed her plump shoulders back through the crowd.

‘Alison! You said next week.’

‘I spent all my money.’ The waif gave the older girl an oddly split look, half guilty and half wary. ‘Is Pete back?’

‘No.’ The voice dropped, half warning. ‘But Charlie and Bill are.’

‘Oh *merde*.’ She looked outraged. ‘I *must* have a bath.’

‘Charlie’s filled it to cool the beer. It’s stecked to the brim.’

The girl with the tan sagged. I broke in.

'Use mine. Upstairs.'

'Yes? Alison, this is ...'

'Nicholas.'

'Would you mind? I've just come from Paris.' I noticed she had two voices; one almost Australian, one almost English.

'Of course. I'll take you up.'

'I must go and get some gear first.' As soon as she went into the room there was a shout.

'Hey Allie! Where you been, girl?'

Two or three of the Australian men gathered round her. She kissed them all briefly. In a minute Margaret, one of those fat girls who mother thin girls, pushed them away. Alison reappeared with the clothes she wanted, and we went up.

'Oh Jesus,' she said. 'Australians.'

'Where've you been?'

'All over. France. Spain.'

We went into the flat.

'I'll just clean the spiders out of the bath. Have a drink. Over there.'

When I came back, she was standing with a glass of Scotch in her hand. She smiled again, but it was an effort; shut off almost at once. I helped her remove her mackintosh. She was wearing a French perfume so dark it was almost carbolic, and her primrose shirt was dirty.

'You live downstairs?'

'Uhuh. Share.'

She raised her glass in silent toast. She had candid grey eyes, the only innocent things in a corrupt face, as if circumstances, not nature, had forced her to be hard. To fend for herself, yet to seem to need defending. And her voice, only very slightly Australian, yet not English, veered between harshness, faint nasal rancidity, and a strange salty directness. She was bizarre, a kind of human oxymoron.

'Are you alone? At the party?'

'Yes.'

'Would you keep with me this evening?'

‘Of course.’

‘Come back in about twenty minutes?’

‘I’ll wait.’

‘I’d rather you came back.’

We exchanged wary smiles. I went back to the party.

Margaret came up. I think she’d been waiting. ‘I’ve a nice English girl anxious to meet you, Nicholas.’

‘I’m afraid your friend’s jumped the gun.’

She stared at me, then round, then motioned me back into the hall. ‘Listen, this is a liddle difficult to explain, but ... Alison, she’s engaged to my brother. Some of his friends are here tonight.’

‘So?’

‘She’s been very mixed up.’

‘I still don’t understand.’

‘Just that I don’t want a rough-house. We hed one once before.’ I looked blank. ‘People grow jealous on other people’s behalf?’

‘I shan’t start anything.’

Someone called her from inside. She tried to feel sure of me, but failed, and apparently decided she couldn’t do anything about it. ‘Fair deal. But you hev the message?’

‘Absolutely.’

She gave me a veteran’s look, then a nod, not a very happy one, and went away. I waited for about twenty minutes, near the door, and then I slipped out and went back up to my own flat. I rang the bell. There was a long pause, then there was a voice behind the door.

‘Who is it?’

‘Twenty minutes.’

The door opened. She had her hair up, and a towel wrapped round her; very brown shoulders, very brown legs. She went quickly back into the bathroom. Draining water gurgled. I shouted through the door.

‘I’ve been warned off you.’

‘Maggie?’

‘She says she doesn’t want a rough-house.’

‘Fucking cow. She’s my potential sister-in-law.’

‘I know.’

‘Studying sociology. London University.’ There was a pause. ‘Isn’t it crazy? You go away and you think people will have changed and they’re just the same.’

‘What does that mean?’

‘Wait a minute.’

I waited several. But then the door opened and she came out into the living-room. She was wearing a very simple white dress, and her hair was down again. She had no make-up, and looked ten times prettier.

She gave me a little bitten-in grin. ‘I pass?’

‘The belle of the ball.’ Her look was so direct I found it disconcerting. ‘We go down?’

‘Just one finger?’

I filled her glass again, and with more than one finger. Watching the whisky fall, she said, ‘I don’t know why I’m frightened. Why am I frightened?’

‘What of?’

‘I don’t know. Maggie. The boys. The dear old diggers.’

‘This rough-house?’

‘Oh God. It was *so* stupid. There was a nice Israeli boy, we were just kissing. It was a party. That was all. But Charlie told Pete, and they just picked a quarrel, and ... oh God. You know. He-men.’

Downstairs I lost her for a time. A group formed round her. I went and got a drink and passed it over someone’s shoulder; talk about Cannes, about Collioure and Valencia. Jazz had started in the back room and I went to the doorway to watch. Outside the window, past the dark dancers, were dusk trees, a pale amber sky. I had a sharp sense of alienation from everyone around me. A girl with spectacles, myopic eyes in an insipidly soft face, one of those soulful-intellectual creatures born to be preyed on and exploited by phonies, smiled coyly from the other side of the room. She was standing alone and I guessed that she was the ‘nice English girl’ Margaret had picked for me. Her lipstick was too red; and she was as familiar as a species of bird. I turned away from her as from a cliff edge, and went and sat on the floor by a bookshelf. There I pretended to read a paperback.

Alison knelt beside me. 'I'm sloshed. That whisky. Hey, have some of this.' It was gin. She sat sideways, I shook my head. I thought of that white-faced English girl with the red smudged mouth. At least this girl was alive; crude, but alive.

'I'm glad you returned tonight.'

She sipped her gin and gave me a small sizing look.

I tried again. 'Ever read this?'

'Let's cut corners. To hell with literature. You're clever and I'm beautiful. Now let's talk about who we really are.'

The grey eyes teased; or dared.

'Pete?'

'He's a pilot.' She mentioned a famous airline. 'We shack together. Off and on. That's all.'

'Ah.'

'He's doing a conversion course. In the States.' She stared at the floor, for a moment a different girl, more serious. 'Engaged is Maggie talk. We're not like that.' She half flicked a glance at me. 'Free people.'

It wasn't clear whether she was talking about her fiancé or for my benefit; or whether freedom was her pose or her truth.

'What do you do?'

'Things. Reception mostly.'

'Hotels?'

'Anything.' She wrinkled her nose. 'I've applied for a new job. Air hostess. That's why I went off polishing French and Spanish these last weeks.'

'Can I take you out tomorrow?'

A heavy Australian in his thirties came and leant against a door-jamb opposite. 'Oh Charlie,' she cried across the room, 'he's just lent me his bath. It's nothing.'

Charlie nodded his head slowly, then pointed an admonitory stubby finger. He pushed himself vertical and went unsteadily away.

'Charming.'

She turned over her hand and looked at the palm.

'Did you spend two and a half years in a Jap prisoner-of-war camp?'

'No. Why?'

'Charlie did.'

'Poor Charlie.'

There was a silence.

'Australians are boors, and Englishmen are prigs.'

'If you —'

'I make fun of him because he's in love with me and he likes it. But no one else makes fun of him. If I'm around.'

There was another silence.

'Sorry.'

'That's okay.'

'About tomorrow.'

'No. About you.'

Gradually, though I was offended at having been taught a lesson in the art of not condescending, she made me talk about myself. She did it by asking blunt questions, and by brushing aside empty answers. I began to talk about being a brigadier's son, about loneliness, and for once mostly not to glamourize myself but simply to explain. I discovered two things about Alison: that behind her bluntness she was an expert coxer, a handler of men, a sexual diplomat, and that her attraction lay as much in her candour as in her having a pretty body, an interesting face, and knowing it. She had a very un-English ability to flash out some truth, some seriousness, some quick surge of interest. I fell silent. I knew she was watching me. After a moment I looked at her. She had a shy, thoughtful expression; a new self.

'Alison, I like you.'

'I think I like you. You've got quite a nice mouth. For a prig.'

'You're the first Australian girl I've ever met.'

'Poor Pom.'

All the lights except one dim one had long ago been put out, and there were the usual surrendered couples on all available furniture and floor-space. The party had paired off. Maggie seemed to have disappeared, and Charlie lay fast asleep on the bedroom floor. We danced. We began close, and became closer. I kissed her hair, and then her neck, and she pressed my hand, and moved a little closer still.

‘Shall we go upstairs?’

‘You go first. I’ll come in a minute.’ She slipped away, and I went up to my flat. Ten minutes passed, and then she was in the doorway, a faintly apprehensive smile on her face. She stood there in her white dress, small, innocent–corrupt, coarse–fine, an expert novice.

She came in, I shut the door, and we were kissing at once, for a minute, two minutes, pressed back against the door in the darkness. There were steps outside, and a sharp double rap. Alison put her hand over my mouth. Another double rap; and then another. Hesitation, heart-beats. The footsteps went away.

