

'Extraordinary and timely'

Hanif Kureshi



ROGER SMITH

Tycoonery

a novel

TYCOONERY

Roger Smith



VERSO

London • New York

First published by Verso 2012

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1 3 5 7 9 10 8 6 4 2

Verso

UK: 6 Meard Street, London W1F 0EG

US: 20 Jay Street, Suite 1010, Brooklyn, NY 11201

www.versobooks.com

Verso is the imprint of New Left Books

eISBN: 978-1-84467-937-9

British Library Cataloguing in Publication Data

A catalogue record for this book is available from the British Library

Library of Congress Cataloging-in-Publication Data

Smith, Roger, 1937–

Tycoonery / by Roger Smith.

p. cm.

ISBN 978-1-84467-898-3 (hardback : alk. paper) –

ISBN 978-1-84467-937-9 (ebook : alk. paper)

1. Businessmen–Fiction. 2. Real estate development–Fiction.

3. Man-woman relationships–Fiction. I. Title.

PR6119.M5813T93 2012

823'.92–dc23

2012018388

To Daisy, Jonny, Molly and Betty

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Any similarity to characters living or dead is
merely evidence of the times we live in.

Chapter 1

1971

I puzzle them at the Ministry of Employment and Productivity. Not with my demands, which are modest to be sure, and involve no more than to be allowed to collect on a Thursday the paltry allowance that the welfare state allots me.

My appearance too is unexceptional, my clothing neat though worn, my nails short but clean, my chin shaven, my ears free of wax, and my underwear as stain-free as can be expected of a bachelor thirty-five, living alone in reduced circumstances in one room in Paddington, a ten-minute walk from the launderette, and nourished by an eclectic diet.

My manner to them is neither servile nor proud, but professional in the way acquired by one accustomed to queuing and waiting and taking.

In fact they are puzzled by my qualifications, which include eight assorted subjects at ordinary level three at advanced and a first-class degree in English language and literature at the University of Oxford, not to mention a PhD on Trollope.

They are more than embarrassed, I suspect, by their inability to find a position for me commensurate with such qualifications, and since I resigned from my position as lecturer in English some five years ago and have not the slightest intention of returning to it, they receive little co-operation on the matter from me. In short, I have no desire to participate in the degrading activities that pass for gainful employment in this our society.

‘Have you thought of advertising?’ they say to me periodically, more out of hope than conviction.

‘Indeed I have and my answer must be in the negative.’ I then explain to them the harlotry of this occupation, suited only to charlatans and purveyors of falsehood.

‘But surely you want to get on?’ enquires Mr Jackson, a red-faced man in horn-rimmed glasses and a shiny herringbone suit, who always smells of carbolic soap. His enquiry is not without concern and pathos, coming from a man whose very existence, for its sheer drudgery and awe-inspiring boredom, must negate for all time the plausibility of the concept ‘getting on’.

‘If you speak of the dehumanising and alienating confines of the capitalist system then my answer must be no.’ I reply with more conviction than you might find necessary in dealing with a functionary of the state.

‘Then I’m afraid there’s nothing we can offer you this week,’ he says, handing me over the money, which I count scrupulously, before nodding to him with a smile and disappearing through the blistered swing doors out into the carbon monoxide-laden air of the streets.

That particular Thursday, the one of which I write, the one when it all began, I purchased four cigarettes from the corner store, noticing on one of the dusty shelves between the Kiwi boot polish and

the sliced bread a small brown bottle which read, confidently and unequivocally, 'SLOAN'S KILL PAIN'. I could not help thinking with a certain ironic pleasure, 'I've tried everything else. Who knows?'

It buoyed my spirits and I sang as I walked up to my room, hardly aware of the glum and dark paintwork, the curious pervasive smell of kippers and the gas bill ominous in its sandy envelope lying snugly amid the pile of free samples that flow in never-ending profusion through my indifferent letter box. Lighting a cigarette and taking the *Telegraph*, I made my way to the lavatory to defecate and chuckle over the more preposterous and patriotic statements of this ruling class organ. I settled down for fifteen minutes of pleasure, heralded, much to my delight, by a crisp and resonant fart.

Puzzled experience has taught me that there is some uncanny connection between the movement of my bowels and the telephone service, for almost every time I settle astride the confident and purposeful chinaware of the Sanitas, the usual gloomy silence of my room is shattered by a call. It always throws me in confusion. There I sit, my trousers round my ankles, my stained pants accusing me, my arse sticky with turd, suspended in panic while the electronic bell invites me.

Sometimes I have wedged my rectum with Andrex and hobbled across the floor to the recently installed slot-type phone (the more homely model was removed after a protracted court case involving non-payment of bill) only to be greeted on panting arrival with an abrupt and strangled silence indicating that the caller had hung up. I call this experience 'effort unrewarded'. The result is intense anxiety, for not only has the sensual pleasure of crapping been curtailed, vandalised one might almost say, but I am now in a state of unsatiated curiosity as to the identity of the caller, and having few acquaintances, who call at any hour of the day or night whenever it enters their heads and in absolute disregard for the inconvenience it might cause me, the telephone can only mean that a new experience is about to enter my somewhat uneventfully chaotic life.

Indeed, you might well ask, disapprovingly, why one in my position who has so resolutely broken with the customary preoccupations of bourgeois life should bother himself with such trivial questions. You might even wonder why I still maintain in my flat at unnecessary expense and obvious inconvenience so peremptory and demanding an instrument of modern life as the telephone. Is it a sign of immaturity?

Undoubtedly it is, but there is a rather more practical if neurotic explanation.

Living as I do on my own, it has crossed my mind not infrequently that an occasion could well arise when I am stricken by one of the multitudinous viruses that thrive and multiply in our atmosphere. I have visualised my death at the hand or tail of one of these voracious microbes, my life ebbing away in solitude, my body weak from undernourishment, and the gathering half-pint milk bottles at the door the only visible symptoms of my imminent demise.

