



THE NORTHERN  
CLEMENCY

PHILIP HENSHER

A K N O P F  B O O K

ALSO BY

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PHILIP HENSHER

*The Fit*

*The Mulberry Empire*

*The Bedroom of the Mister's Wife*

*Pleased*

*Kitchen Venom*

*Other Lulus*

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NORTHERN  
CLEMENCY



PHILIP  
HENSHER



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what he would have ~~done~~ hoped to do for anyone else

—E. M. FORSTER,

*Arctic Summer*, principal fragment

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# Book One

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**MARDY**

~~So the garden of number eighty-four is nothing more than a sort of playground for all the kids of the neighbourhood?"~~

"I wouldn't say all," Mrs. Arbuthnot said. "I would have said it was only the Glover children."

"All of them?" Mrs. Warner—Karen, now—said. "The girl seems so quiet. It's the elder boy, really."

"I've seen the girl going in there too," Mrs. Arbuthnot said. "It's during the day with her. She's on her own generally. I grant you, it's the older boy who goes in after dark, and he's got a lot of people with him. Girls, one at a time. There'll be trouble with both those boys."

"But, Mrs. ..." Mr. Warner said. He was slow to catch people's names.

"Call me Anthea," Mrs. Arbuthnot said. "Now that we've finally met."

"I mean, Anthea," Mr. Warner said, "why doesn't anyone tell the parents? They surely can't know."

"That I don't understand," Mrs. Arbuthnot said. She was stately, forty-six, divorced, and lived in number ninety-three, almost opposite the empty house. "This isn't the best opportunity, I dare say."

They were at the Glovers'. It was a party; the neighbourhood had been invited. Most had been puzzled by the invitation, knowing the couple and their three children only by sight. Mrs. Arbuthnot and Mrs. Warner had passed the time of day on occasion. They had arrived more or less at the same time; both had the habit, at a party, of moving swiftly to the back wall the better to watch arrivals. They had made common ground, and Mrs. Warner's husband had been introduced. He worked for the local council in a position of some authority.

It was a Friday night in August. The room was filling up, in a slightly bemused way; the neighbours, nervously boastful, were exchanging compliments about each other's garden. Conversations about motor-cars were running their usual course.

"It's a nice thing for her to do," Mrs. Warner said, who always prided herself on thinking the best of others. She had left her son, nineteen, a worry, at home; she thought the party might have been smarter than it was, not knowing the Glovers. Other people's children had not come.

"She's a nice woman, I believe," Mrs. Arbuthnot said, who had her own private names for almost everyone in the room, the Warners, the Glovers included. "It's a shame she couldn't have waited a week or two, though."

"Yes?" Mr. Warner said, who believed that if a thing could be done today, it shouldn't be put off until tomorrow.

"There's new people moving into number eighty-four," Mrs. Arbuthnot said. "It might have been nice to introduce them to everyone. They're moving in next week."

"Just opposite Anthea's," Mrs. Warner explained to her husband.

"Perhaps it wasn't ideal," Mr. Warner said. "From the point of view of dates."

"People are busy in August, these days," Mrs. Arbuthnot said. "They go away, don't they?"

"We were thinking about the Algarve," Mrs. Warner said.

"Oh, the Algarve," Mrs. Arbuthnot said, encouraging and patronizing as a magazine.

It was a good party, like other parties. Mrs. Glover was in a long dress: pale blue and high at the neck, it clung to her; on it were printed the names of capital cities. In vain, Mr. Warner ran her eyes over it, looking for the name of the Algarve, but it was not there.

"Nibble?" Mrs. Glover said, frankly holding out a potato wrapped in foil, spiked with miniature assemblages of cheese and pineapple, wee cold sausages iced with fat. Her hair was swept up and pulled in, in a chignon and ringlets. They had all dressed, but she had made the most effort for her own party.

"I so like your unit," Mrs. Arbuthnot said.

"We got fed up with the old sideboard," Mrs. Glover said. "It was Malcolm's mother's, so he felt he had to take it when she went into a home. She couldn't have all her things naturally, so we took it, and then one day, I just looked at it and it just seemed so ugly I had to get rid of it. We got the unit from Cole's, actually."

"You got it in Sheffield?" Mrs. Arbuthnot said.

"I know," Mrs. Glover said. "I saw it and I fell in love with it."

"It's very nice," Mrs. Warner said. "I like old things, too."

"I know what you mean," Katherine Glover said. "I love them, really. I just think they have so much more character than new furniture. I'd love to live in an old house."

There was a pause.

"But it's original, isn't it?" Mr. Warner said, helping her out; they seemed to be stuck on the white unit, windowed with brown smoked glass.

"Yes," Katherine Glover said. She gestured around the room. "I think we've got it looking quite nice now. Finally!"

They all laughed.

"We've lived here for ten years!" she said vivaciously, as if hoping for another laugh. "But —"

Karen Warner remarked that it was strange how you didn't get to meet your neighbours properly, these days.

"This was a nice idea," Mr. Warner said, "having a party like this." But he was wondering why, on this warm August night, the party was staying indoors and not moving out on to the patio.

There were five of them, the Glovers, in the room. Malcolm was in a suit, a borderline vivid blue, waisted and flaring about his skinny hips, flaring more modestly about the ankles; his tie a fat cushion at his neck. He carried a bottle from group to group, his smile illuminating as he moved on. "My wife's idea," he was saying to a new couple about the party. "I work in the Huddersfield and Harrogate."

"You work in Harrogate?" the man said. "That's quite a drive every day."

"No," Malcolm said, after a heavy pause. "The Huddersfield and Harrogate."

"The building society?" the woman said. She was a nursery nurse, pregnant herself.