‘Come on,’ she said. ‘Come on, come on.’

4

It was late the next morning when I woke. She was still asleep, with her naked brown back turned away from me. I went and made some coffee and took it into the bedroom. She was awake then, staring at me over the top of the bedclothes. It was a long expressionless look that rejected my smile and ended abruptly in her turning and pulling the bedclothes over her head. I sat beside her and tried rather amateurishly to discover what was wrong, but she kept the sheet pulled tight over her head; so I gave up patting and making noises and went back to my coffee. After a while she sat up and asked for a cigarette. And then if I would lend her a shirt. She wouldn’t look me in the eyes. She pulled on the shirt, went to the bathroom, and brushed me aside with a shake of her hair when she came and got back into bed again. I sat at the foot of the bed and watched her drink her coffee.

‘What’s up?’

‘Do you know how many men I’ve slept with the last two months?’

‘Fifty?’

She didn’t smile.

‘If I’d slept with fifty I’d just be an honest professional.’

‘Have some more coffee.’

'Half an hour after I first saw you last night I thought, if I was really vicious I'd get into bed with him.'

'Thank you very much.'

'I could tell about you from the way you talked.'

'Tell what?'

'You're the *affaire de peau* type.'

'That's ridiculous.'

A silence.

'I was sloshed,' she said. 'So tired.' She gave me a long look, then shook her head and shut her eyes. 'I'm sorry. You're nice. You're terribly nice in bed. Only now what?'

'I'm not used to this.'

'I am.'

'It's not a crime. You're just proving you can't marry this chap.'

'I'm twenty-three. How old are you?'

'Twenty-five.'

'Don't you begin to feel things about yourself you know are you? Are going to be you for ever? That's what I feel. I'm going to be a stupid Australian slut for ever.'

'Come on.'

'I tell you what Pete's doing right now. You know, he writes and tells me. "I took a piece out last Friday and we had a wuzzamaroo."'

'What's that mean?'

'It means "and you sleep with anyone you like, too".' She stared out of the window. 'We lived together, all this spring. You know, we get on, we're like brother and sister when we're out of bed.' She gave me a slanting look through the cigarette smoke. 'You don't know what it's like waking up with a man you didn't even know this time yesterday. It's losing something. Not just what all girls lose.'

'Or gaining something.'

'God, what can we gain. Tell me.'

'Experience. Pleasure.'

'Did I tell you I love your mouth?'

'Several times.'

She stubbed the cigarette out and sat back.

'Do you know why I tried to cry just now? Because I'm going to marry him. As soon as he comes back, I'm going to marry him. He's all I deserve.' She sat leaning back against the wall, with the too-large shirt on, a small female boy with a hurt face, staring at me, staring at the bedcover, in our silence.

'It's just a phase. You're unhappy.'

'I'm unhappy when I stop and think. When I wake up and see what I am.'

'Thousands of girls do it.'

'I'm not thousands of girls. I'm me.' She slipped the shirt over her head, then retreated under the bedclothes. 'What's your real name? Your surname?'

'Urfe. U, R, F, E.'

'Mine's Kelly. Was your dad really a brigadier?'

'Yes. Just.'

She gave a timid mock salute, then reached out a brown arm. I moved beside her.

'Don't you think I'm a tramp?'

Perhaps then, as I was looking at her, so close, I had my choice. I could have said what I was thinking: Yes, you are a tramp, and even worse, you exploit your tramp-hood, and I wish I'd taken your sister-in-law-to-be's advice. Perhaps if I had been farther away from her, on the other side of the room, in any situation where I could have avoided her eyes, I could have been decisively brutal. But those grey, searching, always candid eyes, by their begging me not to lie, made me lie.

'I like you. Really very much.'

'Come back to bed and hold me. Nothing else. Just hold me.'

I got into bed and held her. Then for the first time in my life I made love to a woman in tears.

She was in tears more than once, that first Saturday. She went down to see Maggie about five and came back with red eyes. Maggie had told her to get out. Half an hour later Ann, the other girl in the flat, one of those unfortunate females whose faces fall absolutely flat from nostrils to chin, came up. Maggie had gone out and wanted Alison to

remove all her things. So we went down and brought them up. I had a talk with Ann. In her quiet, rather prim way she showed more sympathy for Alison than I was expecting; Maggie was evidently and aggressively blind to her brother's faults.

For days, afraid of Maggie, who for some reason stood in her mind as a hated but still potent monolith of solid Australian virtue on the blasted moor of English decadence, Alison did not go out except at night. I went and bought food, and we talked and slept and made love and danced and cooked meals at all hours, *sous les toits*, as remote from ordinary time as we were from the dull London world outside the windows.

Alison was always feminine; she never, like so many English girls, betrayed her gender. She wasn't beautiful, she very often wasn't even pretty. But she had a fashionably thin boyish figure, she had a contemporary dress sense, she had a conscious way of walking, and her sum was extraordinarily more than her parts. I would sit in the car and watch her walking down the street towards me, pause, cross the road; and she looked wonderful. But then when she was close, beside me, there so often seemed to be something rather shallow, something spoilt-child, in her appearance. Even close to her, I was always being wrong-footed. She would be ugly one moment, and then some movement, expression, angle of her face, made ugliness impossible.

When she went out she used to wear a lot of eye-shadow, which married with the sulky way she sometimes held her mouth to give her a characteristic bruised look; a look that subtly made one want to bruise her more. Men were always aware of her, in the street, in restaurants, in pubs; and she knew it. I used to watch them sliding their eyes at her as she passed. She was one of those rare, even among already pretty, women that are born with a natural aura of sexuality: always in their lives it will be the relationships with men, it will be how men react, that matters. And even the tamest sense it.

There was a simpler Alison, when the mascara was off. She had not been typical of herself, those first twelve hours; but still always a little unpredictable, ambiguous. One never knew when the more

sophisticated, bruised-hard persona would reappear. She would give herself violently; then yawn at the wrongest moment. She would spend all one day clearing up the flat, cooking, ironing, then pass the next three or four bohemianly on the floor in front of the fire, reading *Lear*, women's magazines, a detective story, Hemingway – not all at the same time, but bits of all in the same afternoon. She liked doing things, and only then finding a reason for doing them.

One day she came back with an expensive fountain pen.

'For *monsieur*.'

'But you shouldn't.'

'It's okay. I stole it.'

'Stole it!'

'I steal everything. Didn't you realize?'

'Everything!'

'I never steal from small shops. Only the big stores. They ask for it. Don't look so shocked.'

'I'm not.' But I was. I stood holding the pen gingerly. She grinned.

'It's just a hobby.'

'Six months in Holloway wouldn't be so funny.'

She had poured herself a whisky. '*Santé*. I hate big stores. And not just capitalists. Pommy capitalists. Two birds with one steal. Oh, come on, sport, smile.' She put the pen in my pocket. 'There. Now you're a cassowary after the crime.'

'I need a Scotch.'

Holding the bottle, I remembered she had 'bought' that as well. I looked at her. She nodded.

She stood beside me as I poured. 'Nicholas, you know why you take *things* too seriously? Because you take yourself too seriously.' She gave me an odd little smile, half tender, half mocking, and went away to peel potatoes. And I knew that in some obscure way I had offended her; and myself.

One night I heard her say a name in her sleep.

'Who's Michel?' I asked the next morning.

'Someone I want to forget.'

But she talked about everything else; about her English-born mother, genteel but dominating; about her father, a station-master who had died of cancer four years before.

‘That’s why I’ve got this crazy between voice. It’s Mum and Dad living out their battles again every time I open my mouth. I suppose it’s why I hate Australia and I love Australia and I couldn’t ever be happy there and yet I’m always feeling homesick. Does that make sense?’

She was always asking me if she made sense.

‘I went to see the old family in Wales. Mum’s brother. Jesus. Enough to make the wallabies weep.’

But she found me very English, very fascinating. Partly it was because I was ‘cultured’, a word she often used. Pete had always ‘honked’ at her if she went to galleries or concerts. She mimicked him: ‘What’s wrong with the boozier, girl?’

One day she said, ‘You don’t know how nice Pete is. Besides being a bastard. I always know what he wants, I always know what he thinks, and what he means when he says anything. And you, I don’t know anything. I offend you and I don’t know why. I please you and I don’t know why. It’s because you’re English. You couldn’t ever understand that.’

She had finished high school in Australia, and had even had a year doing languages at Sydney University. But then she had met Pete, and it ‘got complicated’. She’d had an abortion and come to England.

‘Did he make you have the abortion?’

She was sitting on my knees.

‘He never knew.’