It is some comfort to me to know that in the event of such catastrophe I could crawl, albeit weakly, to the phone and dial 999. It is one of the few institutions I have faith in. Perhaps my day of judgement will find them wanting and though my faith might well be the last surviving remnant of early primitive belief in mythology, I cling to it nevertheless.

Meanwhile, at eleven-thirty on that Thursday morning as I sat astride the water closet, browsing through the letter columns of the *Daily Telegraph*, my face flushed from my purposeful efforts, the

cheeks of my arse warm on the woodwork, as if on cue confusion was announced by the shrill imperious tones of the telephone. I waited a customary five seconds, as irritations welled, then nipping a turd in the bud, placed the *Telegraph* on the linoleum floor, stuffed three sheets of carefully folded Andrex into my orifice, and shuffled as if in a sack race into the stale disorder of my bed sitting room. Bent at the knees, and leaning at a thirty-degree angle from the waist, I picked up the receiver and announced my name in a tone hopefully confident enough to conceal the fact that I stood there in a state of ridiculous vulnerability.

‘George Timmins,’ I said and cleared my throat.

‘Hello, George. How are you?’

Certain people are possessed of such unshakeable confidence in their own identity that the very choice of announcing their name seems a preposterous irrelevance. Such people are a source of considerable irritation to me. I have been known to replace the receiver on its cradle without uttering a sound. On one other kind of person irritates me more. They conduct themselves on telephones in exactly the same lofty fashion but so distinctive is their voice that even after considerable periods of absence it is immediately recognisable. Such is the voice of David Adler.

It has a light fruitiness, modulated like an actor’s, caressing, sleepy, sensual, as if he has just woken up and you are the first person he thought of. (At eleven-thirty he probably was still in bed.) The florid London vowels only add to its persuasiveness, with its accentuated lilt, soft, slurred, flowing. It is curious to think that an accidental or genetic arrangement of the vocal chords, assiduously cultivated, can afford the basis of so much worldly success. The listener felt privileged to eavesdrop on David Adler’s intimate aloofness. And one look into those soft, large, grey-green eyes trebled the honour.

‘Who is that speaking?’ I asked sharply.

An indulgent sigh brushed its silky way along the impartial wires. ‘It’s David,’ implying who else could it be, and indeed, who else could it have been? ‘I’d like to see you.’

I had anticipated the request. In eleven years it had come some five times before. It usually signified some change in his material progress, a new flat, a more expensive car, a suite of offices more opulent, leather-bound and automated than the previous ones. And on five occasions I had shaved, changed my shirt and cleaned my teeth, then boarded the appropriate means of public transport to place myself in, or around, or by or outside the particular acquisition that he wanted to draw my attention to. Glumly I had nodded my indifferent approval, simulating a response only when he threw a glance at me. I would prod a button, or finger some paintwork, or pat a cushion. ‘Very nice. Very nice.’ He always seemed unperturbed by my palpable lack of enthusiasm. Indeed, it was questionable whether he was even aware of my presence, so self-absorbed did he seem in the obviously sensual pleasure of ownership, as if the motor car or room, whatever it happened to be, was not just the product of arduous human labour, an arrangement of brick or steel welded together by the labourer’s sweat, but had some kind of magical property of its own that conferred upon him a special privilege. The grey-green eyes glistened, reflecting in miniature the new icon, as if by some secret process of transubstantiation he had ingested it into his very being. And though the pleasure was shortlived like all mystical experiences (by the time he had helped me into my coat and thrust two crisp fivers into my damp and eager hands, the magic had already passed and he was bored) it had answered

nevertheless, some deep-seated spiritual need.

That I should be required to act as witness to this communion often gave me cause to ponder, usually at night as I lay back on my fetid sheets, my feet snug in their socks, steamy from the day's labour, my right hand fondling affably my much abused and easily amused member. At such times the darkness around me, the raucous noises of the streets reassuring me, lying in wait to answer the call of my capricious libido, a box of Kleenex at the alert on the bedside table, tissue memorials to the nonconceived, between those moments of lights out and masturbation I muse over life in a kind of suspended animation. It came to me on one such occasion that David needed me to allay his guilt. And if this seems an admittedly banal explanation, no less true for its banality, it has a less analytical corollary which avers that he needs my presence BECAUSE NO ONE ELSE CAN DEFINE HIS PROGRESS LIKE ME.

Confusing? Perhaps. But when I make it known that I am thirty-five and David is thirty-four and that we have known each other for thirty of those voracious and life-consuming years, then perhaps my meaning is clearer. We began our relationship at the ages of five and four, confronting each other in check shirts and grey flannel knickers: he dug his grubby nails into my face and drew blood. For two years he dictated the course of my history with those nails and, when they proved insufficient, with studded boots that showered sparks as he slid along the way, until, somewhat uncharacteristically I now concede, while grappling with him in the street, he predictably clawing at my face, I seized his head and banged it hard three times on the grey stone pavement. My surprise action stunned him more than the kerb stone, and from then on a dialectical change took place as the Hegelians will have it, change from quantity (three blows) into quality (his submission). I had negated his thesis.

Since that time he has tried to negate my negation. His rivalry took on more sophisticated guises masking his deep-rooted respect for the kerb stone.

'Well I'm rather busy just now.'

He laughed. 'You're probably lying around in that grotty flat. Look, come on over. I'll give you a lunch. You probably need a decent meal. And I need to talk to you.'

He was right about the lunch, and he usually gave a good lunch. But there were other considerations. Admittedly five summonses in fifteen years is hardly being at his beck and call, but why should I submit to his overture?