"Yes," Malcolm said, his puzzled voice rising. "Yes, the Huddersfield and Harrogate, our main offices, just off Fargate opposite the Roman Catholic cathedral. It's women like parties mostly. It was my wife's idea."

"It was a nice idea," the husband said. "We've not met a lot of people in the street."

"We've admired your front garden," the wife said. She sneezed.

"The idea was," Malcolm said, "that by now there'd be new people in number eighty-four. Just over there. They'd have been more than welcome."

"That's a nice thought," the woman said, sneezing again.

"But there must have been a hold-up," Malcolm said. "At any rate, it's still empty."

Elsewhere in the room, people were talking about the empty house, and about the new inhabitants.

"Anthea Arbuthnot's met them," a man was saying.

"Oh, Anthea," a woman replied, and laughed. "What she doesn't know isn't worth knowing."

"We call her the *Rayfield Avenue Clarion*," someone's teenage daughter said, and blushed.

"I was saying," the man said, "Anthea Arbuthnot's met them," as Mrs. Arbuthnot came up expertly balancing a pastry case filled with mushroom sauce.

"Met who?" Mrs. Arbuthnot said.

"The new people," he said. "Over the road."

"You don't miss much," she said, in a not exactly unfriendly way. "Yes, I met them, quite by chance. The house, it's being sold by Eadon Lockwood and Riddle, which sold me my house too, five years back. It was the same lady, which is quite a coincidence. Her name was Mary, she breeds chocolate Labradors in her spare time, which was a little bond between us. A nice lady. I saw her coming out of the house one day with a couple as I was going down the road with Paddy, my dog, you know, and stopped to say hello. Naturally she introduced me to the people, they'd bought it by then, they were just having another look over. Measuring up for curtains and carpets, I dare say."

The Glover girl, Jane, was at the edge of their circle, listening, her flowery print frock, her blank hair, the empty plate she had been carrying round the guests all drooping listlessly. The adults shifted politely, smiling. She was fourteen or so; just about old enough for this sort of thing. "Are they nice?" she said.

Mrs. Arbuthnot laughed, not at all kindly. Jane Glover just looked at her, waiting for the answer. "Are they nice?" Mrs. Arbuthnot said. "I don't know about that. They're from London. He's very London. She didn't say anything much. They've got two children, nine, and a fourteen-year-old girl, I think she said."

"Were the children nice?" Jane said, and now she was surely being deliberately childish.

"They weren't there," Mrs. Arbuthnot said. "Their name—let me see—it's on the tip of my tongue ... they're called—Mr. and Mrs. Sellers. That's it."

"London children," a man said, shaking his head.

"I hope they're nice," Jane said, and then just walked away. She knew all about Mr Arbuthnot. Under no circumstances would she tell any of these people that she, Jane, was writing a novel. Already she hated the girl, over the road, fourteen.

"He'll break some hearts," someone was saying, in another part of the room. It was Daniel Glover they were talking about. He was sixteen, lounging over the edge of the sofa, his long legs spread. His mouth hung slightly open, and from time to time he brushed away the soft fall of long black hair. Every twenty seconds the pregnant nursery nurse was sneezing, and it was Daniel she was sneezing at. His lush musk odour filled the room, making the air itchy, and it was the *eau-de-toilette* he'd lifted from Cole's on Tuesday, and he'd practically bathed in the stuff.

Daniel looked at the party. He was thinking about sex, and he counted the women. Then he eliminated the unattractive ones, the ones over thirty-five, his mother and sister—no, he brought his sister back in just for the hell of it. Balanced it out, removed some of the men. Then—what they do, he'd read about it—the men throw their keys into a bowl, the women pick them out, then—

He lost himself in lewd speculation. Or—he started again—you could just have an orgy here. A sex orgy on the carpet. Because that happened all the time, he'd read about it. It just didn't happen here, in this house. But he bet somewhere round here it happened all the time. Probably on this street.

Mrs. Arbuthnot observed with some interest that the elder Glover boy had an erection. She enjoyed the sight: she had divorced six years ago, her long-held ambition to take part in a game of strip poker never having been fulfilled or, indeed, mentioned to anyone, least of all her ex-husband. She envisaged, like Daniel, scenes of satisfaction; for her, they were what Daniel had done, or might be doing, to the girls in the back garden of number eighty-four, watched soberly by its four dark empty windows.

"Hay fever," the nursery nurse said politely, still sneezing, feeling with alarm a little dribble in her knickers.

"They're called Mr. and Mrs. Sellers," someone said. "They paid seventeen thousand for the house. Anthea Arbuthnot told me."

Katherine Glover was relaxing, now that her party was being a success. They were eating the food; she'd made pastry cases with mushroom filling, and prawn, she'd made three different quiches, she'd made Coronation Chicken (a challenge to eat standing), she'd made assemblages of cheese-and-pineapple and cold sausages, she'd made open Danish sandwiches in tiny squares, a magazine idea, and they were eating it all. There were dishes of crisps, toad and Twiglets, but those didn't count in the way of making an effort. They were drinking the wine, Malcolm's choice—she'd had three glasses—and in the background, the music was exactly right, Mozart, Elvira Madigan. It was all being a great success.

The sexes were dividing now: the men were talking about their jobs, their cars, about the election, even; the women about their children's schools, about the cost of living, and about each other.

"Your hand's never out of your pocket," one said, and another observed that her house had doubled in value in five years. One woman, worldly in manner, said that Sheffield would

improve when Sainsbury's got round to opening a branch, as she'd heard they were planning to.

"Oh, we know Mrs. Thurston," another said, referring to the headmistress of one of the local schools.

