

Len Deighton Only When I Larf



MODERN
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Only When I Larf

Len Deighton was born in 1929 in London. He did his national service in the RAF, went to the Royal College of Art and designed many book jackets, including the original UK edition of Jack Kerouac's *On the Road*. The enormous success of his first novel, *The IPCRESS File* (1962), was repeated in a remarkable sequence of books over the following thirty or so years. These varied from historical fiction (*Bomber*, perhaps his greatest novel) to dystopian alternative fiction (*SS-GB*) and a number of brilliant non-fiction books on the Second World War (*Fighter*, *Blitzkrieg* and *Blood, Tears and Folly*).

His spy novels chart the twists and turns of Britain and the Cold War in ways which now give them a unique flavour. They preserve a world in which Europe contains many dictatorships, in which the personal can be ruined by the ideological and where the horrors of the Second World War are buried under only a very thin layer of soil. Deighton's fascination with technology, his sense of humour and his brilliant evocation of time and place make him one of the key British espionage writers, alongside John Buchan, Eric Ambler, Ian Fleming and John le Carré.

Len Deighton in Penguin Modern Classics

The IPCRESS File
Horse Under Water
Funeral in Berlin
Billion-Dollar Brain
An Expensive Place to Die
Only When I Larf
Bomber
Close-Up
Spy Story
Yesterday's Spy
Twinkle, Twinkle, Little Spy
SS-GB
XPD
Goodbye Mickey Mouse
Berlin Game
Mexico Set
London Match
Winter
Spy Hook
Spy Line
Spy Sinker
MAMista
City of Gold
Violent Ward
Faith
Hope
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Short stories

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Fighter
Blitzkrieg
Blood, Tears and Folly

LEN DEIGHTON

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There is an ancient saying among the peoples of Mesopotamia, 'Four fingers stand between truth and lies', and if you hold your hand to your face you will find that measurement to be the distance between the eye and the ear.

In 1925 a Czech nobleman writing on Ministère des Postes et Télégraphes notepaper invited bids from scrap metal merchants for 7,000 tons of metal otherwise known as the Eiffel Tower. So successful was he that, having left Paris hurriedly, he returned one month later and sold it again.

As recently as 1966 the Colosseum changed hands. A West German leased it for ten years at 20,000,000 lire per year (cash in advance) to an American tourist who wanted to adapt the top of it for a restaurant.

In 1949 a South African company purchased an airfield in England for 250,000 pounds sterling, giving a 10% deposit to a man in the uniform of an RAF Group Captain.

In 1962 a Pole in Naples collected 90,000 dollars in deposits on US Navy ships.

In 1963 an Irishman from Kerry sold a Scandinavian fishing fleet to a consortium of English businessmen after flying them to Bergen to view the fleet at anchor.

In 1965 two English airline stewards took a 20,000 dollar deposit on a used Boeing airliner during a three-day stopover in Tokyo.

To these men on land, sea and air, this book is respectfully dedicated.

Only When I Larf

Bob

We'd been eight and a half minutes earlier on the dress rehearsal. This time we were held up in a traffic jam at Lexington and Fiftieth Street. Mid-town Manhattan on Friday afternoon is no place for tight schedules. I paid the cab driver with a couple of dollar bills, took fifty cents as change and gave him a two bit tip. Silas and Liz tumbled out and I heard Liz swearing softly and dabbing a spittle wet finger at the knee of her nylons.

Silas waited for no one; umbrella in one hand, travel bag in the other, he marched off into the shiny hall of the Continuum Building. Liz, looking equally elegant, hurried after him. I scribbled \$1.75 into my accounts notebook, stuffed it into my pocket and hurried after them. New York streets like a fairground; flashing lights, car horns, police whistles and all those organisation men with soft white shirts and hard pink faces hurrying so fast to nowhere that their grey flannel suits are going at the knees. It was late afternoon and there wasn't much action in the Continuum Building. The hall was shiny, and silent except for the tap of our shoes. On the left side of the foyer there was the Continuum Building Coffee and Donut shop, and a newspaper and tobacco kiosk. Neither seemed to be doing much business. The right of the lobby was a side entrance to the bank. That wasn't doing much business either, but we planned to do something about that.

I was wearing overalls and I put down the heavy bags for a moment while I unlocked the glass case, removed the 'For Rent' sign and clipped the white letters into place: '29th Floor. Amalgamated Minerals.' Pop. I closed the case and looked around but no one seemed to care. I followed the others into the lift and Mick pressed

the button for the twenty-ninth. Liz snatched a look at her ladder and Silas sniffed his carnation. Vroom went the lift.