You will remember I had been called from the lavatory seat, and that I stood, my trousers round my ankles, inclined some thirty degrees to the perpendicular. Such a stance afforded me a view of the nether regions of a chest of drawers that stood by the telephone. Perhaps it was first the sunlight that attracted my attention for it highlighted a layer of dust of wondrous texture, like a rich extravagant carpet that had gathered beneath the battered mahogany of disorderly drawers. Next I chanced upon crumpled Kleenex, thrown aside no doubt after a night of particularly reckless passion; no more than nine inches to the left of the discarded tissue was a small piece of fruit cake, and nibbling at the same piece of cake, its eye black and provocative, was a small furry mouse. Usually I take such manifestations in my living room as a matter of course, as an inevitable hazard faced by those who live in a state of disarray and dirt. But a combination of certain things, the telephone call, the stirring of some dead rivalry, but most of all the extreme exposure of my condition, trousers at ankles, Y

fronts at calves, penis bared to the elements and, worse, to the needle-boned tooth of my rodeo intruder, and (some homosexual anxiety erupting?) three sheets of Andrex plugged in my bum, all conspired to make me break out in a cold and shivering sweat. I lurched for my trousers and dragged them up my goose-pimpled legs, whose hairs were rising like a field of wheat. I banged the chest drawers with my elbow, which did nothing to disrupt the early lunching and munching of my unwanted guest. A sharp kick seemed to make him only more resolved to stay. It was a conflict of wills, and already the beast of two inch length proved more determined than I.

At this point the forgotten receiver was saying, 'Get a taxi and come over.'

'Right away,' I shouted, 'right away,' conceding ignominious defeat to both mouse and man.

I hastily replaced the telephone, rushed back to the lavatory, where anxiety moved my bowels to extravagant proportions. Wiped, washed, coated and hatted, I left my apartment without so much as a glance at that part of my home now requisitioned by an alien creature.

Chapter 2

The street calmed my quivering nervous system. The sky was a pale autumnal blue and the weak sharp-rimmed sun was lethargically reaching its highest meridional point. It was a time of the year when the season seems to brace itself with a kind of expectancy before lurching into the bleak shroud of winter. My stride took up its rhythm and my open sandals rediscovered a spring.

As I descended the escalator to the Bakerloo line, the swim suit – or bathing costume, as we used to call it – ads seemed unusually provocative. Those lithe, blonde and suggestively sleazy girls, thrusting forth their delectable crotches, must have unnerved many a man, but such is the hold of our puritanism that only on one occasion have I seen anyone give vent to his natural impulses, and that late at night when a squat bowler-hatted man emerged from the train to the foot of the stairs, placed his hat and umbrella in his left hand, and with his right unzipped his flies, and lying across the moving rubber banister, wanked his way from poster to poster, reaching a sudden, ecstatic if silent climax some ten yards from the top, which he directed precisely and methodically into his bowler hat. He was arrested at the ticket barrier.

My new-discovered mood, the empty train (curiously there is nothing more liberating, more likely to give a sense of well-being and contentment, than an empty compartment rattling its way through the depths of London at midday), turned my thoughts to David and, because they are inextricably linked to my childhood.

It haunts me with an exaggerated nostalgia. The years since lack that sharp clarity of focus with which I can still evoke places, colours, feelings, fantasies, new pleasures, the secrecy of a child's world of cowboys and Indians, camps in the ferns, identities assumed. Whether that sense of extremity that I recall at thirty-five is illusory I no longer know, but wartime summers stretched on into double summertime and winters seem crisp with snow and sledges. I discovered the dark thrill of the cinema and the names and faces of the stars, the impossible celluloid girls that I still yearn for, woven now into a thread of unrealisable fantasies that pulls at today's experience with a tug of disappointment and permanent regret. And David shared that with me; for we grew up in the same town.

Trowbridge Spa marked its growth across the years in a crablike movement north. Some time at the turn of the nineteenth century some passing nobleman discovered a spring five miles outside the Norman town of Trowbridge in Kent, and the spa became a popular health resort. The water is sharp and cold with a tang of iron. The well still exists, though the old woman who sells it at a penny a glass is far removed from the fashionable Regency circles who once flocked there, and only a small cluster of elegantly proportioned shops and houses bear testimony to their past existence. By 1940 when I first arrived, an evacuee from the blitz, the town sprawled in different architectural shock waves out from the nucleus of the spa, up the hill in early Victorian, along the straight in late Victorian and finally merged with lush Kent countryside in a scattering of thirties speculative. To the east it was fringed by a common of coarse grass and fern, bracken, a profusion of trees, and an exotic outburst of sandstone

rocks, carved by generations of lovers and trippers, their names and pledges worn away by wind and rain and the feet of a thousand children. For me, this seemingly endless stretch of common land with its names – Devil’s Dyke, Donkey Stand, High Rocks, the Sandpit – provided the location for a million dreams and celluloid games, where the fearless bandits George and Dave lurked and plotted, the two steely-eyed sheriffs patrolled, the twin fighter pilots purged the sky of the sun. There was little that could not be righted or frightened by us terrible two.

Children have a great sense of the hierarchy of age and my one slender year of seniority conferred on me all sorts of privileges of leadership. It was assumed that David should play Will Scarlet to my Robin Hood, Ginger to my Just William, deputy to my sheriff. That one year seemed to make an enormous difference to us. It separated us at school, even at Sunday school, and later sent me in new cap and blazer to the grammar school while he remained with the infants. But education wasn’t the real business of living and it was after school hours, or in the seemingly endless summer holidays, that our relationship developed, when the games took over and we made flesh and blood the heroes of our books and comics, while above us in the skies planes first etched out their battles in tracer shells and then gave way to the spluttering engines of the doodlebug.

To us the war seemed only an extension of our games, its menace only glimpsed on the trembling knees of parents in air raid shelters when it was said that incendiary bombs were falling on the town like fireworks. The next day brought the thrill of searching for shrapnel in craters, for cartridge cases and unused shells. Later the war brought American soldiers who ran off with our girls, it was said, and showered us with gum and candy from their jeeps. It brought glimpses of the enemy too, cheerful Italian prisoners of war in green uniforms who waved at us and whistled from their trucks.