"She teaches the piano, doesn't she?" the nursery nurse said hopefully. "On Charrington Road?" She was set right, and the others started recommending piano teachers to each other, boasting about their children's grades, merits and distinctions.

"It's all going to the dogs," a man said. "This'll be a third-world country by 1980," and the others gravely agreed. Malcolm made his rounds again; for the last twenty minutes he had said nothing to anyone, only smiled and offered the bottle, and he was circling too soon. As the glasses were full, and the guests refused with a smile, wondering about their host, whom they did not know. Absently, he offered the bottle to Daniel, who took the opportunity, half fourth, to refill his glass, still thinking of tits.

"It would have been nice if they could have come," Katherine said again. "Sellers, they're called."

"Your son's getting to be a handsome young man," they said in reply.

"I've got two," Katherine said, laughing.

"Yes," they said, wondering where the other was, the one they wouldn't have meant, since he was, what?, nine years old.

"We invited Mrs. Topsfield, too," she said. "The old lady who lives in the great big house, the old one, at the bottom of the road, the edge of the moor. But only to be polite—she wouldn't be likely to come at her age."

"I've often wondered about her," someone said. "A gorgeous house."

"It's just her in it, apparently," Katherine said.

"I do think they've done their house beautifully," Karen Warner said to her husband; they had been marooned together at one side of the room. It was a handsome room; one wall had been covered with a bold paper in a bamboo print, jungle green with lemony highlights, and the others painted the palest beige. The fat suite, pushed back against the walls, and the carpet were rough oatmeal; instead of a fourth wall, a single picture window gave on to the garden.

"It's quite like our house, the way it's arranged," Warner said.

"Not quite, though," Karen said. The estate, a hundred and twenty houses, all built in one or go ten years before, was elegantly varied; there were a dozen or more differently shaped houses, arranged irregularly. There was nothing municipal about the estate; but, of course, she had said this many times before. "Had you heard anything at work about a Sainsbury opening in Sheffield?" Warner informed his wife that he had not, and that such information would not have come his way in the course of his work at the council. "I do like that unit," she said in a rush, because now she, too, had seen the elder Glover boy, sprawled about his erection.

"I didn't expect to be invited," the nursery nurse was saying, to someone she didn't know, "but I'm glad I came." It had been ten days before; she had been resting in the afternoon, her

feet, horribly swollen in this weather even at six months, up on a stool. Through the window she had seen a woman in a sleeveless summer dress stomping up the drive; a familiar figure, some sort of neighbour, with an air of imminent complaint about her walk. What now? she thought wearily. But the woman hadn't rung: there was the clatter of something through the letterbox that proved, when her husband got home and picked it up, to be an invitation. "But who are they?" he'd said. "I think we might as well go," she'd said, not answering his question.

But the Glovers had three children, surely: the youngest a boy, wasn't he? Maybe he was in bed.

The youngest was behind the sofa: he had been there most of the evening, slipping behind it quite early on. Timothy had with him his favourite book in the whole world. He had been reading it steadily all evening, letting his eye run over the familiar entries. He had taken it out from the public library eleven months before; he had renewed it once, then stopped bothering. It was now ten months overdue, which caused him great terror whenever he thought of it. In happy moments, he decided that he could conceal the book where no one would find it, and his parents would never uncover the gigantic fine now building up. The fear of punishment was huge in him.

But the terror did not touch the book. It was as good now as ever. The pleasure he found in letting his eye ride over it, touching on category after category, overrode anything else. Whenever he could, he returned to its calm instructions. Even when it was not quite right for him to do so, he sensed, he found a way to be alone with it, as now burrowing behind the sofa at his parents' party. It was so important to him that often in the last months he had found himself telling others—his best friends Simon and Ian, his sister Jane, his mother but for some reason not his brother Daniel, not his father—some facts about his subject. More oddly, he found himself asking them questions about it, as if they could instruct him, feigning ignorance, wanting to find out if they knew what he already did.

The book was about snakes. Timothy gazed at the photographs as if at a family album, committing the names he already knew to a further refreshment of memory.

He had been there for three hours, wedged between the sofa and the large picture window. If the party went outside, they would see him, and probably laugh. From time to time the back of the sofa, the porridgy tweed panels between the wood frames, bulged as someone sat down, swelling towards him, like some inchoate mass searching for him. There was a queer smell of dust down here, and the nasty smell of spilt alcohol. It was his favourite place when there was anyone in the house.

"I don't know where he's got to," Katherine Glover said to a departing guest; it was too warm for anyone to have brought coats, but she made a helpful gesture. "He's a little bit shy."

The guest smiled; her husband made a honking noise, understanding that the woman was talking about her son, not knowing that there was any son apart from the great lout who had been lolling on the sofa, gawping at the ladies.

On the mat was an envelope, which, surely, had not been there earlier; it was addressed to Katherine, and she picked it up. In front of her, the remains of her party; the poor pregnant

woman, harassed and tired, waiting for her husband to want to go. But the husband was drunk, his hair ruffled, making a hash of a joke to a group of husbands. Where was Malcolm? Sitting down, his host's bottle in his hand, all refills at an end; and the Mozart had come to an end, too, leaving the patient silence to dismiss the guests.

"You looked so nice," Jane said to her mother, coming up to her in the hall, munching cheese straw, "in your posh frock and your hair like that."

Katherine felt so terribly tired. "I don't know why I bothered," she said crossly. "They didn't appreciate it at all."

Jane looked at her mother in astonishment. "It was a lovely party," she said. "You should always wear your hair like that."

"What, to work?" Katherine said. "Don't be daft."

"Thank you so much," the drunk man was saying, "for a lovely time, my dear. We've had a lovely, lovely time."