‘It’ll be the twenty-ninth again,’ said Mick.

‘That’s it,’ I said, picking up his brogue without meaning to.

‘You’ll be seeing the big fight.’

‘I will,’ I said.

‘That feller will never learn,’ said Mick, shaking his head. Silas stared at me reprovingly.

‘Have you had any more trouble from the O’Reilly twins?’ I asked Mick.

‘Not even a visit from the big feller,’ said Mick. ‘I knew me cousin Pat could fix the whole matter in a jiffy, but I didn’t like to worry him with little domestic squabbles.’ Silas looked at us both, then asked Mick, ‘What action did your cousin Pat take?’

Mick looked at Silas suspiciously. It was the hard British accent that did it. The lift stopped. Mick leaned forward to Silas and lowered his voice, ‘Bless you, sir, he broke their legs.’ He waited a moment before pushing the button. The doors opened with a burr. ‘Their back legs,’ added Mick. We got out. From my heavy bag I produced a card sign that said, ‘Amalgamated Minerals Reception’. I hung it by the lift. As we walked along the corridor Silas switched on all the lights.

‘Who the hell’s that?’ said Silas. He shivered.

‘Mick, the liftman.’

‘How do you know all about his friends and family?’

I said, ‘I heard someone talking to him one day. So now I always say, “Had any more trouble from the O’Reilly twins, Mick?” or “How are the O’Reilly twins?” or . . .’ Silas grunted. As he walked along the corridor he closed the doors of the empty offices. Bonk, bonk, bonk.

I followed Silas and Liz into the offices the janitor had furnished for us. From behind the door’s glass panel a voice said, ‘I’m just about done.’ The last of the putty fell onto a sheet of newspaper and the glass panel bearing the battered old words ‘General Manager’s Office’ lowered gently to reveal the ugly face of the janitor. ‘I’ve got rid of the cleaners and I’ve furnished both offices with the furniture you chose. It was heavy . . .’

Almost without pausing in his stride, Silas placed a hundred dollars in tens between the man's teeth. That smile could have held another five grand.

Silas and Liz marched into the inner office. The janitor raised the new glass panel into place. On it was expensive gold-leaf lettering that read 'Amalgamated Minerals Inc. New York. Washington. Seattle. London. Stockholm. Office of Sir Stephen Latimer. President'.

You know how these New York executives start off in a bull pen. Then they get themselves promoted to a room without windows, window facing an air shaft and, if they really make the top, get an office with an outside view. This one was on a corner of the building; three windows. The janitor must have really raided the building; a fitted carpet, Knoll desk, squawk box, four phones, Mies van der Rohe chairs, and a tall Hepplewhite bookcase full of *National Geographics*. I went to the window; it had a view like an airline poster. On the roof of the Pan Am building a helicopter was warming up before flying to Kennedy Airport: pockety, pockety, pockety. Clear blue air, skyscrapers and far below brightly coloured cars pulling into the kerb as fire engines wailed their way to Wall Street.

Silas coughed to attract my attention. Then he gave his roll brim hat and umbrella to Liz as though he'd been arriving here to start work all his life. I had no overcoat, I took off my overalls. Silas got behind the teak desk and got the feel of the controls. Liz had got an electric drill out of the bag and plugged it into the wall socket. As I turned she gave it a test buzz and handed it to me. I began to drill holes through the thin partition wall. We had done it both ways on rehearsals. We'd taken sample hardboard and tested for the joists. We had used a mechanical saw and various drills. Twenty-two holes with a three-quarter-inch drill finishing with the saw had proved the quickest. Silas never begrudged money for research, it was an obsession with him.

Liz took framed photos from the bag and began to arrange them on the wall. They were all air photos of mine-heads or plant. Beautifully printed under each photo on the thick mounts it said things like 'Borke Sweden. Plant for Ore Processes. Amalgamated Mineral Svenska AB. Second Largest in Scandinavia'. Or it said, 'Mining Drill

Manf. Co., Illinois, owned by Amalgamated Mineral Inc. New York'. Silas had researched each caption and the frames were light teak so that they would match the desk.