And then the radio announced it was all over and there were Union Jacks and bunting and fireworks and bonfires on which Hitler was burnt as the guy. And a strange man who turned out to be my father came home, and David’s father arrived having spent forty-eight hours in the Mediterranean on a plank. But after their leave was over and the uniforms put away, they went back to their jobs and found the same old drudgery. The promises of the ‘White Cliffs of Dover’ had a hollow ring.

But for us there were pantomimes at Christmas, and the principal girl to love, and the radio comedies and the catch phrases and the dreadful empty songs and the cinema and Esther Williams and Sonja Henie and Humphrey Bogart and Gene Kelly and ...

Need I go on? Those drab, grey, heartbreaking, defeated years are forever touched with the romance of childhood.

When I was twelve the family moved back to London. It was after all our original place of domicile and it was only Hitler who had sent us scurrying to the sticks, though there was no doubt in my mother’s mind that it was a temporary arrangement and as if to prove it, throughout four years of global warfare and three years of ensuing peace, the front room carpet was turned upside down, its pink fern-like pattern to the floor. She was waiting for a home of her own where the full rosy glory of the Wilton could be displayed; to her way of thinking the two rooms that we occupied in Trowbridge Spa did not qualify for that status. My mother incidentally is an interesting woman, but since she is not particularly central to this story (do I hear the Freudians chortle? All right, in a narrative sense) I intend only to allude to her from time to time whenever for the sake of historical authenticity it

necessary. But home being where the heart is for those who don't have the financial wherewithal for a mortgage, we were dependent on the good if bureaucratic offices of the Lewisham Borough Council as it then was, for accommodation, and lists being lists and long with it, and bomb damage being somewhat extensive in the metropolis, it took three more years of agitation on my determined mother's part, and three years of desperation on my father's, who worked in a factory in Shoreditch sleeping in dusty lodgings during the week, and three years of reprieve for me, already advancing up the ladder of success and now attending the local grammar school, before an enormous pantechnicon larger by far than anything we had ever lived in or were likely to, engulfed our few bits of protected and polished furniture and deposited them on the pavements of Sydenham. To those familiar with the geography of London, it would be superfluous to point out that Sydenham is almost as far removed from Shoreditch as it is possible to be and necessitated my father getting out of his bed, wherein he had slumped the night before, unconscious after overtime, at the hell-ridden hour of five-thirty; it also many bus journeys away from the nearest school and, as far as my young vision could take in practically everything else. Nevertheless we had a home and a bathroom for the first time in our lives and we were no longer classed as provincials.

The greatest loss for me was David. I was now in a large sprawling and incomprehensible city, at a hateful new school and without my closest friend. We wrote letters and looked forward to the holidays, but letters never reflect the real unstated nuances of relationships; rather they add a self-conscious element, the role of letter writer obtrudes, and as two boys who had entered the trap of prestige education, our words soon echoed the pretentiousness of misspelt French and schoolboy Latin. A new rivalry emerged and when we met again almost a year later it was this rivalry that created the context of our relationship. We faced each other like contenders, cagey, weighing the other up behind awkward smiles.

David had grown too and was now three inches at least taller than me. His voice had broken or was in the process of breaking and would make sudden violent and unpredictable shifts from basso profundo to strangled squeak. I still felt a boy and the privilege of that one year's seniority seemed fraudulent as a soprano. At the swimming bath changing rooms that solid meaty and hairy thing between his legs had something of substance, of manhood. Shivering, my eyes full of chlorine, I rubbed ferociously with my towel at the little bit of string in my thighs, hoping magically that the friction might rub it into rope-like size. He said nothing but contented himself with rubbing his back easily and lazily like an athlete, knowing that my eyes were transfixed by the dark heavy metamorphosed growth of his prick.

I countered by being metropolitan, for what did such arbitrary physical differences make to an inhabitant of one of the oldest and largest cities in the world, which placed at my feet theatre, cinemas, music, art galleries. Though as yet I had only penetrated the local Odeon I felt I had a right to this cultural heritage, the history, the architecture, the latest in fashion. The city was beginning to emerge from its postwar gloom. Soon the streets would be neon-lit like Broadway.

'When you come to London,' I said, 'I must take you to Soho. They have prostitutes there waiting on the streets to be had.'

We parted and though the letters were more sporadic they continued intermittently. We saw each

other in the summer holidays. At school it became clear that I was the bright boy, while in Trowbridge Spa, still that year behind, David notched up his successes. I went through the examination tide, level, A level, and then the postman brought the news that I had won an open scholarship to New College, Oxford.

We celebrated, the pair of us, in Soho. A spaghetti bolognese and espresso coffee. Jazz was having its revival and skiffle too. We wandered about the streets eyeing the whores, November breath steaming out of us, wearing duffel coats and cheese cutters. And two pints later he said, 'Do you fancy a whore?' How can you look at your best friend and closest rival and say that the idea terrifies the life out of you, that your bowels have turned to soup even at the suggestion, that your knees have become putty and your scrotum is as tight as a baby's fist? So I blew out some smoke from my Senior Service and laughed, 'Do you?'

He shrugged. 'I might do.'

'You wouldn't dare.'

He stubbed out his cigarette, got up from the table, flicked his shoulders inside his duffel and left by the saloon entrance. I could see him through the window. He approached a tart standing theatrical under a street lamp and said something to her, then they went off together.

I rolled the silver paper of the cigarette pack into a tight, humiliated ball and drank another half bitter. Then he reappeared, his cheese cutter set a little more jauntily, but otherwise unruffled. He sat down without saying anything and lit another cigarette.

'Was it all right?' I asked.

He sniffed and scratched the back of his neck. 'It was all right,' he said.

A year later he won an open scholarship to Christ's, Cambridge. He was seventeen and a half.