He leant towards her, as if to kiss her, but did not; Katherine had him by the shoulders, a gesture that might have been affectionate, holding him at arm's-length inspection.

"We've had a very good time," the pregnant woman said. But it didn't look it.

"When is your baby due?" Jane said abruptly.

"In November," the woman said, not smiling. She took her husband by the arm, and they went.

"Where's your dad?" Katherine said, but then Daniel was in the hall, up from the sofa for the first time all evening.

"Just going out for a second," he muttered.

"One second—" Katherine said, but he was gone. "Oh, well."

And then Daniel, who had answered all polite inquiries with a brief grunt and a shrug, who had not moved from his perch on the arm of the sofa, like a vast and lurid ornament, proved himself to have been all along the ringmaster of the festivities. Because with his departure the party was decisively over, and the few remaining guests moved towards the front door where Mrs. Glover, her daughter at her side, was standing. In kindness, they bent and said a word to Malcolm, who said something in return, and then, with a chorus of thanks, they went out.

"I do love your unit," Mrs. Warner said over her shoulder, a final kindly thought disappearing into the lush August night. "As I was saying, I do love your ..."

Goodbye, goodbye ... and Katherine opened the envelope in her hand. It was an unfamiliar hand, elegant and swooping, in real ink, and the general gist of apology was clear before the signature was deciphered. She read it again, and smiled, her first genuine smile all evening.

"Have they all gone?" she heard Timothy saying, as he got up from behind the sofa, book in hand.

"I think so," his father said, his voice muffled, regretful in the other room. "Where's your brother?"

Daniel was in the street. It was half past nine. The road and the estate, in this summer twilight, had a lush warm glow; in the houses, up and down the avenue, single lights were coming on automatically, guiding the couples home from the party; husbands and wives, arm in arm and in the summer gloaming turned into lovers. The thin trees, planted ten years before, had lost their daylight lack of conviction and formed a delicate orchard, marking the edges of the quiet street. The night was perfumed, and Daniel, perfumed too, sniffed it all up.

Barbara was there, waiting for him. He had told her to wait on the wall outside number eighty-four. It was less suspicious to be casual like that rather than, as she was doing, cowering under the porch at the side of the house. Everyone knew it was empty; anyone could see her from the street. It was asking for trouble. Worse, it showed Barbara didn't trust him, didn't automatically think he was right. He decided to dump her after tonight, or maybe after the weekend.

"I thought you weren't coming," she said, in a burst.

"Well, I've come now," he said, and dived for her mouth. She gave a small squeal, the beginning of a protest; but he knew to let his mouth just stay at the edge of a kiss, not forcing it, and in a second her hard teeth seemed to make way. They stayed like that for a minute, once or twice she made a pretty little noise, almost animal, and each time, not quite knowing whether he was mocking or encouraging her, he made something of the same noise back, but deeper, the sound vibrating through their twinned lips, making them buzz and ache, fulfilling the desire and stirring up more. Finally he pulled away. He looked at her critically; the little squeal, the blonde hair frizzing up in one, the pink roundness of her pinked-up face, lips and tits. Perhaps the boys had it right when they called her Crystal Tipps and laughed at him. Or maybe they were jealous. "I came as soon as I could," he said. "They were having a party."

"You said they were," Barbara said. "I don't know why I couldn't be allowed to come. I have behaved."

"It was boring," he said. "There was nothing but neighbours. They didn't know each other, my mum didn't know them. I don't know why she asked them."

"We know all our neighbours," Barbara said with astonishment, "their birthdays, star signs, the lot. The telly programmes they watch, even."

"That's because you live in a terraced house," Daniel said. "You could hear everything through the walls. When they fuck."

"Do you mind?" Barbara said, objecting to the word rather than Daniel's snobbery. But she drew close again, pulling him with her out of the light from the street towards the empty overgrown garden.

"They were all saying," Daniel murmured, his mouth against hers, running his tongue against her lips as they walked backwards into the lyric night, "they were all saying, who's that gorgeous girl, goes into the neighbours' gardens with Daniel Glover—"

"They were not," Barbara said, her eyes bright, her hand running down Daniel's side.

"They were," Daniel said, his hand, his rippling fingers rising, weighing, cupping, down and under, beneath and within. "And I said—"

"Oh, give over," Barbara said. But Daniel carried on, his hushed, exuberant voice no

muted, and as they fell back against the lawn, which had grown into a thick meadow, she gave in to what he knew she felt. There was some indulgent amusement deep within him, and he never completely surrendered to the sensation, was never reduced to begging animal favours or further steps in the exploration of what she would grant him. His gratification always, lay in seeing her so helpless; his pleasure in the expert and improving knack of bestowing pleasure. The noises she made were on some level comic, “Nnnngg,” she went, and an observation post in him kept alert over the expanding border territory between her propriety and her desire. They began when he chose to begin; they ended when he said he had to go, and when he knew that she would say disappointedly, “Do you have to?”

Barbara was in his maths set; he’d heard some of the things she’d been letting out about him. Flattering, really. He didn’t talk about her. Another couple of times, and that would be it; he’d seen the way Michael Cox’s sister looked at him, though she was eighteen next month. That would be something to talk about.

. . .

It was not clear to any of the Glovers what the purpose of the party had been. Not even Katherine, whose idea it had been. He hadn’t come, after all. When the last of the guests had gone, the other two children went upstairs, Timothy holding a book. Malcolm sat down and with his heels, dragged the armchair into a position facing the television. He did not get up to turn it.