By the time I'd finished drilling and had broken a circular hole in the partition, Silas had arranged his personal photos on his desk. Photos of wife and families in front of a large country house, all featured a dopey man with a big moustache that Silas claimed was him a few years back. He helped me to fit the old-fashioned wall-safe into the hole I'd made. I'd done it just right, so we didn't need any of the wooden wedges to hold it firmly into the partition wall. Silas fiddled with the combination, and opened and closed the safe door a few times. Zonk. It closed with a clang. Yeah, very convincing. After all, it was a real safe except that there was no back to it. Apart from a piece of black velvet to keep it dark, it was just a tube into the room next door.

'Two thirty-three,' said Silas, looking at his watch. 'Stage One completed,' twenty-seven minutes to go before the bank closed.

'Stage one completed,' Liz said. She hung a picture over the door of the wall safe to hide it, like they do in films.

'Stage One completed,' I reported. 'But we are 25 cents miscalculated on the cab fare.' Silas nodded. He knew that I was trying to needle him, but he didn't react. What a stuffed shirt.

Liz was on the telephone talking to the bank downstairs in the foyer of the Building. She said, 'I'm Mrs Amalgamin, and want to confirm our arrangement to collect close to three hundred thousand dollars in cash in just a few minutes. Well yes, I know I only have 557 dollars in my account right now, but we went all through that yesterday. The Funfunn Novelty Company owe us three hundred thousand dollars, and they have promised a cheque today. We need the cash right away.' There was a pause, and then Liz said, 'Well, I don't see how there can be any difficulty. Funfunn Novelty Company are customers at your branch, and so are we. You promised to oblige us but if there's going to be any difficulty then I'll get on to head office right away. Well, I should think so. Yes, I told you, I've arranged that. Mr Amalgamin – my husband – would never allow me to carry that amount of cash. The armoured car company will handle it and I

shall just be there to pay in the Funfunn cheque and draw from our account.' She put down the phone. 'They had me worried for a moment. They don't have to do that, you know.'

'Yeah,' I said. 'Well, now all we have to worry about, is that bank clerk spotting one of our Funfunn jerks on his way through the foyer and getting into conversation with him.'

'Don't worry, baby,' she mocked, 'Silas will keep it cool for you.'

'Get lost,' I said, and went to the next-door office to check my equipment. There was a security guard uniform including white belt, holster and hat, and a cash box with chain and wrist lock. There was also a new pigskin document case, some documents and a fresh Nassau newspaper hot from Times Square where you can buy all the out-of-town dailies. I tried the hat on. It was a stupid hat. I wore it down over my eyes. My hair stuck out and I pulled a face in the mirror. Then I tipped it back at a rakish angle.

'You look sweet,' Liz said. I didn't know she was watching and her voice made me jump. I said nothing. She came up behind me and we looked at each other in the mirror. She was a doll and I would have been grateful for a bit of hand-to-hand combat with her any time, but I didn't want a kiss on the ear in that condescending mummy-says-go-bye-byes way she has.

'Get lost,' I said angrily, but she suddenly pulled my hat right down over my eyes and got out of the room before I could retaliate.

'You bitch,' I shouted, but I wasn't really angry. She laughed.

I looked at myself in a mirror. I'll tell you I looked pretty unconvincing as a security guard. My hair was too long and my skin was pale, the colour it always went in the winter if I didn't get a week in the sun somewhere. I was always a skinny little sod. Twenty-six years old and as wiry and hard now as I had ever been, even in the nick. Liz and Silas were all right; it was a lucky day for me when I met them, but they never let me forget who was the junior partner. I mean, they really didn't.

Silas had been with Liz right from when I first met him. If I hadn't seen the score between them, I might have thought that Silas was queer. I'd had trouble with a queer while I was in the nick. Peter the bigamist they called him and it was nearly too late before I found out

how he got the name. There was nothing queer about Silas but that doesn't mean that I knew what made him tick.

Things I didn't have, Silas had. Things I'll never have, Silas had, and let's face it, things I'll never want, Silas had. He was urbane, you know what I mean? He could wear evening clothes like Fred Astaire wore them. He had a feeling of command. If I put on a white coat I was a house painter, if Silas put one on, he was a surgeon, you know the type? And of course women go for that bossy upper-class manner, women were all crazy for Silas. Liz was, I just hoped I'd be able to pull birds like Liz when I got to be his age.

It was that war that did it. Before Silas was twenty-two he was a major in the tank corps and had half a dozen medals. He was bossing a hundred people, and some of them were old enough to be his father. If they as much as answered back, I suppose they'd have been in front of a firing squad or something. And perhaps a few of them were! Well, I mean, can you wonder he was bossy? I mean, I like him, he had this sly sense of humour and we could kid each other along with neither of us giving even a flicker of a smile, and that was great, but when you got down to it, he was a cold fish. That was the war too, I suppose. I mean, you don't go around killing people for five years and come out the other end a warm-hearted philanthropist, do you? I mean, you don't.