The years at university produced the final rift. Oxford seemed to me at eighteen an enchanted and intimidating place. I could think of nowhere else I would rather work or live, peaceful, secure, beautiful, learned. I decided early on that I would like to teach there, and addressed myself to the realisation of that task. It meant a great deal of hard work, burrowing in libraries, missing most of the activities that others pursued, occupying the shadows and the periphery. Many thought I was dull. And certainly I must have appeared so in contrast to the flamboyant reports that came from Cambridge. Like everything else, David seized Cambridge by the scruff of the neck. He acted, edited the university paper, threw parties, laid upper middle-class girls who threw themselves at his proletarian feet. I went once to a party he gave there, and got the impression that he was embarrassed to see me and indeed it was obvious to me and to him that I did not fit into his world. He ignored me most of the evening, and I felt that I owed my place there yet again to his need to demonstrate his superiority. I returned to Oxford feeling rather flat.

Three years passed quickly enough and in the summer of 57 I took my degree. Surprisingly, he sent a letter wishing me well and suggested that we might meet in London. Three weeks later we had dinner in a small Italian restaurant. He said, 'What are you going to do?'

I told him of my plans to teach, to write a thesis, to stay in Oxford.

He leant back in his chair and grinned. He said, 'You're a cunt, all that academic stuff is bollock. When I get my degree I'm going into property. You can make a fortune at it. I want to make a lot of

money. I want a big luxury flat, a wardrobe full of clothes, a fast car, holidays abroad, and as many good-looking birds as I can screw.'

If, as a statement of faith, it was calculated to shock me, it did just that. I knew then that we had absolutely nothing in common, that we remained absolute opposites. And if tenacity of purpose was considered a sterling quality, then sterling qualities he had, for from that day he remained loyal to his twenty-year-old's creed.

Chapter 3

Such were my memories as I left the underground train at Knightsbridge and turned right into Sloane Street, threading my way among the middle-class hordes who congregate there, exchanging their ill-gotten and ill-deserved gains for the domestic booty found in the many and expensive stores that line the pavements. At noon the womenfolk predominate, dressed in a style that is set by the reigning monarch, gloved, handbagged and hatted, their middle-aged sagging bellies rumbling with flatulence in rubber corsets, their shoulders drooping from the weight of pendulous dugs, and their faces, oh, so bitter and defeated, and arrogant. Where have all their mouths gone, curled into their gums every one? Were they ever young, were they ever pretty, did they ever fuck? Did those shrill, near-hysterical voices, aimed now at shop assistants, cab drivers and pets, ever vibrate with sex? Did once those dirty Brillo pads that are their cunts ever run with juices? To the victor the spoils. I negotiated my way sustaining only a minor contusion of the knee from the wheel chair of an ageing Boadicea.

David's penthouse (he never shies from the obvious) was situated at the top (where else?) of a recently constructed apartment block overlooking the trim lawns and much attended flower beds of a railinged square. The garden work is aggressively riotous, and beneath its well-tended and watered turf and soil, for the exclusive use of the occupants of the building, is built discreetly and far from the human eye a multi-storey subterranean car park, where cars are waxed and polished to even more dazzling finish and engines tuned till they purr like lions.

I entered the said building with caution, and why not, for notices warned me that trespassers would be prosecuted and I was nothing but a trespasser, having neither credentials nor suitable attire. The entrance, vulgar to my taste, was marble-lined and floored. Green rubber plants flexed their muscles in a corner pot. At a desk, peak-capped and eagle-eyed, was the porter, who had been watching me approach through the wide glass panoramic doors: trained like a bull mastiff, his eyes focused immediately on the hole in my sock and the red protrusion poking through my sandal which was my September big toe. I shuffled past him, eyes down, heading for the lift.

'Can I help you, sir?' he said, mocking me with that sir. He straightened up to show a pair of shoulders and chest that could crush me in one lazy hug.

'I have an appointment with Mr Adler.'

'I'll let him know you're here, sir. What is your name?'

'Timmins. George Timmins.'

I stood awkwardly in the foyer, a victim of this retired, or axed in all probability, sergeant major trained killer, his medals boasting his brutishness throughout the four corners of the world. His blue eyes spelled prejudice at every blink, wop hater, wog beater, hang em, flog em and cut off the bollocks. The full weight of sixty years of cultivated aggression bore down on me as he placed his pencil into the dial of a white telephone and rotated it agonisingly slowly three times. From the lift a man dressed in jodhpurs and riding jacket humped his way down the five carpeted stairs on a pair

stainless steel crutches. Already I was regretting my excursion into the outside world.

In mid dial, the porter replaced the receiver, and hurried to open the door for the no doubt officer w veteran. He escorted the limping major out into the street, standing at a respectful distance, but alert the task of pulling him to his feet, should the crutches buckle or slide.

I seized my chance and slipped into the lift, pressing the button to the top floor. After a moment apparent consideration (maybe they too were worked by some mysterious security-conscious electronic eye?) the doors collided like guillotine blades and I hummed my way skywards.

He was dressed in a small silk bathrobe, his legs bare. It was three years since I had seen him last and he looked considerably older. The black hair was beginning to thin at the back and his face looked puffier. His normally dark chin was peppered with stubble. His waist was thicker and there were the beginnings of a paunch. At the top of his cheeks was the slight flush of burst veins, but the eyes above them still had the same sleepy alertness. He smiled. The teeth were dazzlingly white.

‘Come in,’ he said. I could hear the water running for a bath.

To describe his flat is to describe David, for it is here that the fantasies of his mind are projected as were onto a living screen. They are inseparable, for David has become this idea, a man who has invented himself rather like one of those collages that were fashionable in the sixties. People make them by cutting out adverts and pictures of pop idols and film stars. He had pieced himself together out of the glittering hardware of consumption and commerce, deliberately, and what is more had lived it out, had seized the ‘boom’ by the throat, had listened to its extravagant claims with a wry and tuned ear and adopted them as his own. He had set about their acquisition with a clear-headed and practical application; to possess, you needed wealth, and wealth came from a shrewd understanding of how it was made, and of being ahead of those other rivals who were buying for the neon moon. In essence it was simple – you acquired something for considerably less than others were then prepared to pay you for it. An inventive mind and a single-mindedness of purpose open the cave to the magic lamp. It involved effort, treachery, dishonesty, lies, cruelty, flattery, deviousness, but David was nothing but a realist and such demands were not so much the price you had to pay but rather the explicit conditions of play, mere formalities. Morality is in any case merely its practice, and practice, as is well known, makes perfect. Thus he could make his own any of the numerous pieces of gadgetry that our panicky stricken technology is driven to produce. He was like Lot in our modern lottery, ever moving forward never looking back for fear that the loved one turn to salt – though to be sure in our times someone’s enterprise would market her saline remains. But David could acquire and, having acquired, relieve the itch and turn his attention to something else.