‘Never knew!’

‘It could have been someone else’s. I wasn’t sure.’

‘You poor kid.’

‘I knew if it was Pete’s he wouldn’t want it. And if it wasn’t his he wouldn’t have it. So.’

‘Weren’t you —’

‘I didn’t want a baby. It would have got in the way.’ But she added more gently, ‘Yes, I was.’

‘And still?’

A silence, a small shrug.

‘Sometimes.’

I couldn’t see her face. We sat in silence, close and warm, both aware that we were close and aware that we were embarrassed by the implications of this talk about children. In our age it is not sex that raises its ugly head, but love.

One evening we went to see Carné’s old film *Quai des Brumes*. She was crying when we came out and she began to cry again when we were in bed. She sensed my disapproval.

‘You’re not me. You can’t feel like I feel.’

‘I can feel.’

‘No, you can’t. You just choose not to feel or something, and everything’s fine.’

‘It’s not fine. It’s just not so bad.’

‘That film made me feel what I feel about everything. There isn’t any meaning. You try and try to be happy and then something chance happens and it’s all gone. It’s because we don’t believe in a life after death.’

‘Not don’t. Can’t.’

‘Every time you go out and I’m not with you I think you may die. I think about dying every day. Every time I have you, I think this is one in the eye for death. You know, you’ve got a lot of money and the shops are going to shut in an hour. It’s sick, but you’ve got to spend. Does that make sense?’

‘Of course. The bomb.’

She lay smoking.

‘It’s not the bomb. It’s us.’

She didn’t fall for the solitary heart; she had a nose for emotional blackmail. She thought it must be nice to be totally alone in the world, to have no family ties. When I was going on one day in the car about not having any close friends – using my favourite metaphor: the cage of glass between me and the rest of the world – she just laughed. ‘You like it,’ she said. ‘You say you’re isolated, boyo, but

you really think you're different.' She broke my hurt silence by saying, too late, 'You are different.'

'And isolated.'

She shrugged. 'Marry someone. Marry me.'

She said it as if she had suggested I try an aspirin for a headache. I kept my eyes on the road.

'You're going to marry Pete.'

'And you wouldn't marry me because I'm a whore and a colonial.'

'I wish you wouldn't use that word.'

'And because you wish I wouldn't use that word.'

Always we edged away from the brink of the future. We talked about a future, about living in a cottage, where I should write, about buying a jeep and crossing Australia. 'When we're in Alice Springs ...' became a sort of joke – in never-never land.

One day drifted and melted into another. I knew the affaire was like no other I had been through. Apart from anything else it was so much happier physically. Out of bed I felt I was teaching her, anglicizing her accent, polishing off her roughnesses, her provincialisms; in bed she did the teaching. We knew this reciprocity without being able, perhaps because we were both single children, to analyse it. We both had something to give and to gain ... and at the same time a physical common ground, the same appetites, the same tastes, the same freedom from inhibition. She was teaching me other things, besides the art of love; but that is how I thought of it at the time.

I remember one day when we were standing in one of the rooms at the Tate. Alison was leaning slightly against me, holding my hand, looking in her childish sweet-sucking way at a Renoir. I suddenly had a feeling that we were one body, one person, even there; that if she had disappeared it would have been as if I had lost half of myself. A terrible deathlike feeling, which anyone less cerebral and self-absorbed than I was then would have realized was simply love. I thought it was desire. I drove her straight home and tore her clothes off.



Another day, in Jermyn Street, we ran into Billy Whyte, an Old Etonian I had known quite well at Magdalen; he'd been one of the Hommes Révoltés. He was pleasant enough, not in the least snobbish – but he carried with him, perhaps in spite of himself, an unsloughable air of high caste, of constant contact with the nicest best people, of impeccable upper-class taste in facial expression, clothes, vocabulary. We went off to an oyster bar; he'd just heard the first Colchesters of the season were in. Alison said very little, but I was embarrassed by her, by her accent, by the difference between her and one or two debs who were sitting near us. She left us for a moment when Billy poured the last of the Muscadet.

'Nice girl, dear boy.'

'Oh ...' I shrugged. 'You know.'

'Attractive.'

'Cheaper than central heating.'

'I'm sure.'

But I knew what he was thinking.

Alison was very silent after we left him. We were driving up to Hampstead to see a film. I glanced at her sullen face.

'What's wrong?'

'Sometimes you sound so mean, you upper-class Poms.'

'I'm not upper-class. I'm middle-class.'

'Upper, middle – God, who cares.'

I drove some way before she spoke again.

'You treated me as if I didn't really belong to you.'

'Don't be silly.'

'As if I'm a bloody abo.'

'Rubbish.'

'In case my pants fell down or something.'

'It's so difficult to explain.'

'Not to me, sport. Not to me.'

One day she said, 'I've got to go for my interview tomorrow.'

'Do you want to go?'

'Do you want me to go?'

'It doesn't mean anything. You haven't got to make up your mind.'

'It'll do me good if I get accepted. Just to know I'm accepted.'

She changed the subject; and I could have refused to change the subject. But I didn't.

Then, the very next day, I too had a letter about an interview. Alison's took place – she thought she had done well. Three days later she received a letter saying that she had been accepted for training, to start in ten days' time.

I had my own examination from a board of urbane officials. She met me outside and we went for an awkward meal, like two strangers, in an Italian restaurant. She had a grey, tired face, and her cheeks looked baggy. I asked her what she'd been doing while I was away.

'Writing a letter.'

'To them?'

'Yes.'

'Saying?'

'What do you think I said?'

'You accepted.'

There was a difficult pause. I knew what she wanted me to say, but I couldn't say it. I felt as a sleepwalker must feel when he wakes up at the end of the roof parapet. I wasn't ready for marriage, for settling down. I wasn't psychologically close enough to her; something I couldn't define, obscure, monstrous, lay between us, and this obscure monstrous thing emanated from her, not from me.

'Some of their flights go via Athens. If you're in Greece we can meet. Maybe you'll be in London. Anyway.'

We began to plan how we would live if I didn't get the job in Greece.

But I did. A letter came, saying my name had been selected to be forwarded to the school board in Athens. This was 'virtually a formality'. I should be expected in Greece at the beginning of October.

I showed Alison the letter as soon as I had climbed the stairs back to the flat, and watched her read it. I was looking for regret, but I couldn't see it. She kissed me.

'I told you.'

'I know.'

'Let's celebrate. Let's go out into the country.'

I let her carry me away. She wouldn't take it seriously, and I was too much of a coward to stop and think why I was secretly hurt by her refusing to take it seriously. So we went out into the country, and when we came back we went to see a film and later went dancing in Soho; and still she wouldn't take it seriously. But then, late, after love, we couldn't sleep, and we had to take it seriously.

'Alison, what am I going to do tomorrow?'

'You're going to accept.'

'Do you want me to accept?'

'Not all over again.'

We were lying on our backs, and I could see her eyes were open. Somewhere down below little leaves in front of a lamp-post cast nervous shadows across our ceiling.

'If I say what I feel about you, will you ...?'

'I know what you feel.'

And it was there: an accusing silence.

I reached out and touched her bare stomach. She pushed my hand away, but held it. 'You feel, I feel, what's the good. It's what *we* feel. What you feel is what I feel. I'm a woman.'

I was frightened; and calculated my answer.

'Would you marry me if I asked you?'

'You can't say it like that.'

'I'd marry you tomorrow if I thought you really needed me. Or wanted me.'

'Oh Nicko, Nicko.' Rain lashed on the window-panes. She beat my hand on the bed between us. There was a long silence.

'I've just got to get out of this country.'

She didn't answer; more silence, and then she spoke.

'Pete's coming back to London next week.'

'What will he do?'

'Don't worry. He knows.'

'How do you know he knows?'

'I wrote to him.'

'Has he answered?'

She breathed out. 'No strings.'

'Do you want to go back to him?'

She turned on her elbow and made me turn my head, so that our faces were very close together.

'Ask me to marry you.'

'Will you marry me?'

'No.' She turned away.

'Why did you do that?'

'To get it over. I'm going to be an air hostess, and you're going to Greece. You're free.'

'And you're free.'

'If it makes you happier – I'm free.'

The rain came in sudden great swathes across the tree-tops and hit the windows and the roof; like spring rain, out of season. The bedroom air seemed full of unspoken words, unformulated guilts, a vicious silence, like the moments before a bridge collapses. We lay side by side, untouching, effigies on a bed turned tomb; sickeningly afraid to say what we really thought. In the end she spoke, in a voice that tried to be normal, but sounded harsh.

'I don't want to hurt you and the more I ... want you, the more I shall. And I don't want you to hurt me and the more you don't want me the more you will.' She got out of bed for a moment. When she came back she said, 'We've decided?'