He had this sort of computer brain, and to let emotion enter into his calculations would be like programming errors into the computer. He told me that. Several times he told me that. I don't know how Liz could stay in love with him so long. He was sort of in love with Liz, but he was a cold fish, and there would come one day when the computer would reject Liz's punch card, and I'm telling you he could turn away mid sentence and never come back. He was tough, and he had a terrifying temper that showed itself now and again. He had no friends whatsoever. They were all killed in the war, Silas says. Yes, I said, and do you want me to guess who killed them? Liz got really angry when I said that, but I can tell you, he's been a rough bastard that Silas, so don't let that old school tie and plum-stone accent fool you.

He despises me. Silas despises me because I'm not educated

properly and yet he pours cold sarcasm on every attempt I make to learn something. Every time he sees me reading a book he adds 'for little people' or 'simply explained for the under fives' to the title, to make me feel like a moron. I can see what he's trying to do. He would have liked me to stop educating myself. He was frightened that one day I would take over the leadership. He was frightened I'd take over Liz too. I could see the glint of that fear in his eyes at times. Liz was much younger than Silas. Her family had known him for years apparently and Silas had started off keeping an eye on her and they had finished up living together. She says that Silas had asked her to marry him, but that she had refused. Years ago. Oh yeah. I doubted it; very much. Why would Silas have asked her that? The computer would have rejected that idea and sounded the buzzer. Silas had nothing to gain. And what Silas had nothing to gain from, Silas didn't do.

These operations didn't have any dash or real style – élan the French say – it was always Silas doing the big man and dangling his watch chain, while me and Liz were running around like a couple of coolies doing the real work. Now, if Silas had let me plan this operation things would be different. I'd have us posing as an aerobatics team that was selling its three-planes to change over to jets. I'd told Silas that idea, but he wouldn't even listen properly. Or there was my other idea about us being a three person expedition on our way to find the lost treasures of Babylon. I could use my book on archaeology if we did that one. Then there was an idea I had, where I would be a very young financial genius who everyone wanted to be in with. A sort of secret power in the finance politics of Europe, toppling governments with a stroke of the pen. Scratch you, chum.

Anything would be better than these capers in dreary offices. Imagine the old coot who sat here in this little hard-arse seat, every day from nine to five. Imagine beating that typewriter, answering the phone, yes sirring the boss until superannuation, and all for a hundred a week and all the pencils you can take home. Pow. Not me. Not me, man. I'm for the open road, the jet routes, Cannes, Nice, Monte; where the pickings are rich and the living is easy, the suckers are rising and the cabbage is high. I'd like to be there for the Grand

Prix. I didn't look like a security guard, but a driver – a racing driver – that's what I looked like. He's coming into the casino turn, vroom vroom, and he's too fast, but no, he's controlling that skid, German corner won't kill this boy. Vroom, vroom, vroom. Up over the pavement. Both cars, their wheels missing by a millimetre, he's ahead of von Turpitz and down the hill and the duel begins. Vroom, vroom. It's unbelievable folks, they're setting a new fantastic lap record. Monte has never seen anything like this before and the crowd are going wild, wild, I tell you, wild.

'For God's sake stop making that noise,' said Liz putting her head around the door. 'They will be arriving soon.'

I pulled my security guard cap on more firmly.

'And don't dare smoke,' said Liz. 'You know how angry Silas gets. Have one of my toffees instead.' She put a toffee on the table.

'Vroom,' I said. 'Vroom, vroom, vroom.' I gave her a sexy little hug but she pulled away from me. She went out and closed the door. I was dying for a cigarette but I didn't light one. Silas doesn't allow smoking on duty, unless the role calls for it, and I never upset him – really upset him I mean – when it's an operation. At other times I upset him quite a lot.