Thus although his flat bears testimony in all its extravagant lines to a fantasy, it is already a fantasy that has been laid to rest. His attention is now elsewhere. The flat is more like the remains of the past, a living and centrally heated tomb of Tutankhamun. The walls are lined in a rich gold, and a deep green carpet with a sheen like velvet covers the many-levelled floor. Soft, plump sofas in brown invite the weary visitor to rest. Paintings by some of the best young artists soothe or excite the eye. Lamps occupy corners and tables like preening metal birds, boxes shelter drinks, cases books. The high envelops you in multitrack sound. Through an arched door the bedroom invites seduction, glittering with wall and ceiling mirrors, reflecting, refracting, in triplicate, quadruplicate, the one solitary silhouette.

foot-square bed with its white mink coverlet. Behind its glassy walls, which slide apart at the mere touch of a switch, are lined his suits and jackets, a hundred shirts, a hundred shoes, leather from the hide of alligators, suede from the antelope, silk from the worm, cotton from the loom. The marble bathroom foams with Badedas, and perfumes, green, yellow, rose, propose the elixir of eternal youth.

But for all that, there pervades a mood of disinterest. As I pad my way into the living or 'dying' room I hear the sound of 'Mares eat oats' synthetically syncopating from the colour tv set, which shows the red face of a child. The ashtrays burst with butts, and the glasses that are strewn about the room, some half full, indicate the drinking of the night before. On the sofa *The Times* is scattered and on a low table the remains of his breakfast, a banana and a broken egg shell. Out on the terrace which commands a panoramic view of London is an improvised washing line which flaps incongruously with a pair of jockey pants and nylon socks.

He says, 'I'm just going to have a bath. Have a drink.' He scratches his hair and lopes bathwards.

I poured myself a whisky and soda – the first for a long time – ice from the fridge in a heavy glass and drank. I could see him disrobing through the open door and he got into the water with a contented moan. I read the paper, he soaked and scrubbed and we exchanged remarks that would be of little interest to the reader. It is sufficient to say that some twenty minutes passed before he appeared in a pair of tan trousers, white moccasins and a purple silk shirt. He poured himself a drink and lit a cheroot.

'George, I got trouble,' he said. 'It's nice but it's trouble.' As if to give emphasis to his problems he sank back into the welcoming cushions of the sofa.

Rich, young, powerful and still there are problems! How complex is this life we lead. I raised an eyebrow, indicating a desire to know more.

He exhaled smoke and rubbed his eye, and went on. 'It's a girl. A woman really.'

There had been many women over the years, actresses, models, hairdressers, dress designers, Olympic hurdles finalist, air hostesses, publishers, theatrical agents, students, a simple heiress or two and all in their turn had been treated to the overwhelming vitality of his charm, had received telegrams, letters, flowers, gifts, supplications to dine, to dance, to holiday abroad, whatever whim or ruse had entered his head at the time; yet any calculation on his part was only secondary, a sort of inevitable process that ticked over, a knowhow that was always there in half-conscious action, to the genuine feelings that he expressed for them.

For a time at least. In four days of romantic magic, there was nothing that he would not do for his latest paramour. And after an hour of his wit, his attention, his honesty above all, for everyone remarked what an honest person he was about himself and all things, he had, emotionally speaking, bound them hand and foot and there was nothing they would not do for him. Usually his demands were little, and shortly, now inflamed with love for him, the girl would part her inevitably trim and shapely legs on the very white mink spread that covered the six-foot bed next door. In time, usually after some forty-eight hours, the self-induced dream dispelled itself, and he found his Cinderella a thing of rags and tatters on the stroke of midnight and he did not even bother to pick up the glass slippers left behind. If it was slippers he wanted, he could have bought up a whole factory manufacturing them!

But to be fair, he always felt guilty about his sudden change of heart, always blamed himself, fe

silent and shifty for almost an hour before he broke the news in an apologetic way. Sometimes I was guilty was he that he could not even face the soft bright eyes of his fallen idol, and left the country for a week, for the girl's sake of course, so that she could recover the more easily, free of the tormenting knowledge that he was there in the very same city. But still they came, fresh reinforcements, one after the other, and if you find in my thinking a certain puzzled cynicism with regard to the fairer sex, then I will cite the experience of David Adler by way of explanation. And indeed with the knowledge of all this, it is no wonder that when he spoke to me, I choked a little on the whisky I was drinking and raised the other brow.

He went on, 'I'm mad about her. I can't get enough of her, I want to fuck her every single minute of the day.'

'I'm sorry, I don't understand the problem,' I said, and though I have chosen for myself a different sexual course, or rather a non-sexual course, for I have opted for celibacy after more years of aggravation than I would care at this stage to describe, I am nevertheless puzzled when a fellow human being appears to be enjoying a surfeit of lust.

He looked at me sheepishly, then lowered his eyes, as if deliberating whether he could trust me enough to divulge the burden that lay so heavily on his mind. He hesitated for a moment, then under the pressure of his ill-ease he finally coughed and said with a kind of astonishment, 'But she's really rather ugly.'