'I suppose.'

We said no more. Soon, too soon, I thought, she went to sleep.

In the morning she was determinedly gay. I telephoned the Council. I went to receive Miss Spencer-Haigh's congratulations and briefings, and took her out for a second and – I prayed – last lunch.

5

What Alison was not to know – since I hardly realized it myself – was that I had been deceiving her with another woman during the latter part of September. The woman was Greece. Even if I had failed

the board I should have gone there. I never studied Greek at school, and my knowledge of modern Greece began and ended with Byron's death at Missolonghi. Yet it needed only the seed of the idea of Greece, that morning in the British Council. It was as if someone had hit on a brilliant solution when all seemed lost. Greece – why hadn't I thought of it before? It sounded so good: '*I'm going to Greece.*' I knew no one – this was long before the new Medes, the tourists, invaded – who had been there. I got hold of all the books I could find on the country. It astounded me how little I knew about it. I read and read; and I was like a medieval king, I had fallen in love with the picture long before I saw the reality.

It seemed almost a secondary thing, by the time I left, that I wanted to escape from England. I thought of Alison only in terms of my going to Greece. When I loved her, I thought of being there with her; when I didn't, then I was there without her. She had no chance.

I received a cable from the school board confirming my appointment, and then by post a contract to sign and a courteous letter in atrocious English from my new headmaster. Miss Spencer-Haigh produced the name and address in Northumberland of a man who had been at the school the year before. He hadn't been appointed by the British Council, so she could tell me nothing about him. I wrote a letter, but that was unanswered. Ten days remained before I was due to go.

Things became very difficult with Alison. I had to give up the flat in Russell Square and we spent three frustrating days looking for somewhere for her to live. Eventually we found a large studio-room off Baker Street. The move, packing things, upset us both. I didn't have to go until October 2nd, but Alison had already started work, and the need to get up early, to introduce order into our life, was too much for us. We had two dreadful rows. The first one she started, and stoked, and built up to a white-hot outpouring of contempt for men, and me in particular. I was a snob, a prig, a twopenny-halfpenny Don Juan – and so on. The next day – she had been icily mute at breakfast – when I went in the evening to meet her, she was not there. I waited an hour, then I went home. She wasn't there, either. I telephoned: no air-hostess trainees had been kept late. I waited, getting angrier and

angrier, until eleven o'clock, and then she came in. She went to the bathroom, took her coat off, put on the milk she always had before bed, and said not a word.

'Where the hell have you been?'

'I'm not going to answer any questions.'

She stood over the stove in the kitchen recess. She had insisted on a cheap room. I loathed the cooking-sleeping-everything in one room; the shared bathroom; the having to hiss and whisper.

'I know where you've been.'

'I'm not interested.'

'You've been with Pete.'

'All right. I've been with Pete.' She gave me a furious dark look. 'So?'

'You could have waited till Thursday.'

'Why should I?'

Then I lost my temper. I dragged up everything I could remember that might hurt her. She didn't say anything, but undressed and got into bed, and lay with her face turned to the wall. She began to cry. In the silence I kept remembering, with intense relief, that I should soon be free of all this. It was not that I believed my own accusations; but I still hated her for having made me make them. In the end I sat beside her and watched the tears trickle out of her swollen eyes.

'I waited hours for you.'

'I went to the cinema. I haven't seen Pete.'

'Why lie about it?'

'Because you can't trust me. As if I'd do that.'

'This is such a lousy way to end.'

'I could have killed myself tonight. If I'd had the courage, I'd have thrown myself under the train. I stood there and thought of doing it.'

'I'll get you a whisky.' I came back with it and gave it to her.

'I wish to God you'd live with someone. Isn't there another air hostess who'd -'

'I'm never going to live with another woman again.'

'Are you going back to Pete?'

She gave me an angry look.

'Are you trying to tell me I shouldn't?'

‘No.’

She sank back and stared at the wall. For the first time she gave a faint smile. The whisky was beginning to work. ‘It’s like those Hogarth pictures. Love *à la mode*. Five weeks later.’

‘Are we friends again?’

‘We can’t ever be friends again.’

‘If it hadn’t been you, I’d have walked out this evening.’

‘If it hadn’t been you I wouldn’t have come back.’

She held out her glass for more whisky. I kissed her wrist, and went to fetch the bottle.

‘You know what I thought today?’ She said it across the room.

‘No.’

‘If I killed myself, you’d be pleased. You’d be able to go round saying, she killed herself because of me. I think that would always keep me from suicide. Not letting some lousy shit like you get the credit.’

‘That’s not fair.’

‘Then I thought I could do it if I wrote a note first explaining why I did it.’ She eyed me, still unmollified. ‘Look in my handbag. The shorthand pad.’ I got it out. ‘Look at the back.’

There were two pages scrawled in her big handwriting.

‘When did you write this?’

‘Read it.’

I don’t want to live any more. I spend most of my life not wanting to live. The only place I am happy is here where we’re being taught, and I have to think of something else, or reading books, or in the cinema. Or in bed. I’m only happy when I forget to exist. When just my eyes or my ears or my skin exist. I can’t remember having been happy for two or three years. Since the abortion. All I can remember is forcing myself sometimes to look happy so if I catch sight of my face in the mirror I might kid myself for a moment I really am happy.

There were two more sentences heavily crossed out. I looked up into her grey eyes.

‘You can’t mean this.’

'I wrote it today in coffee-time. If I'd known how to quietly kill myself in the canteen I'd have done it.'

'It's ... well, hysterical.'

'I *am* hysterical.' It was almost a shout.

'And histrionic. You wrote it for me to see.'

There was a long pause. She kept her eyes shut.

'Not just for you to *see*.'

And then she cried again, but this time in my arms. I tried to reason with her. I made promises: I would postpone the journey to Greece, I would turn down the job – a hundred things that I didn't mean and she knew I didn't mean, but finally took as a placebo.

In the morning I persuaded her to ring up and say that she wasn't well, and we spent the day out in the country.

The next morning, my last but two, came a postcard with a Northumberland postmark. It was from Mitford, the man who had been on Phraxos, to say that he would be in London for a few days, if I wanted to meet him.

I rang him up on the Wednesday at the Army and Navy Club and asked him out for a drink. He was two or three years older than myself, tanned, with blue staring eyes in a narrow head. He had a dark young-officer moustache which he kept on touching, and he wore a dark-blue blazer, with a regimental tie. He reeked mufti; and almost at once we started a guerilla war of prestige and anti-prestige. He had been parachuted into Greece during the German occupation, and he was very glib with his Xans and his Paddys and the Christian names of all the other well-known *condottieri* of the time. He had tried hard to acquire the triune personality of the philhellene in fashion – gentleman, scholar, thug – but he spoke with a second-hand accent and the clipped, sparse prep-schoolisms of a Viscount Montgomery. He was dogmatic, unbrooking, lost off the battlefield. I managed to keep my end up, over pink gins: I told him my war had consisted of two years' ardent longing for demobilization. It was absurd. I wanted information from him, not antipathy; so in the end I confessed I was a regular army officer's son, and asked him what the island looked like.

He nodded at the food-stand on the bar in the pub where we'd met. 'There's the island.' He pointed with his cigarette. 'That's what the locals call it.' He said some word in Greek. 'The Pasty. Shape, old boy. Central ridge. Here's your school and your village in this corner. All the rest of this north side and the entire south side deserted. That's the lie of the land.'

'The school?'

'Best in Greece, actually.'

'Discipline?' He stiffened his hand *karate*-fashion.

'Teaching problems?'

'Usual stuff.' He preened his moustache in the mirror behind the bar; mentioned the names of two or three books.

I asked him about life outside the school.

'Isn't any. Island's quite pretty, if you like that sort of thing. Birds and the bees, all that caper.'

'And the village?'

He smiled grimly. 'Old boy, your Greek village isn't like an English one. Absolute bloody dump socially. Masters' wives. Half a dozen officials. Odd pater and mater on a visit.' He raised his neck, as if his shirt collar was too tight. It was a tic; made him feel authoritative. 'A few villas. But they're all boarded up for ten months of the year.'

'You're not exactly selling the place to me.'

'It's remote. Let's face it, bloody remote. And you'd find the people in the villas pretty damn dull, anyway. There's one that you might say isn't, but I don't suppose you'll meet him.'

'Oh?'

'Actually, we had a row and I told him pretty effing quick what I thought of him.'

'What was it all about?'

'Bastard collaborated during the war. That was really at the root of it.' He exhaled smoke. 'No – you'll have to put up with the other beaks if you want chat.'

'They speak English?'