Katherine put the letter on the shelf over the radiator, and began to go round the room picking up glasses and plates. Malcolm had put the empty bottles in the kitchen as he had gone through them. There were two open bottles left, one red and one white. The food had mostly been eaten, the tablecloth around the large oval dish of Coronation Chicken stained yellow where spoonfuls had been carelessly dropped. She began to talk as she collected the remainings. She was wiping the thought that Nick, after all that effort, hadn’t come. He’d said he would.

“They seemed to have a good time,” she said. “I thought the food went well. I was worried they wouldn’t be able to eat it standing up, but people manage, don’t they?”

Malcolm said nothing. She sighed.

“It’s a shame the new people over the road haven’t moved in yet,” she said. “It would have been a good opportunity for them to meet the neighbours. Most people came, I think. There was a nice little letter from the lady in the big house, saying she was sorry she couldn’t come. She doesn’t like to go home after dark. Silly, really—it’s only a hundred yards, I don’t know what she thinks would happen to her, and it’s not really dark, even now. They get set in their ways, old people.”

Malcolm gave no sign of listening.

She couldn’t be sure what the reason for the party had been. But for her it had been defined by the people who hadn’t come rather than those who had. Not just one person; two of them. All evening she’d felt impatient with her guests who, by stooping to attend, had shown themselves to be not quite worth knowing. She projected her idea of the sort of friends she ought to have on to the new people—the Sellerses—and Mrs. Topsfield, with the exquisite handwriting and supercilious reason for not attending. The Sellerses were going

be smart London people. That was absolutely clear.

“Did you miss your battle re-creation society tonight?” she said to Malcolm, to be kind.

“Yes,” he said. “It doesn’t matter, once in a while.”

“You could have invited some of them to come tonight,” she said, although she’d rather not have to meet grown men who dressed up in Civil War uniforms and disported themselves over the moors, pretending to kill each other. It was bad enough being married to one.

“I thought it was just for the neighbours,” Malcolm said. “You said you weren’t going to invite anyone else.”

Upstairs, Jane shut her door. It was too early to go to bed, but it was accepted that she spent time in her room; homework, her mother said hopefully, but, really, Jane sat in her room reading. There were forty books on the two low shelves, and a blank notebook. She had read them all, apart from *The Mayor of Casterbridge*, a Christmas present from a disliked aunt; she had been told that Jane liked reading old books and that, with a life of Shelley, now lost and unread, had been the result. Jane’s books were of orphans, of love between equals, of illegitimate babies, treading round the mystery of sex and sometimes ending just before it began.

Her room was plain. Three years before she had been given the chance to choose its décor. Her mother had made the offer as the promise of special treaty enacted between women; something to be conveyed only afterwards to the men. Jane had appreciated the tone of her mother’s confiding voice, but was baffled by the possibilities. It was that she had no real idea what role her bedroom’s décor was supposed to play in her mother’s half-angry plans for social improvement, and she was under no illusions that if she actually did choose wallpaper, curtains, paint, bedspread, carpet, even, that her choice would be measured against her mother’s unshared ideas and probably found disappointing. Would it be best to ask for an old-fashioned style, “with character,” as her mother said, a pink teenage girl’s bedroom? Or to opt for her own taste, whatever that might be?

In the end she delayed and delayed, and now her bedroom was a blank series of whites and neutrals. She had failed in whatever romance her mother had planned for her; and, with its big picture window, the room showed no sign of turning into a garret. It looked out on to a suburban street. Daniel’s room, at the back of the house, had the view of the moor, which meant nothing to him. Over her bed, one concession: a poster, bought in a sale, of a Crucible Theatre production of *Romeo and Juliet*. Daniel had seen it, not her—he’d done the play for school level. Someone had given him the poster, but it was over her bed that two blue-lit figures embraced, one already dead.

She wondered what the new people over the road would be like, and let her thoughts go on their romantic course.

. . .

It was the next day, in London. The house had been packed into a van. It was driving northwards, towards Sheffield. On every box was written, in large felt-tip letters, the name SELLERS.

“Nice day for it,” the driver said.

“Yeah, you don’t want to be moving in the rain,” the other man put in.

The driver was on Sandra’s right, his mate, the chief remover, on her left. On the far side of the van was the boy, ten or fifteen years younger than the others, who had said nothing.

“Why do you say that?” Sandra said. She was pressed up against the man on her left, and the driver’s operations meant that his left hand banged continually against her thigh. The lorry’s cabin was meant only for the comfort of three. There was a dull, dusty smell in the cabin, of unwashed sweaters and ancient cigarette stubs. The floor was littered with brown paper sandwich wrappers.

“Well, stands to reason,” the chief remover said. “If it’s raining, that’s no fun.”

“And there are always customers who insist on tarpaulins,” the driver said.

“Tarpaulins?” Sandra said. “Whatever for?”

“It’s their right,” the chief remover said. “Say you’re moving a lot of pictures, or books, or soft furnishings—”

“The customer, they don’t like it if you carry them out into the rain, and sometimes you have to leave them outside for a minute or two, and if it’s raining—”

“Hence the tarpaulin,” the driver said. Behind them, the full tinny bulk of the removals van thundered like weather. There was a distant rattle, perhaps furniture banging against the walls or a loose exhaust pipe. Below, the roofs of cars hurtled past.

“Because,” the chief remover said, “if something gets wet, even for a couple of minutes, the whole load gets rained on, you get to the other end, see, and it’s offloaded and put in place, and a day or two later, there’s a call to the office, a letter, maybe, complaining that the whole lot stinks of damp.”

“Hence the tarpaulin,” the driver said again.

“Course,” the chief remover said, “nine times out of ten, it’s not the furniture, it’s the house, the new house, because a house left empty for a week, it does tend to smell of damp, but they don’t take that into consideration. But the tarpaulins, it doubles the work for us, it does.”