Now there is a problem, for if you believe that beauty is, if not truth, then certainly like butter, beauty and if you have based most of your thinking life on the predatory acquisition of the best, the fastest car, the loudest hi-fi, the most expensive flat and the most glamorous women, if you worship the appearance and not the essence of things, as most of us do, then indeed the very foundations of the life can creak with insecurity when confronted with a qualitatively different premise. Beauty can reside of course in the eye of the beholder, but usually that same eye looks for reassuring glances of approval from the eyes of others. How could it be otherwise when the major part of the exercise is to compete with and outdo one's neighbour? Beauty is also a thing of fashion, each age producing its own criterion, but for that to operate there must be a generally accepted idea, a concept of loveliness which the majority will value.

Wherein else resides its worth? (And perhaps David was not formulating it as such, but his eyes and restless mouth reflected it.) Lesser mortals must perforce lower their sights, settle for less, but the dynamic impresarios of our world reach and it is given, take and it is confirmed.

I questioned him and he told me the whole story. I won't attempt to reproduce his hesitations, his pauses, his snatches at cheroots, his repetitions, and indeed his sudden burst of eloquence when genuine emotion stirred within him at the very mention of her name, but I will take the liberty of the novelist in reducing his account to the more palatable proportions of a chapter, hoping that you will trust my perceptions, my regard for detail and my objectivity.

I merely end on a somewhat carping note: lunch did not seem to be forthcoming, and a good deal of his narrative was punctuated by the cistern-like rumblings of my aroused but frustrated digestive system.

Chapter 4

The story goes like this. Ajax Developments, a subsidiary of the parent company, Adler Enterprises, had turned its ever-eager eye in the direction of Trowbridge Spa to investigate first the possibility of an expansion of holdings and subsequently the development of the city centre. A certain sentiment of nostalgia may well have been in the back of the mind of the dynamic thirty-four-year-old tycoon, but he seldom allowed such considerations to influence his shrewd judgements, and it can be safely assumed, though the exact details of the manoeuvre escape my unbusiness-like intelligence, that the investigation must have been founded on a sound commercial basis.

A junior executive of the company first proceeded to that small provincial town, haunted as it is for me by so many childhood memories, made certain discreet enquiries, and returned forthwith with a satisfactory report to his boss. The wheels slowly turning into motion, David himself then ventured forth and got himself invited by the local Rotarians to attend one of their many social functions.

Temperamentally he abhorred such gatherings, but there was the necessity of business dealings. Also the fact that he was returning to his old home town as something of a celebrity, a local boy who had indisputably made good, added an element of flattery to his vanity. For the occasion he had made his tailor a suit of rich black velvet, which he wore with a cream silk shirt, set off at the neck by a plum red tie. Shoes of the same plum colour were stitched for his feet.

He wanted first to accentuate his distinction, his elegance, before this undoubtedly provincial crowd, but not to the extent of alarming them or making their small-town minds suspicious. He set off in his white Rolls, his chauffeur at the wheel, languidly watching a portable television from the back seat.

They greeted him warmly, laughed at his jokes, were solicitous to his demands. After dinner a speech was given in his honour. All eyes were turned to him. The applause was loud and prolonged.

It was only after dinner, when a five-piece group played from a stage bedecked with carnations, and the Rotarians and their wives or girlfriends danced across a floor slippery with chalk, that he first noticed Maureen. She was dancing with her husband. It was that unquestioned look of boredom in her eyes, as though she had withdrawn her whole personality, that singled her out for him, for that look implied a critical mind and he recognised an ally.

When the music stopped he introduced himself, first to her husband Ted, the owner of a provision store in the centre of the town, and then to her. He shook her hand and found that it was warm and yielding. When he asked her to dance, Ted grinned with pride at his fellow tradesmen, as his wife took the floor with the distinguished and dashing Mr Adler.

She said, 'I bet you usually don't dance in places like this.' He supposed she was about thirty. She had a certain ripeness, an autumnal quality, like a fruit ready to fall. Her skin was clear, but the flesh was pliant. Her hips were heavy with a kind of mysterious sensuality. Next to him she was warm, generating heat, and she moved easily about the floor.

His leg slipped through her parted thighs.

He said with a twinkle, 'It's all in the line of business.'

He had an erection and she nuzzled her soft plump belly into it. When he looked at her face, her eyes flashed back boldly and knowingly. He wanted her immediately.

There was nothing trim, or model-like, or sophisticated about her. She was only too evidently provincial, and it was this perhaps that attracted him. He was now with the kind of woman that in other circumstances had been different, if he hadn't been by some accident clever, if he hadn't been in Cambridge, if he hadn't, well practically everything, this was the kind of woman he could have married. It was girls like Maureen that fifteen years before he had kissed on the Common, and, his breath panting with excitement, had moved his eager hand up the abrasive stocking leg, and found after the initial resistance, clamped knees, wrestling hands, the delicious damp slippery prize. He remembered seducing his first girl on his parents' bed, surrounded by their three-piece suite, the mirror of the dressing table with its cut-glass dishes and trays, purely ornamental, never used, reflecting his own satanic face in its reproachful oval surface; beneath him the disorderly stockings, legs of the girl, her damp knickers round her ankles, her shoulders heaving on the green sateen bedspread. Oh, that bedspread evoked in him such vibrant lust! For hours he had rubbed and rubbed with soap and water and cloth the large dark stain that his semen left, and for all his scrubbing it remained, desecrating the prim sanctity of his mother's sleep. All this, with its hints of guilt and secrecy and desire, Maureen released in him, and he wanted her all the more.

All evening he danced with her and when the group thumped out the last waltz amid the wilting flowers, he said to her, 'I must see you again. Do you ever come up to London?' She said simply, 'For you I would.'

So he escorted her back to her table and back to her husband, and thanked them all for a most enjoyable evening, and when he shook Ted's hand, he offered him his card, saying, 'Any time you're in London,' and left for his car.

For a week he waited, restless, aroused, laughing at himself for his absurdity, but when the telephone rang and she said, 'I'm at Charing Cross station,' all self-reproach vanished and he waited impatiently for her to arrive.