'Most of 'em speak Frog. There's the Greek chap who teaches English with you. Cocky little bastard. Gave him a black eye one day.'

'You've really prepared the ground for me.'

He laughed. 'Got to keep 'em down, you know.' He felt his mask had slipped a little. 'Your peasant, especially your Cretan peasant, salt of the earth. Wonderful chaps. Believe me. I know.'

I asked him why he'd left.

'Writing a book actually. Wartime experiences and all that. See my publisher.'

There was something forlorn about him; I could imagine him briskly dashing about like a destructive Boy Scout, blowing up bridges and wearing picturesque off-beat uniforms; but he had to live in this dull new welfare world, like a stranded archosaur. He went hurriedly on.

'You'll piss blood for England. Be worse for you, with no Greek. And you'll drink. Everyone does. Have to.' He talked about *retsina* and *aretsinato*, *raki* and *ouzo* – and then about women. 'The girls in Athens are strictly O.O.B. Unless you want the pox.'

'No talent on the island?'

'Nix, old boy. Women are about the ugliest in the Aegean. And anyway – village honour. Makes that caper highly dangerous. Shouldn't advise it. Discovered that somewhere else once.' He gave me a curt grin, with the appropriate hooded look in his eyes.

I drove him back towards his club. It was a bronchial mid-afternoon, already darkening, the people, the traffic, everything fish-grey. I asked him why he hadn't stayed in the Army.

'Too damn orthodox, old boy. Specially in peacetime.'

I guessed that he had been rejected for a permanent commission; there was something obscurely wild and unstable about him, under the mess mannerisms.

We came to where he wanted to be dropped off.

'Think I'll do?'

His look was doubtful. 'Treat 'em tough. It's the only way. Never let 'em get you down. They did the chap before me, you know. Never met him, but apparently he went bonkers. Couldn't control the boys.'

He got out of the car.

'Well, all the best, old man.' He grinned. 'And listen.' He had his hand on the door-handle. 'Beware of the waiting-room.'

He closed the door at once, as if he had rehearsed that moment. I opened it quickly and leant out to call after him. 'The *what?*'

He turned, but only to give a sharp wave. The Trafalgar Square crowd swallowed him up. I couldn't get the smile on his face out of my mind. It secreted an omission; something he'd saved up, a mysterious last word. Waiting-room, waiting-room, waiting-room; it went round in my head all that evening.

6

I picked up Alison and we went to the garage that was going to sell the car for me. I'd offered it to her some time before, but she had refused.

'If I had it I'd always think of you.'

'Then have it.'

'I don't want to think of you. And I couldn't stand anyone else sitting where you are.'

'Will you take whatever I get for it? It won't be much.'

'My wages?'

'Don't be silly.'

'I don't want anything.'

But I knew she wanted a scooter. I could leave a cheque with 'Towards a scooter' on a card, and I thought she would take that, when I had gone.

It was curious how quiet that last evening was; as if I had already left, and we were two ghosts talking to each other. We arranged what we should do in the morning. She didn't want to come and see me off – I was going by train – at Victoria; we would have breakfast as usual, she would go, it was cleanest and simplest that way. We arranged our future. As soon as she could she would try to get herself to Athens. If that was impossible, I might fly back to England at Christmas. We might meet halfway somewhere – Rome, Switzerland.

'Alice Springs,' she said.

In the night we lay awake, knowing each other awake, yet afraid to talk. I felt her hand feel out for mine. We lay for a while without talking. Then she spoke.

‘If I said I’d wait?’ I was silent. ‘I think I could wait. That’s what I mean.’

‘I know.’

‘You’re always saying “I know”. But it doesn’t answer anything.’

‘I know.’ She pinched my hand. ‘Suppose I say, yes, wait, in a year’s time I shall know. All the time you’ll be waiting, waiting.’

‘I wouldn’t mind.’

‘But it’s mad. It’s like putting a girl in a convent till you’re ready to marry her. And then deciding you don’t want to marry her. We have to be free. We haven’t got a choice.’

‘Don’t get upset. Please don’t get upset.’

‘We’ve got to see how things go.’

There was a silence.

‘I was thinking of coming back here tomorrow night. That’s all.’

‘I’ll write. Every day.’

‘Yes.’

‘It’s a sort of test, really. We’ll see how much we miss each other.’

‘I know what it’s like when people go away. It’s agony for a week, then painful for a week, then you begin to forget, and then it seems as if it never happened, it happened to someone else, and you start shrugging. You say, dingo, it’s life, that’s the way things are. Stupid things like that. As if you haven’t really lost something for ever.’

‘I shan’t forget. I shan’t ever forget.’

‘You will. And I will.’

‘We’ve got to go on living. However sad it is.’

After a long time she said, ‘I don’t think you know what sadness is.’

We overslept in the morning. I had deliberately set the alarm late, to make a rush, not to leave time for tears. Alison ate her breakfast standing up. We talked about absurd things; cutting the milk order, where a library ticket I had lost might be. And then she put down her coffee-cup and we were standing at the door. I saw her face, as if it

was still not too late, all a bad dream, her grey eyes searching mine, her small puffy cheeks. There were tears forming in her eyes, and she opened her mouth to say something. But then she leant forward, desperately, clumsily, kissed me so swiftly that I hardly felt her mouth; and was gone. Her camel-hair coat disappeared down the stairs. She didn't look back. I went to the window, and saw her walking fast across the street, the pale coat, the straw-coloured hair almost the same colour as the coat, a movement of her hand to her handbag, her blowing her nose; not once did she look back. She broke into a run. I opened the window and leant out and watched until she disappeared round the corner at the end of the street into Marylebone Road. And not even then, at the very end, did she look back.

I turned to the room, washed up the breakfast things, made the bed; then I sat at the table and wrote out a cheque for fifty pounds, and a little note.

Alison darling, please believe that if it was to be anyone, it would have been you; that I've really been far sadder than I could show, if we were not both to go mad. Please wear the ear-rings. Please take this money and buy a scooter and go where we used to go – or do what you want with it. Please look after yourself. Oh God, if only I was worth waiting for ...

NICHOLAS

It was supposed to sound spontaneous, but I had been composing it on and off for days. I put the cheque and the note in an envelope, and set it on the mantelpiece with the little box containing the pair of jet ear-rings we had seen in a closed antique-shop one day. Then I shaved and went out to get a taxi.

The thing I felt most clearly, when the first corner was turned, was that I had escaped; and hardly less clearly, but much more odiously, that she loved me more than I loved her, and that consequently I had in some indefinable way won. So on top of the excitement of the voyage into the unknown, the taking wing again, I had an agreeable feeling of emotional triumph. A dry feeling; but I liked things dry. I went towards Victoria as a hungry man goes towards a good

dinner after a couple of glasses of Manzanilla. I began to hum, and it was not a brave attempt to hide my grief, but a revoltingly unclouded desire to celebrate my release.

7

Four days later I was standing on Hymettus, looking down over the great complex of Athens-Piraeus, cities and suburbs, houses spilt like a million dice over the Attic plain. South stretched the pure blue late-summer sea, pale pumice-coloured islands, and beyond them the serene mountains of the Peloponnesus stood away over the horizon in a magnificent arrested flow of land and water. Serene, superb, majestic: I tried for adjectives less used, but anything else seemed underweight. I could see for eighty miles, and all pure, all noble, luminous, immense, all as it always had been.

It was like a journey into space. I was standing on Mars, knee-deep in thyme, under a sky that seemed never to have known dust or cloud. I looked down at my pale London hands. Even they seemed changed, nauseatingly alien, things I should long ago have disowned.

When that ultimate Mediterranean light fell on the world around me, I could see it was supremely beautiful; but when it touched me, I felt it was hostile. It seemed to corrode, not cleanse. It was like being at the beginning of an interrogation under arc-lights; already I could see the table with straps through the open doorway, already my old self began to know that it wouldn't be able to hold out. It was partly the terror, the stripping-to-essentials, of love; because I fell totally and for ever in love with the Greek landscape from the moment I arrived. But with the love came a contradictory, almost irritating, feeling of impotence and inferiority, as if Greece were a woman so sensually provocative that I must fall physically and desperately in love with her, and at the same time so calmly aristocratic that I should never be able to approach her.

None of the books I had read explained this sinister-fascinating, this Circe-like quality of Greece; the quality that makes it unique. In

England we live in a very muted, calm, domesticated relationship with what remains of our natural landscape and its soft northern light; in Greece landscape and light are so beautiful, so all-present, so intense, so wild, that the relationship is immediately love-hatred, one of passion. It took me many months to understand this, and many years to accept it.