Liz

I wouldn't have called it an auspicious start, but Silas and Bob were bowing to each other, like a couple of Japanese Generals, and saying 'Stage One completed,' so I hung the framed photo over the dummy safe and phoned the bank to confirm that we'd be coming for the money. Then Bob went next door and I guessed he was trying on his security guard peaked cap and preening himself in the mirror. I hoped that he wouldn't have a cigarette because Silas would be sure to smell it and go into one of his tantrums. The two marks were expected at any minute. I debated whether to change my nylons; one of them had a tiny ladder, but the other had gone at the knee. Silas was scattering some land search papers across the desk. His face was taut and his lips pressed tight together with nerves. I wanted to go to him and put a hand on his arm, just so that he would look up and relax and smile for a moment, but before I could do so he said, 'Two thirty-five. The driver should have them at the front hall soon. Take your position, darling.' He looked perfect; black jacket, pinstripe trousers, gold watch chain and those strange half-frame spectacles that he peered over abstractedly. I loved him. I smiled at him and he gave a brief smile back as though frightened to encourage me in case I wasted time embracing him.

We still needed a fake teleprinter message, so I hurried down the hall to the unoccupied teleprinter room. The janitor had pointed it out to me on the previous Saturday's visit. I switched it into local so that it would not transmit, and then typed a genuine Bahamas teleprinter number and Amalgamin as an answerback code. Under that I typed the phoney message from Nassau and then switched the machine back to normal working again. I left the torn-off sheet near

Bob's uniform. There were a couple of genuine messages on the same sheet. I removed my earrings and necklace and tried to straighten my hair, but it was no use, it needed reshaping before it would ever look right again. Silas called to me, 'Get down to the lobby, caterpillar. I don't want those two idiots up here for at least five minutes, so stall them.'

'Just going, darling,' I said. I put a pair of heavy, library-style spectacles around my neck on a neck string, and picked up my notebook. It was lucky I hurried, for the Lincoln hire-car that we had sent to collect the marks arrived just as I reached the lobby.

I greeted the marks and had a brief, confidential word with the driver. 'You are to pick up an Italian gentleman – Mr Salvatore Lombardo – here outside this building at 3.06 precisely. OK? Can you wait?'

'Maybe I can, lady, maybe I can't,' said the driver. 'But if the fuzz starts crowding me, I'll roll around the block and pull into this same slot again. So, if I ain't here tell him to stay put. Italian guy, huh?'

'White fedora, dark glasses and tan coat,' I said.

'Whadda say his name was, Al Capone?' said the driver, then laughed.

I leaned close to him and spoke softly. 'Try out a gag like that on Sal,' I growled, 'and you could wind up in the East River.' I hurried to catch up with the two marks who were waiting in the lobby. 'That's not the regular driver,' I said. 'We have so many drivers nowadays and they all forget their instructions.'

The marks nodded. There were two of them: Johnny Jones was about forty, overweight, but attractive like a teddy bear in his soft overcoat. The other one – Karl Poster – was tall and distinguished looking, with grey eyes and a fine nose, down which he looked at me. He was the type they cast as unfaithful husbands in Italian films that get banned by the League of Decency.

'I was just going to get coffee for you,' I said. 'Our coffee machine upstairs is on the blink today.'

Karl looked me over slowly, like a comparison shopper in a slave market. 'Why don't we just take time out for a coffee here and now?' he said. He looked at his watch, 'We are five minutes early.'

‘Fine,’ I said turning back to the elevator.

‘You have coffee too,’ said Karl. He put his hand on my arm with just enough pressure to endorse the invitation, but not enough to make a girl look around for a cop.

We found a corner seat in the half-empty coffee shop, and they insisted upon my having donuts too. Sugar-coated donuts with chocolate chips inside.

‘Sky’s the limit,’ explained Johnny, the shorter one. ‘Expense no object, it’s our big day today. Is that right, Karl?’ Karl looked at him, and seemed annoyed at the ingenuous admission. ‘Karl would never admit it. Eh, Karl?’ He slapped Karl’s shoulder. ‘But this is a big day for both of us. Let’s have a smile, Karl.’ Karl smiled reluctantly. Johnny turned to me, ‘Have you worked for this company long?’

‘Four years,’ I said. ‘Five next February.’ I had it all pat. Marks often asked questions like that. How long have you been with this boss. What make was the company plane. Or there were trick questions to double-check things that Silas had told them, like how long since your boss started wearing glasses or what kind of car does he drive.

I looked at them. I sometimes wondered why I didn’t feel sorry for marks. Bob said he felt sorry for them sometimes, but I never felt really close to them. It’s like reading about people dying in traffic accidents, if it isn’t someone you know, it’s almost impossible to care, isn’t it? It’s like feeling sorry for the dead angus when you are eating a really superb fillet with béarnaise. I mean, would it help the angus if I scraped the steak clean and just ate the béarnaise? Well, that’s the way I felt about the marks; if I didn’t eat them, someone else would, they were nature’s casualties. That’s the way I saw it.