She wore a belted suede coat and underneath a short angora dress in ice blue. She had white knee-length boots. She smiled at him self-consciously but mischievously at the door, like someone in the wrong. He took her coat and her perfume caught his nostrils. It had been a long time since he smelled that heady cologne.

She sat down while he poured her a drink. He could see from her face the awe and excitement that his flat made her feel, for her eyes darted here and there, taking in that painting, that colour, that object, but always they returned to him with a kind of nervous expectancy.

He found himself curiously tongue-tied. Once in her presence he could think of nothing to say. He wanted to hold her, that was all. Already he was aroused in the same way as before. It was marvellously so urgent a sensation.

She said, 'Well, I came,' and sipped her drink, looking at him over the rim.

He sat next to her. 'I can't think of anything to say,' he said. 'Except I want you.'

She gave a nervous laugh, then put her arms round his neck and kissed him. It was a rushing

breathless, eager, impulsive desire that he felt. He hugged her close to him and she wriggled and he held her even tighter.

He made love to her there on the sofa, her angora dress around her bum and her tights at her ankles. Afterwards he lay on her belly and she stroked his hair. She said, 'I knew it would be like that.' He made her tea, it was what she wanted, and laughingly he thought how right it was. While he brewed in the kitchen she wandered about the room, looking at this, picking up that. It was curious that the delight she took in his possessions was so akin to his, or what it had been before he grew bored with them. Her very simple pleasure recharged those forgotten relics with a new kind of meaning. He saw them through her eyes and revalued them. She wanted to know where he had bought them, why, how much he had paid. He was offhand in his replies and that made her marvel all the more.

When they finished tea, he picked her up in his arms, she protesting how heavy she was and he agreeing, and carried her to the bedroom. He took off her clothes slowly this time, savouring her, but he made love to her with as much intensity and as much joy.

He lay back astounded. It had never been like this before, so free of anxiety and manipulation and cunning. He had merely followed his impulses, and his impulses did the rest. It was so easy.

He turned to her and saw that she was sobbing, silently at first, but when he asked what was wrong, it was as if by admitting her tears he had conferred upon her a freedom, and she sobbed uncontrollably with great heaving gasps from the depths of her, hailstones of tears welling in her eyes, and flooding the mascara onto her cheeks. He squeezed her hand and she stammered, 'I'm sorry,' but the sobs still came, and when finally they seemed to abate and her breathing became more regular he asked tenderly, 'What's the matter?' And she shook her head as if it was all beyond her comprehension.

He gave her a cigarette and she smiled and lit up. Then she gave a short laugh and said, 'I don't suppose you want to see me again.'

And he shook his head as if in amazement and said, 'Oh yes, I do.'

'Really?' she said, her eyebrows in a curve.

'Really,' he said.

And he did, the next Thursday, and the next and the next, in fact every Thursday for the following three months.

Which brings us up to date and me sitting in his penthouse flat, hungry but silently impressed by his story. And he too was moved by it, for when he had finished he sat for a long time without saying anything, pulling occasionally at the top of his left sock. Finally he said, 'I don't suppose you remember her. She was at the same junior school. Lower down. Maureen White used to be her name.'

But I had to shake my head, for the name escaped me. Indeed it is curious but I remember almost no girls at that school, except the one who sat behind me, who would whisper to me occasionally to look under the desk where she would show me her small, pink, infant-like vagina. And even then I could place no name to the memory.

'I'd like you to meet her though. She's coming here this afternoon. OK?'

And what could I do, but nod my head and grin and say, 'OK.'

Chapter 5

She was due to arrive at three o'clock, and by two-thirty he was in a noticeable state of agitation. He kept pacing back from the terrace to the main room, glancing at his watch and mumbling to himself. And his anxiety could not have been reduced much by the sound of the vacuum cleaner, which a stoic and disapproving housekeeper was humping around the flat. She made a great deal of the full ashtray and unwashed glasses, clattering them to show her hostility. And I must admit that I was not without certain sympathy for her, even though she made it quite clear that she considered me to be one of the enemy camp. She hunted me from chair to chair, wherever I fled to escape her infernal machine.

With such a noise conversation was impossible, but even had we been in the most silent or soundproofed rooms, I had the feeling that he would not have spoken or paid any attention to me whatsoever. He had said his piece and was now anxious to get on with the next business, whatever that was to be, and somehow for all my thoughts on the subject, I could not for the life of me see how he could include me. I joined him on the terrace where he was leaning over a balustrade, flicking matches over the side and watching them float to the street below. I suspect he was timing the fall with his watch.

'Perhaps I ought to go,' I said.

His reply was short and rather irritable. 'No, you stay. Have a drink or get yourself something to eat from the fridge. Mrs Lot'll cook you something when she's finished.' He placed another match between finger and thumb and fired it streetwards.

'But why do you want me to stay?' I insisted.

He leaned both elbows onto the balustrade and stared down.

'I want your opinion. You know something about women and psychiatry. Jesus!' he exclaimed. The last being prompted by the sight of a taxi cab that as it were in slow motion had steered itself maniacally into the side of a Morris Minor in the street below. There was the usual squeal of brakes and that awful hollow crashing sound of impact, rather like a sack of scrap iron dropped onto an empty steel drum. The head of the driver of the Morris was poking bloodily through the windscreen and he was moved away, unable to watch any longer.

I returned to the living room, which was now silent and orderly. Mrs Lot washed dishes in the kitchen. If anything, his enigmatic answer to my question had succeeded in confounding me all the more. What on earth did he mean by 'You know something about women and psychiatry?' I racked my brains to find some clue to the origins of this strange assumption.

It is true that I had undergone a somewhat abbreviated form of psychoanalysis. For two years, three times a week, for fifty-minute sessions, I had lain on a couch rambling on about my life and my dreams, waiting for the mysterious 'transference' to take place, and whether it did or not to this day I am uncertain. I retain the greatest respect for my analyst, who seemed a patient if mainly silent man and endured with gravity the boredom of my life and the occasional scandals, but whether his insight

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