Later that day I was standing at the window of a room in the hotel to which the bored young man who received me at the British Council had directed me. I had just written a letter to Alison, but already she seemed far away, not in distance, not in time, but in some dimension for which there is no name. Reality, perhaps. I looked down over Constitution Square, the central meeting-place of Athens, over knots of strolling people, white shirts, dark glasses, bare brown arms. A sibilant murmur rose from the crowds sitting at the café tables. It was as hot as a hot English July day, and the sky was still perfectly clear. By craning out and looking east I could see Hymettus, where I had stood that morning, its sunset-facing slope an intense soft violet-pink, like a cyclamen. In the other direction, over the clutter of roofs, lay the massive black silhouette of the Acropolis. It was too exactly as imagined to be true. But I felt as gladly and expectantly disorientated, as happily and alertly alone, as Alice in Wonderland.

Phraxos lay eight dazzling hours in a small steamer south of Athens, about six miles off the mainland of the Peloponnesus and in the centre of a landscape as memorable as itself: to the north and west, a great fixed arm of mountains, in whose crook the island stood; to the east a distant gently-peaked archipelago; to the south the soft blue desert of the Aegean stretching away to Crete. Phraxos was beautiful. There was no other adjective; it was not just pretty, picturesque, charming – it was simply and effortlessly beautiful. It took my breath away when I first saw it, floating under Venus like a majestic black whale in an amethyst evening sea, and it still takes my breath away when I shut my eyes now and remember it. Its beauty was rare even in the Aegean, because its hills were covered with pine trees, Mediterranean pines as light as greenfinch feathers. Nine-tenths of the island was uninhabited and uncultivated: nothing but pines, coves,

silence, sea. Herded into one corner, the north-west, lay a spectacular agglomeration of snow-white houses round a couple of small harbours.

But there were two eyesores, visible long before we landed. One was an obese Greek-Edwardian hotel near the larger of the two harbours, as at home on Phraxos as a hansom cab in a Doric temple. The other, equally at odds with the landscape, stood on the outskirts of the village and dwarfed the cottages around it: a dauntingly long building several storeys high and reminiscent, in spite of its ornate Corinthian façade, of a factory – a likeness more than just visually apt, as I was to discover.

But the Lord Byron School, the Hotel Philadelphia, and the village apart, the body of the island, all thirty square miles of it, was virgin. There were some silvery olive-orchards and a few patches of terrace cultivation on the steep slopes of the north coast, but the rest was primeval pine-forest. There were no antiquities. The ancient Greeks never much liked the taste of cistern-water.

This lack of open water meant also that there were no wild animals and few birds on the island. Its distinguishing characteristic, away from the village, was silence. Out on the hills one might pass a goatherd and his winter flock (in summer there was no grazing) of bronze-belled goats, or a bowed peasant-woman carrying a huge faggot, or a resin-gatherer; but one very rarely did. It was the world before the machine, almost before man, and what small events happened – the passage of a shrike, the discovery of a new path, a glimpse of a distant caïque far below – took on an unaccountable significance, as if they were isolated, framed, magnified by solitude. It was the least eerie, the most un-Nordic solitude in the world. Fear had never touched the island. If it was haunted, it was by nymphs, not monsters.

I was forced to go frequently for walks to escape the claustrophobic ambience of the Lord Byron School. To begin with there was something pleasantly absurd about teaching in a boarding school (run on supposedly Eton-Harrow lines) only a look north from where Clytemnestra killed Agamemnon. Certainly the masters, victims of a country with only two universities, were academically of a

far higher standard than Mitford had suggested, and in themselves the boys were no better and no worse than boys the world over. But they were ruthlessly pragmatic about English. They cared nothing for literature, and everything for science. If I tried to read the school eponym's poetry with them, they yawned; if I taught the English names for the parts of a car, I had trouble getting them out of the class at lesson's end; and often they would bring me American scientific textbooks full of terms that were just as much Greek to me as the expectant faces waiting for a simple paraphrase.

Both boys and masters loathed the island, and regarded it as a sort of self-imposed penal settlement where one came to work, work, work. I had imagined something far sleepier than an English school, and instead it was far tougher. The crowning irony was that this obsessive industry, this mole-like blindness to their natural environment, was what was considered to be so typically English about the system. Perhaps to Greeks, made blasé by living among the most beautiful landscapes in the world, there was nothing discordant in being cooped up in such a termitary; but it drove me mad with irritation.

One or two of the masters spoke some English, and several French, but I found little in common with them. The only one I could tolerate was Demetriades, the other teacher of English, and that was solely because he spoke and understood the language so much more fluently than anyone else. With him I could rise out of Basic.

He took me round the village *kapheneia* and tavernas, and I got a taste for Greek food and Greek folk music. But there was always something mournful about the place in daylight. There were so many villas boarded up; there were so few people in the alley-streets; one had always to go to the same two better-class tavernas for a meal, and one met the same old faces, a stale Levantine provincial society that belonged more to the world of the Ottoman Empire, Balzac in a fez, than to the 1950s. I had to agree with Mitford: it was desperately dull. I tried one or two of the fishermen's wine-shops. They were jollier, but I felt they felt I was slumming; and my Greek never rose to the island dialect they spoke.

I made inquiries about the man Mitford had had a row with, but no one seemed to have heard of either him or it; or, for that matter,

of the 'waiting-room'. Mitford had evidently spent a lot of time in the village, and made himself unpopular with other masters besides Demetriades. There was also a heavy aftermath of anglophobia, aggravated by the political situation at that time, to be endured.

Soon I took to the hills. None of the other masters ever stirred an inch farther than they needed to, and the boys were not allowed beyond the *chevaux de frise* of the high-walled school grounds except on Sundays, and then only for the half-mile along the coast road to the village. The hills were always intoxicatingly clean and light and remote. With no company but my own boredom, I began for the first time in my life to look at nature, and to regret that I knew its language as little as I knew Greek. I became aware of stones, birds, flowers, land, in a new way, and the walking, the swimming, the magnificent climate, the absence of all traffic, ground or air – for there wasn't a single car on the island, there being no roads outside the village, and aeroplanes passed over not once a month – these things made me feel healthier than I had ever felt before. I began to get some sort of harmony between body and mind; or so it seemed. It was an illusion.

There had been a letter from Alison waiting for me when I arrived at the school. It was very brief. She must have written it at work the day I left London.

I love you, you can't understand what that means because you've never loved anyone yourself. It's what I've been trying to make you see this last week. All I want to say is that one day, when you do fall in love, remember today. Remember I kissed you and walked out of the room. Remember I walked all the way down the street and never once looked back. I knew you were watching. Remember I did all this and I love you. If you forget everything else about me, please remember this. I walked down that street and I never looked back and I love you. I love you. I love you so much that I shall hate you for ever for today.

Another letter came from her the next day. It contained nothing but my cheque torn in two and a scribble on the back of one

half: 'No thanks.' And two days later there was a third letter, full of enthusiasm for some film she had been to see, almost a chatty letter. But at the end she wrote: 'Forget the first letter I sent you. I was so upset. It's all over now. I won't be old-fashioned again.'

Of course I wrote back, if not every day, two or three times a week; long letters full of self-excuse and self-justification, until one day she wrote,

Please don't go on so about you and me. Tell me about things, about the island, the school. I know what you are. So be what you are. When you write about things I can think I'm with you, seeing them with you. And don't be offended. Forgiving's forgetting.

Imperceptibly information took the place of emotion in our letters. She wrote to me about her work, a girl she had become friendly with, about minor domestic things, films, books. I wrote about the school and the island, as she asked. One day there was a photograph of her in her uniform. She'd had her hair cut short and it was tucked back under her fore-and-aft cap. She was smiling, but the uniform and the smile combined gave her an insincere, professional look; she had become, the photo sharply warned me, someone not the someone I liked to remember; the private, the uniquely my, Alison. And then the letters became once-weekly. The physical ache I had felt for her during the first month seemed to disappear; there were still times when I knew I wanted her very much, and would have given anything to have her in bed beside me. But they were moments of sexual frustration, not regretted love. One day I thought: if I wasn't on this island I should be dropping this girl. The writing of the letters had become as often as not more of a chore than a pleasure, and I didn't hurry back to my room after dinner to write them – I scribbled them off hurriedly in class and got a boy to run down to the gate at the last minute to give them to the school postman.