They were nearing the motorway now, having crossed London. The traffic that had held them steady on the North Circular for an hour was thinning, and the removals van was moving in bigger bursts. The car with Sandra’s parents in it, her brother in the back, had long been lost in the shuffle of road lanes, one moving, one holding; a music-hall song her grandmother used to sing was in her head: “My old man said follow the van ... you can’t trust the specials like an old-time copper ...” No, indeed you couldn’t, whatever it meant.

She went back to being interested and vivacious before she had a chance to regret her request to travel up to Sheffield in the van, rather than in the car. “You must see everything in this job,” she said vividly.

“Yeah, that’s right,” the boy surprisingly said, snuffling with laughter.

“Don’t mind him,” the driver said. “He can’t help himself.”

“It’s a shame, really,” the chief remover said.

“A bit like being a window-cleaner, I expect,” Sandra said, before the boy could say he

seen nothing to match her and her jumping into the van like that. She was fourteen; he was probably five years older, but she was determined to despise him. "I mean, you get to see everything, everything about people."

"You'd be surprised," the chief remover said.

"That's the worst of it over," the driver said. The road was widening, splitting into lanes, its sides rising up in high concrete barriers, and the London cars were flying, as if for sheer uncaged delight, and the four of them, in their rumbling box, were flying too. "Crossing London, that's always the worst."

"You see some queer stuff," the chief remover said. "People are different, though. There are some people who, you turn up, there's nothing done. They expect you to put the whole house into boxes, wrap up everything, tidy up, do the job from scratch."

"Old people, I suppose," Sandra said.

"Not always," the driver said. "You'd be surprised. It's the old people, the ones it'd be a task for, that aren't usually a problem."

"It's the younger ones, the hippies, you might call them, expect you to do everything," the chief remover said. "My aunt, you come across some stuff with that lot, things you'd think they'd be ashamed to have in the house, let alone have a stranger come across."

"That's right," the boy said. He seemed almost blissful, perhaps remembering the boxing-up of some incredible iniquity.

"Of course," Sandra said, "you're not to know what's in a lot of boxes, are you? They might be anything."

The three of them were silent: it had not occurred to them to worry about what they had agreed to transport.

"What was the place we said we'd stop?" the chief remover said.

"Leicester Forest East, wasn't it?" the driver said.

Sandra had watched the packing from an upstairs window, and only at the end had she thought of asking if she could travel with the men. She was fourteen; she had noticed recently that you could stand in front of a mirror with a small light behind you, approach it with your eyes cast down, then lift them slowly, and raise your arm across your chest, as if you were shy. You could: you could look shy. Whatever you were wearing, a coat, a loose dress, a t-shirt, or most often the new bra you'd had to ask your mum to buy to replace the one that had replaced the starter bra of only a year before, the shy look and the protective arm had a effect.

The old house had been stripped, and everything the upper floor had held was boxed and piled downstairs; the house had drained downwards, like a bucket with a hole. Sandra had been born in that house. She had never seen these upstairs rooms empty, and they now looked so small. Her clean room's walls were marked and dirty. Only the window looked bigger, stripped of the curtains she had been allowed to choose and hadn't liked for years—the pink, the peacocks, the girly rainbows and clouds. The net curtains were gone too—and she had anything to do with it, they'd not be going up in her new room.

Her father was downstairs in the hall, telling the foreman a funny story—the confidenti

anecdotal mutter deciphered by bursts of laughter. Her mother, probably exhausted, was perhaps looking for Francis, who was lazy and clumsy, and had a knack of disappearing when anything needed to be done. She looked out of the window to where the van, its back open, was being steadily loaded with the house's contents, exotic and unfamiliar when scattered across the drive. There were two men, one middle-aged, the top of his bald head white and glistening like lard, the other a boy. She waited in the window patiently, and soon her mother came out with cups of tea. The boy turned to her mother. He was polite, he said, "Thank you, Mrs. Sellers," and when her mother went back inside, he was still facing in the right direction. She did that thing she knew how to do, and it worked; he looked upward. Her gaze was shy, lowered. It met his modestly, and she gently drew her hand across her chest. Brilliant. She might have slapped him, the way he turned away, but he was the only one who blushed. She realized that the driver and Mr. Griffiths from next door, nosing about in his front garden, had also seen her. Mr. Griffiths, who'd always been fond of her, and Mr. Griffiths too; from the look on his face now, they'd have something to think about if they ever thought of her ever again.

"Have you seen your brother?" her father said, as he thudded up the stairs.

"No," Sandra said. "He's probably down the end of the garden. Can we—" she began. She was about to ask if they could have a tree-house at their new house, but she'd had a better idea. She was fourteen. "Can I go up to Sheffield with the movers in their van?"

Bernie looked startled. "There'll not be room. A bit of an adventure, is it?"

"Something like that."

"I'll see what I can do. Don't ask your mother. She'll have a fit."

So there she was, wedged into the van, clear of London, for the sake of the boy she had glimpsed—a movement of the arms, a flash of blue from the deep-set shadow under the surprising blond eyebrows. But he was saying nothing, and she was settling for enchanting the driver and the chief remover.

"People do this all the time," she said.

"Move house?" the chief remover said. "Enough to keep us busy."

"No, I meant—" But what she had meant was that people leave London by car, drive on the motorway, set off northwards all the time, perhaps every day. She never had, and her mother, her brother and she had only ever left London when they went on holiday. She had never had any business outside London. "People either move a lot or not at all, don't they?" she said. "I mean," sensing puzzlement, "there's the sort of people who never leave the house they were born in and die there. Dukes. And there's the sort of people who move house every year, every two years. I don't know what would be normal."