‘Do you like children?’ asked Johnny, the short one.

‘My sister has three,’ I offered. ‘Twin boys, nearly five, and a three-year-old girl.’

‘I’ve got a boy, nearly six,’ said Johnny. He announced the age like it was a trump card, as though a son of seven would have been even better. ‘Would you like to see a photo?’

‘She doesn’t want to see photos,’ said Karl. Johnny looked offended. Karl amended his remark. ‘Not your photos, nor mine,’ he said. ‘She’s

working, what would she want with them?’ He ended the sentence on a note of apology.

‘I’d like to see them. I really would,’ I said. ‘I love children.’

Johnny brought out his wallet. Under a transparent window in it there was a photo of a woman. The hair style was out of fashion, and the dark tones of the picture had faded. The woman had a strange fixed smile as though she knew she was going to be trapped inside a morocco leather wallet for six years. ‘That’s Ethel, my wife,’ said the mark. ‘She worked with us until the baby came. She was the brains behind the whole company, wasn’t she, Karl?’ Karl nodded. ‘She brought us out of the soft toy, and into the mechanicals and plastics. Ethel pushed us over the red line. She got our first contract with the big distributors here in the east. For a long time we were in Denver. Manhattan seemed big time to us when there were just the four of us working in Denver. Ethel helped me with the design work and Karl did the books and the advertisements. We worked around the clock.’

‘She doesn’t want to hear about Denver,’ said Karl.

‘Why not?’ said the fat mark. ‘It’s quite a story you know,’ he pulled photos from his wallet. ‘It’s quite a story,’ he repeated quietly. ‘We had only nine hundred dollars between us when we began.’ He prodded the photos with his stubby fingers. ‘That’s my wife in the garden, Billy was three then, going on four.’

‘And now?’ I said. ‘How big are you now?’

‘Now we are big. We could get five million if we sold out today, if we bided our time we’d get six. That’s the house, that’s my wife, but she moved. The negative is sharp, but the print’s not very good.’

‘Five million is peanuts to a big company like this,’ said Karl.

‘A big firm like this; who owns it,’ said Johnny. ‘A company like ours; it’s flesh and blood. It’s most of your life, and most of mine. Am I right?’ I nodded but Karl went on arguing.

‘Ten million is peanuts. A company like this is world wide, their phone bill is probably more than a million a year.’

‘You don’t measure companies in dollars,’ said Johnny, the fat one. ‘You’ve got to reckon on it differently to that. You’ve got to reckon on it like it’s a living thing; something that grows. We’d never sell out to just anyone.’

‘No?’ I said.

‘Lord, no,’ he said. ‘It would be like selling a dog. You’d need to know that it was going to a good home.’

‘A company like this wouldn’t need to know,’ said Karl. ‘A company like this works on a slide rule. Lawyers figure the profit and loss.’

The fat one smiled. ‘Well, perhaps they have to. After all they’ve got shareholders, Karl.’

‘They’ve got different sort of minds,’ said Karl.

‘I don’t think we are like that,’ I said.

‘No,’ said Karl coldly. ‘Well, you look like that.’

‘Aw come on, Karl,’ said Johnny. ‘Do you have any pics of your sister’s kids?’ He was anxious to assuage the effect of Karl’s rudeness.

‘No,’ I said.

‘What are their names?’

‘The twins are Roger and Rodney and the girl is Rosalind,’ I said.

Johnny beamed. ‘Some folks do that, don’t they? They keep the same first letter for the names.’

‘That’s right,’ I said. ‘And there aren’t too many girls’ names beginning with “r”.’

‘Rosemary,’ said Karl. ‘Rene.’

‘Ruth,’ said Johnny, ‘and Rosalind.’

‘They already used Rosalind,’ said Karl.

‘That’s right they did,’ said Johnny. ‘Well, there have to be more. Look, if I think of some really good ones, I’ll send them to you here at the office. How would that be?’

‘Thank you,’ I said.

‘Rodney,’ mused Johnny. ‘Say, you’re English, aren’t you?’

‘Yes,’ I said. ‘I was born in Gloucester.’

‘We have a collection of English porcelain at home,’ said Johnny. ‘We have an English style of dog too, named Peter.’

‘For Christ sake,’ said Karl. Johnny smiled self-consciously. ‘I’ll just get some cigarettes,’ he said. He walked across to the cigarette machine.

‘He’s nervous,’ said Karl when he was out of earshot. ‘This is a big moment for us. We’ve worked bare hand on that factory.’