At half-term I went with Demetriades to Athens. He wanted to take me to his favourite brothel, in a suburb. He assured me the girls were clean. I hesitated, then – isn't it a poet's, to say nothing of a cynic's, moral duty to be immoral? – I went. When we came out, it

was raining, and the shadowing wet leaves on the lower branches of a eucalyptus, caught under a light in the entrance, made me remember our bedroom in Russell Square. But Alison and London were gone, dead, exorcized; I had cut them away from my life. I decided I would write a letter to Alison that night, to say that I didn't want to hear from her again. I was too drunk by the time we got back to the hotel, and I don't know what I would have said. Perhaps that I had proved beyond doubt that I was not worth waiting for; perhaps that she bored me; perhaps that I was lonelier than ever – and wanted to stay that way. As it was, I sent her a postcard telling her nothing; and on the last day I went back to the brothel alone. But the Lebanese nymphet I coveted was taken, and I didn't fancy the others.

December came, and we were still writing letters. I knew she was hiding things from me. Her life, as she described it, was too simple and manless to be true. When the final letter came, I was not surprised. What I hadn't expected was how bitter I should feel, and how betrayed. It was less a sexual jealousy of the man than an envy of Alison; moments of tenderness and togetherness, moments when the otherness of the other disappeared, flooded back through my mind for days afterwards, like sequences from some cheap romantic film that I certainly didn't want to remember, but did; and there was the read and re-read letter; and that such things could be ended so, by two hundred stale, worn words.

Dear Nicholas,

I can't go on any more. I'm so sorry if this hurts you. Please believe that I'm sorry, please don't be angry with me for knowing you will be hurt. I can hear you saying, I'm not hurt.

I got so terribly lonely and depressed. I haven't told you how much, I can't tell you how much. Those first days I kept up such a brave front at work, and then at home I collapsed.

I'm sleeping with Pete again when he's in London. It started two weeks ago. Please *please* believe me that I wouldn't be if I thought ... you know. I know you know. I don't feel about him as I used to do, and I don't begin to feel about him as I felt about you, you *can't* be jealous.

It's just he's so uncomplicated, he stops me thinking, he stops me being lonely, I've sunk back into all the old Australians-in-London thing again. We may marry. I don't know.

It's terrible. I still want to write to you, and you to me. I keep on remembering.

Goodbye.

ALISON

You will be different for me. Always. That very first letter I wrote the day you left. If you could only understand.

I wrote a letter in reply to say that I had been expecting her letter, that she was perfectly free. But I tore it up. If anything might hurt her, silence would; and I wanted to hurt her.

8

I was hopelessly unhappy in those last few days before the Christmas holidays. I began to loathe the school irrationally: the way it worked and the way it was planted, blind and prisonlike, in the heart of the divine landscape. When Alison's letters stopped, I was also increasingly isolated in a more conventional way. The outer world, England, London, became absurdly and sometimes terrifyingly unreal. The two or three Oxford friends I had kept up a spasmodic correspondence with sank beneath the horizon. I used to hear the B.B.C. Overseas Service from time to time, but the news broadcasts seemed to come from the moon, and concerned situations and a society I no longer belonged to, while the rare newspapers from England that I saw became more and more like their own 'One hundred years ago today' features. The whole island seemed to feel this exile from contemporary reality. The harbour quays were always crowded for hours before the daily boat from Athens appeared on the north-eastern horizon; even though people knew that it would stop for only five minutes, that probably not five passengers would get off, or five get on, they had to watch. It was as if we were all convicts still hoping faintly for a reprieve.

Yet the island was so beautiful. Near Christmas the weather became wild and cold. Enormous seas of pounding Antwerp blue roared on the shingle of the school beaches. The mountains on the mainland took snow, and magnificent white shoulders out of Hokusai stood west and north across the angry water. The hills became even barer, even more silent. I often started off on a walk out of sheer boredom, but there were always new solitudes, new places. Yet in the end this unflawed natural world became intimidating. I seemed to have no place in it, I could not use it and I was not made for it. I was a townsman; and I was rootless. I rejected my own age, yet could not sink back into an older. So I ended like Sciron, a mid-air man.

The Christmas holidays came. I went off to travel round the Peloponnesus. I had to be alone, to give myself a snatch of life away from the school. If Alison had been free, I would have flown back to England to meet her. I had thoughts of resigning; but then that seemed a retreat, another failure, and I told myself that things would be better once spring began. So I had Christmas alone in Sparta and I saw the New Year in alone in Pyrgos. I had a day in Athens before I caught the boat back to Phraxos, and visited the brothel again.

I thought very little about Alison, but I felt about her; that is, I tried to erase her, and failed. I had days when I thought I could stay celibate for the rest of my life – monastic days; and days when I ached for a conversable girl. The island women were of Albanian stock, dour and sallow-faced, and about as seducible as a Free Church congregation. Much more tempting were some of the boys, possessors of an olive grace and a sharp individuality that made them very different from their stereotyped English private-school equivalents – those uniformed pink ants out of the Arnold mould. I had Gide-like moments, but they were not reciprocated, because nowhere is pederasty more abominated than in bourgeois Greece; there at least Arnold would have felt thoroughly at home. Besides, I wasn't queer; I simply understood (nailing a lie in my own education) how being queer might have its consolations. It was not only the solitude – it was Greece. It made conventional English notions of what was moral and immoral ridiculous; whether or not I did the socially unforgivable seemed in itself merely a matter of appetite, like smoking or not

smoking a new brand of cigarette – as trivial as that, from a moral point of view. Goodness and beauty may be separable in the north, but not in Greece. Between skin and skin there is only light.

And there was my poetry. I had begun to write poems about the island, about Greece, that seemed to me philosophically profound and technically exciting. I dreamt more and more of literary success. I spent hours staring at the wall of my room, imagining reviews, letters written to me by celebrated fellow-poets, fame and praise and still more fame. I did not at that time know Emily Dickinson's great definition, her 'Publication is not the business of poets'; being a poet is all, being known as a poet is nothing. The onanistic literary picture of myself I caressed up out of reality began to dominate my life. The school became a convenient scapegoat – how could one compose flawless verse if one was surrounded by futile routine?

But then, one bleak March Sunday, the scales dropped from my eyes. I read the Greek poems and saw them for what they were: undergraduate pieces, without rhythm, without structure, their banalities of perception clumsily concealed under an impasto of lush rhetoric. In horror I turned to other poems I had written – at Oxford, in East Anglia. They were no better; even worse. The truth rushed down on me like a burying avalanche. I was not a poet.

I felt no consolation in this knowledge, but only a red anger that evolution could allow such sensitivity and such inadequacy to coexist in the same mind. In one ego, my ego, screaming like a hare caught in a gin. Taking all the poems I had ever written, page by slow page, I tore each one into tiny fragments, till my fingers ached.

Then I went for a walk in the hills, even though it was very cold and began to pour with rain. The whole world had finally declared itself against me. Here was something I could not shrug off, an absolute condemnation. One aspect of even my worse experiences had always been that they were fuel, ore; finally utilizable, not all waste and suffering. Poetry had always seemed something I could turn to in need – an emergency exit, a lifebuoy, as well as a justification. Now I was in the sea, and the lifebuoy had sunk, like lead. It was an effort not to cry tears of self-pity. My face set into a stiff mask, like that of an acroterion. I walked for hours and I was in hell.

One kind of person is engaged in society without realizing it; another kind engages in society by controlling it. The one is a gear, a cog, and the other an engineer, a driver. But a person who has opted out has only his ability to express his disengagement between his existence and nothingness. Not *cogito*, but *scribo, pingo, ergo sum*. For days after I felt myself filled with nothingness; with something more than the old physical and social loneliness – a metaphysical sense of being marooned. It was something almost tangible, like cancer or tuberculosis.

Then one day, not a week later, it was tangible: I woke up one morning and found I had two sores. I had been half expecting them. In late February I had gone to Athens, and paid another visit to the house in Kephissia. I knew I had taken a risk. At the time it hadn't seemed to matter.

For a day I was too shocked to act. There were two doctors in the village: one active, who had the school in his practice, and one, a taciturn old Rumanian, who though semi-retired still took a few patients. The school doctor was in and out of the common-room continually. I couldn't go to him. So I went to see Dr Patarescu.

He looked at the sores, and then at me, and shrugged.

'*Félicitations*,' he said.

'*C'est ...?*'

'*On va voir ça à Athènes. Je vous donnerai une adresse. C'est bien à Athènes que vous l'avez attrapé, oui?*' I nodded. '*Les poules là-bas. Infectes. Seulement les fous qui s'y laissent prendre.*'

He had an old yellow face and pince-nez; a malicious smile. My questions amused him. The chances were I could be cured; I was not contagious but I must have no sex, he could have treated me if he had had the right drug, benzathine penicillin, but he could not get it. He had heard one could get it at a certain private clinic in Athens, but I would have to pay through the nose; it would be eight weeks before we could be sure it had worked. He answered all my questions drily; all he could offer was the ancient arsenic and bismuth treatment, and I must in any case have a laboratory test first. He had long ago been drained of all sympathy for humanity, and he watched me with tortoise eyes as I put down the fee.