"The average number of times a person moves house in his lifetime," the boy said, "is seven, isn't it?" He had a harsh, grating voice, a South London voice not yet settled into its adult state.

"Take no notice of him," the driver said. "He's making it up. He doesn't know."

"But the figure is increasing all the time," he continued.

"He makes up statistics," the chief remover said. "That's what he does. Once we were

dealing with a musician, moving house for him—a sad story, he was divorcing his wife, and we had to go in and pick out the things that were going and the things that were staying. And we were moving his stuff and he said he'd be taking his cellos, because he had two, with him in a taxi, and wouldn't let us touch them, though we handle your fragile things all the time. And all of a sudden this one says, 'There are a hundred and twenty-three parts in a cello,' as if to say, yes, it's best you handle it yourself. He'd only gone and made it up, the hundred and twenty-three parts. There's probably about thirty."

"It sounds about right, moving seven times," Sandra said. "There's a girl in my class who moved house seven times already. She's only fourteen." Sandra thought she might have told them she was sixteen: she sometimes did that. Even seventeen. "This was two years ago," she added. "So she'd used up all her moves already, if you look at it like that."

"Fancy," the boy said.

"Do you see that sign, young lady?" the driver said. "A hundred and twenty miles to Sheffield."

They were clear of London now; the banked-up sides of the motorway no longer suggested the outskirts of towns, but now, behind stunted trees, there were open fields, expansive with scattered sheep. In the distance, on top of a hill like a figurine on a cake, there was a romantic, solitary house. She wondered what it must be like to look out every morning from your inherited grand house and see, like a river, the distant flowing motorway. It was never empty, this road.

"New home," the chief remover said sweetly. "Sheffield. And The North, it said."

"Have you ever noticed," the driver said, "that wherever you go, anywhere, you see motorway signs that say 'The North'? Or 'The South' when you're in the north? Or 'The West'? But wherever you go, and we go everywhere, you never see a sign which says 'The East'?"

"No, you never do," the boy agreed.

Sandra felt her story hadn't made much of an impression. It was difficult, squashed in like this, to push back her shoulders, but she tried.

"This girl," she went on, "you always wondered whether it was good for her to move so often. I mean, seven times, seven new schools. She never stayed long, so I don't suppose she ever made proper friends with anyone. I tried to be friends with her, because I thought she'd be lonely, but she didn't make much of an effort back. She'd only been in our school for three, four weeks when we found out the sort of girl she was."

"What sort was she?" the boy said.

"At our school, see," Sandra said, "you didn't hang about after school had finished. Because next door there was the boys' school. And maybe some girls knew boys from the boys' school—if they had brothers or something—but this girl, I said to her one day, 'Let's walk home together.' And she said to me, 'No, let's hang around here and see if we can bump into boys because they're out in ten minutes.' We didn't get let out together, the boys' school and girls' school. And she jumps on to the wall, sits there, grins, waiting for me to jump up to the wall. Because she just wanted to meet boys. That's the sort of girl she was."

“Dear oh dear,” the driver said. She had hoped for a little more concern: the older man might have had daughters of their own. The levity of the sarcastic apprentice had spread to them.

“So you didn’t stay friends with her, then?” The chief remover pushed back his cap and scratched his bald head.

“No,” Sandra said. Sod them, she thought. “Five months later, she had to leave the school because she’d met a boy and gone further. In a way I don’t need to specify”—the adult phrase rang well in her ears—“and she had to leave the school because she was having a baby. Can you imagine?”

“No,” the driver said. He almost sang it, humouring her, and now it was over, the whole invented rigmarole seemed unlikely even to Sandra. “Probably best for you to leave a school where things like that go on.”

“That’s right,” the chief remover said, very soberly, looking directly ahead.

“That’s right,” the boy said. He plucked at his chin as if in thought. But he was trembling with laughter; the big blue van at their backs rumbled and trembled with suppressed laughter.

The blue pantechnicon, ahead of Bernie, Alice and Francis, formed a hurtling, unrooted landmark.

“I don’t know which way he’s heading,” Bernie said. “Expect he knows a route.”

Alice opened her handbag, brown leather against the brighter shine of the Simca’s plastic seats. She popped out an extra-strong mint for Bernie and put it to his mouth, like a trainee with a sugar-lump for a horse—he took it—then one for herself. They were on Park Lane. The van was a hundred yards ahead—no, that was a different blue van. Theirs was ahead of it.

“We don’t need to follow them all the way,” Bernie said, crunching his mint cheerfully. “We could be quicker going down side-streets. They’ll be sticking to the A-roads through London.”

“I’d be happier, really,” Alice said. That was all. Everything she had, everything she had acquired and kept in her life, had gone into that van—the nest of tables they’d saved up for their first furniture after they had married, the settee and matching chairs that had replaced the green chair and springy tartan two-seater Bernie’s aunts had lent them ...

“That’s all right, love,” Bernie said. “If you want to keep them in view, we’ll keep them in view.”

... the mock-mahogany dining table and chairs, green-velvet seated, from Waring & Gillois brass-footed with lions’ claws, the double divan bed only a year old—their third since she had first come home with Bernie, him carrying her over the threshold and not stopping there but carrying her upstairs, puffing and panting until he was through the door of their bedroom and dropping her on to his surprise, a new-bought bed, and her not knowing she was pregnant already—and the carpets ...

“I know it’s silly,” Alice said, “but I won’t feel easy about it unless we follow them.”

“Well, we’ve lost them now,” Bernie said. “We’ll catch up.”

It was true. London had spawned vans ahead of them, blue and black and green, rumbling and bouncing to the street horizon; the Orchard’s van was there somewhere, but lost. The ground to a halt in the dense traffic.

“It can’t be helped,” Alice said bravely. The carpets, all chosen doubtfully, all fitting the space. (She had no faith in the Sheffield estate agent’s measurements. The woman bred Labradors, which she’d mentioned more than once when she ought to have been paying attention.) The unit for the sitting room, a new bold speculation, white Formica with smoked brown glass doors, the *Reader’s Digest* books, the china ladies, the perpetual flowers under glass; the mahogany-veneer sideboard, a wedding present, once grand and solitary in the sitting room before furniture started to be possible for them; curtains, yellow for the kitchen, purple Paisley in the sitting room, red in their bedroom, the rainbow pattern Sandra had chosen ...

“Look on the bright side,” Bernie said. “If they do get lost, or if they steal it and run away to South America, Orchard’s can buy us a whole new houseful of furniture. Insurance.”

“They aren’t going to lose it, are they?” A voice came from the back seat. It was Francis, even at nine, his knees were pressing hard into his mother. Goodness knew how tall he would grow.

“No, love,” Alice said. Her own worry disappeared in her love for her son. He worried about these things, as she did. Once, on an aeroplane, she had found her own nervousness about flying vanished as she did her duty and comforted him. “They won’t lose it, and if they did steal it, they wouldn’t get far on the proceeds. Do you think they’d get much for Sandra? She’s up there with them, keeping an eye on things.”

“I wouldn’t give you two hundred quid for Sandra,” Bernie said, concentrating on the road. “Maybe if she’d had a wash first. What do you reckon, son?”

“I don’t know where you go to buy and sell people,” Francis said. “There aren’t people shops, are there?”

She hadn’t told Francis they were going to move to Sheffield until it was certain. She wasn’t sure, herself, how it had happened. Bernie had worked for the Electricity Board for years, the only member of his fast-talking family not to make money in irregular, unpredictable ways. They were at the outer edges of respectability, in most cases only having their churchgoing to take the edge off their quickness. Alice had first met Bernie at church with him and his family in their Sunday best. If it had been a deft illusion, it hadn’t been a long-lasting one; you couldn’t be surprised with Bernie—he was as open to view as an Ordnance Survey map. His family were proud of him and his proper job, his steadily rising salary, his head office, and Bernie paid back their pride by not renouncing his own quick ways, his broad mother’s broad manners.

But in the last couple of years, the job, London, had worn away at him. The series of strikes—every power-cut had driven him to a personal sense of grievance. “Don’t say that,” Alice had said, the first time the house had gone dark, the television fading slowest, giving out a couple more seconds of ghostly blue light before the four of them were in pitch darkness, Bernie swearing.

“Don’t say what?” Bernie said, almost shouting.

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“You know what you said,” Alice said.

“I can’t think of a better word for them,” Bernie said, getting up and groping for the fucking candles.

Though the power-cuts, random and savage, affected and infuriated every adult in the country—not the children, who across the nation took to it with delight, like camping, and in later years were to ask their parents when the power-cuts would start again, as if it were a traditional, seasonal thing—they affected Bernie worst. In part, it was the way neighbours like the Griffithses, or the regular commuters on Bernie’s train would inquire pointedly when Bernie and his colleagues were going to get a grip on the situation. Everyone had a story of the power coming on and sparking up an abandoned iron, still plugged in, in the middle of the night, waking up Mrs. Griffiths, as it happened, with a stench of burning, which proved to be her husband’s best shirt for the morning. “And a miracle the house didn’t burn down,” Mrs. Griffiths said, suggesting that someone more honourable than Bernie might offer to pay for a new best shirt for the morning out of his own wallet. It drove Bernie mad.

On top of that the winter of 1973 was a hard one, and three or four times the train from the City to Kingston had failed. The first time, Bernie phoned Alice, who went to Morden Underground station to pick him up in their ancient black Austin, the same car they’d had when they first married, a cast-off from Bernie’s brother Tony. It had refused to start again in the car park at Morden, and Alice had had to phone Mrs. Griffiths, begging her to give the children something to eat while the garage came out; they didn’t get home until after midnight. So the second time it happened, even though by that time Bernie had bought a new car, the Simca, he only called to say he’d be a bit late, got the Tube to Morden and walked from there. The third and fourth time, too; it seemed to be going on all winter, like the winter.

But by then he’d heard of a new job, a promotion, out of London. That would never have seemed like a recommendation before. “Bernard,” his widowed mother had said, when they’d gone to tell her in St. Helier, the ranks of crocuses lining up firmly along the path outside the house, “Bernard. You’ve never lived anywhere but London. You couldn’t stand it for a week.” She’d ignored Alice, apart from a savage glance or two; the whole thing, she could see, was the boy’s wife’s idea. In a corner, Bernard’s shy uncle Henry sipped tea from a next-to-best floral cup, not getting involved; he would have to stay and hear the worst of it afterwards. But it was unfair of anyone to think it couldn’t have been Bernie’s idea, you could see why they’d believed that. His whole manner—the way he blew his nose, the way he ate with his elbow out, as if always demolishing a pie in a crowded pub, his soft London complexion, even his hair—made it impossible to think of him outside London. But it was only Bernie who wanted to move. Alice had been born near the Scottish borders, and had moved to London at the age of nine. Francis was moving to Sheffield, nine, at the war’s end when no one was moving into capital cities. It was Alice, though, who loved London; she dreaded the North’s forgiveness, the way it would look at her when she returned.

But there was no arguing with Bernie and, it was true, the job was a good one. Bernie had been offered the deputy managership of a power plant. It was the best way forward, to take a hands-on, strategic role, Bernie said. He’d left it quite late; but the industry was expanding.

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