I stood in his doorway, still foolishly trying for his sympathy.

Je suis maudit.

He shrugged, and showed me out, totally indifferent, a sere notifier of what is.

It was too horrible. There was still a week to the end of term, and I thought of leaving at once and going back to England. Yet I couldn't bear the idea of London, and there was a sort of anonymity in Greece, if not on the island. I didn't really trust Dr Patarescu; one or two of the older masters were his cronies and I knew they often saw him for whist. I searched every smile, every word spoken to me, for a reference to what had happened; and I thought that the very next day I saw in various eyes a certain dry amusement. One morning during break the headmaster said, 'Cheer up, *kyrios* Urfe, or we shall say the beauties of Greece have made you sad.' I thought this was a direct reference; and the smiles that greeted the remark seemed to me to be more than it merited. Within three days of seeing the doctor I decided that everyone knew about my disease, even the boys. Every time they whispered I heard the word 'syphilis'.

Suddenly, in that same terrible week, the Greek spring was with us. In only two days, it seemed, the earth was covered with anemones, orchids, asphodels, wild gladioli; for once there were birds everywhere, on migration. Undulating lines of storks croaked overhead, the sky was blue, pure, the boys sang, and even the sternest masters smiled. The world around me took wing, and I was stuck to the ground; a Catullus without talent forced to inhabit a land that was Lesbia without mercy. I had hideous nights, in one of which I wrote a long letter to Alison, trying to explain what had happened to me, how I remembered what she had said in her letter in the canteen, how now I could believe her; how I loathed myself. Even then I managed to sound resentful, for my leaving her began to seem like the last and the worst of my bad gambles. I might have married her; at least I should have had a companion in the desert.

I did not post the letter, but again and again, night after night, I thought of suicide. It seemed to me that death had marked my family down, right back to those two uncles I had never known, one killed at Ypres and the other at Passchendaele; then my parents. All violent,

pointless deaths, lost gambles. I was worse off than even Alison was; she hated life, I hated myself. I had created nothing, I belonged to nothingness, to the *nèant*, and it seemed to me that my own death was the only thing left that I could create; and still, even then, I thought it might accuse everyone who had ever known me. It would validate all my cynicism, it would prove all my solitary selfishness; it would stand, and be remembered, as a final dark victory.

The day before term ended I felt the balance tip. I knew what to do. The gatekeeper at the school had an old twelve-bore, which he had once offered to lend me if I wanted to go shooting in the hills. I went and asked to borrow it. He was delighted and loaded my pocket with cartridges; the pine-forests were full of passage quail.

I walked up a gulley behind the school, climbed to a small saddle, and went into the trees. I was soon in shadow. To the north, across the water, the golden mainland still lay in the sun. The air was very light, warm, the sky of an intense luminous blue. A long way away, above me, I could hear the bells of a flock of goats being brought back to the village for the night. I walked for some time. It was like looking for a place to relieve oneself in; I had to be sure I couldn't be observed. At last I found a rocky hollow.

I put a cartridge in the gun, and sat on the ground, against the stem of a pine tree. All around me grape hyacinths pushed through the pine-needles. I reversed the gun and looked down the barrel, into the black O of my non-existence. I calculated the angle at which I should have to hold my head. I held the barrel against my right eye, turned my head so that the shot would mash like black lightning through the brain and blast the back wall of my skull off. I reached for the trigger – this was all testing, rehearsing – and found it difficult. In straining forward, I thought I might have to twist my head at the last moment and botch the job, so I searched and found a dead branch that would fit between the guard and the trigger. I took the cartridge out and slipped the stick in, and then sat with the gun between my knees, the soles of my shoes on the stick, the right barrel an inch from my eye. There was a click as the hammer fell. It was simple. I reloaded the cartridge.

From the hills behind came the solitary voice of a girl. She must have been bringing down the goats, and she was singing wildly, at the limit of her uninhibited voice; without any recognizable melody, in Turkish-Muslim intervals. It sounded disembodied, of place, not person. I remembered having heard a similar voice, perhaps this same girl's, singing one day on the hill behind the school. It had drifted down into the classroom, and the boys had begun to giggle. But now it seemed intensely mysterious, welling out of a solitude and suffering that made mine trivial and absurd. I sat with the gun across my knees, unable to move while the sound floated down through the evening air. I don't know how long she sang, but the sky darkened, the sea paled to a nacreous grey. Over the mountains there were pinkish bars of high cloud in the still strong light from the set sun. All the land and the sea held light, as if light was warmth, and did not fade as soon as the source was removed. But the voice dwindled towards the village; then died into silence.

I raised the gun again until the barrel was pointing at me. The stick projected, waiting for my feet to jerk down. The air was very silent. Many miles away I heard the siren of the Athens boat, approaching the island. But it was like something outside a vacuum. Death was now.

I did nothing. I waited. The afterglow, the palest yellow, then a luminous pale-green, then a limpid stained-glass blue, held in the sky over the sea of mountains to the west. I waited, I waited, I heard the siren closer, I waited for the will, the black moment, to come to raise my feet and kick down; and I could not. All the time I felt I was being watched, that I was not alone, that I was putting on an act for the benefit of someone, that this action could be done only if it was spontaneous, pure – and moral. Because more and more it crept through my mind with the chill spring night that I was trying to commit not a moral action, but a fundamentally aesthetic one; to do something that would end my life sensationally, significantly, consistently. It was a Mercutio death I was looking for, not a real one. A death to be remembered, not the true death of a true suicide, the death obliterate.

And the voice; the light; the sky.

It began to grow dark, the siren of the receding Athens boat moaned, and I still sat smoking, with the gun by my side. I re-evaluated myself. I saw that I was from now on, for ever, contemptible. I had been, and remained, intensely depressed, but I had also been, and always would be, intensely false; in existentialist terms, inauthentic. I knew I would never kill myself, I knew I would always want to go on living with myself, however hollow I became, however diseased.

I raised the gun and fired it blindly into the sky. The crash shook me. There was an echo, some falling twigs. Then the heavy well of silence.

‘Did you kill anything?’ asked the old man at the gate.

‘One shot,’ I said. ‘I missed.’

9

Years later I saw the *gabbia* at Piacenza: a harsh black canary-cage strung high up the side of the towering campanile, in which prisoners were once left to starve to death and rot in full view of the town below. And looking up at it I remembered that winter in Greece, that *gabbia* I had constructed for myself out of light, solitude, and self-delusions. To write poetry and to commit suicide, apparently so contradictory, had really been the same, attempts at escape. And my feelings, at the end of that wretched term, were those of a man who knows he is in a cage, exposed to the jeers of all his old ambitions until he dies.

But I went to Athens, to the address the village doctor gave me. I was given a Kahn test and Dr Patarescu’s diagnosis was confirmed. The ten days’ treatment was very expensive; most of the drugs had been smuggled into Greece, or stolen, and I was at the receiving end of a Third Man network. The smooth young American-trained doctor told me not to worry; the prognosis was excellent. At the end of the Easter holidays, when I returned to the island, I found a card from Alison. It was a garishly coloured thing with a kangaroo on it balloon-saying ‘Thought I’d forgot?’ My twenty-sixth birthday had

taken place while I was in Athens. The post-mark was Amsterdam. There was no message. It was simply signed 'Alison'. I threw it into the waste-paper basket. But that evening, I took it out again.

To get through the anxious wait for the secondary stage not to develop, I began quietly to rape the island. I swam and swam, I walked and walked, I went out every day. The weather rapidly became hot, and during the heat of the afternoon the school slept. Then I used to take off into the pine-forest. I always went over the central crest to the south side of the island if I could, away from the village and the school. There, was absolute solitude: three hidden cottages at one small bay, a few tiny chapels lost among the green downward of pines and deserted except on their saints' days, and one almost invisible villa, which was in any case empty. The rest was sublimely peaceful, as potential as a clean canvas, a site for myths. It was as if the island was split into dark and light; so that the teaching timetable, which made it difficult to go far except at week-ends or by getting up very early (school began at half past seven), became as irksome as a short tether.

I did not think about the future. In spite of what the doctor at the clinic had said I felt certain that the cure would fail. The pattern of destiny seemed clear: down and down, and down.

But then the mysteries began.

2

Irrités de ce premier crime, les monstres ne s'en tinrent pas là; ils l'étendirent ensuite nue, à plat ventre sur une grande table, ils allumèrent des cierges, ils placèrent l'image de notre sauveur à sa tête et osèrent consommer sur les reins de cette malheureuse le plus redoutable de nos mystères.

De Sade, *Les Infortunes de la Vertu*