

The Thigh Baby

Robert was alone in the bathroom. His head felt thick and his brain was fat and pounding in his skull. He took a breath and carefully slid the bolt across on the door. Years of accumulated paint caused the little metal runner to stick in the lock and he grimaced as he jiggled it up and down.

The house seemed alive with the bustle of the morning. Daphne was frying eggs in the kitchen downstairs; Tom was pumping weights and singing show tunes in his bedroom, and the voice of John Humphries was blaring from the wireless on the landing.

The bolt shot and he rubbed his eyes – red and sore from another sleepless night. Things were not going well in Robert's world.

He switched on the shower and as he did, he turned on the radio beside it. The *Today* programme again. The wittering sound of a cornered frontbencher echoed off the bathroom tiles. He paused, checking that the sound was sufficient to mask any noise from the bathroom. The politician droned and the water thrummed insistently as it fell. It would do, he thought to himself.

He mumbled as he stumbled to the bathroom mirror and flinched as he shook off his dressing gown.

"Bloody hell!"

He looked a shadow of himself. He had always prided himself on being a bit of a looker for his age. Years of inter-pub cricket and a twice-weekly turn on the exercise bike had kept his aging body trim and supple. But the stress of the last few days had left him haggard. His skin was pale and saggy, and his moustache, once a bright and bushy thing, now looked withered and depleted. Huge great bags of purple flesh had swollen up beneath his bloodshot eyes and his usually well-groomed hair now framed his head like a crazy mad professor's. He looked every one of his fifty-two years. But this was all as nothing when compared with ... well, with other changes.

Robert closed his eyes as he fiddled with the cord of his pyjamas. He could barely bring himself to look. He felt the cotton trousers drop and breathed in heavily. Then he opened his eyes and peered downwards.

There it was: the thing that was the source of all his troubles. Tiny, round, pink, it stuck out obscenely from his inner thigh. He stared at it. What was it, he wondered? He thought he knew the answer. A cancer. A cancerous lump. A malevolent tumour, curled up on his leg. A cancer.

Its presence seemed to taunt him in the mirror. It was bigger than yesterday – bigger than the day before. Robert suddenly realised he was sweating. He picked up a pair of Daphne's tweezers from the shelf beside the sink. This wasn't the sort of thing that was supposed to happen to men like him.

His hand wavered as he brought the tweezers closer to the lump. He could barely bring himself to touch it. He paused, then pushed the prongs towards the flesh. It was strange but there was nothing. No pain at all. He knew that he was prodding at a part of himself, but he felt it only in his head, like an echo of sensation. The thing itself felt different - separate from himself.

Outside, on the landing, he heard Tom bring a rousing chorus of *Makin' Whoopee* to an end. There was silence for a moment, then a clatter as he thudded down the stairs.

There was something disgustingly familiar about the "thing". He couldn't quite put his finger on what it was. It was almost as though he recognised it. Like a memory of something he had glimpsed a long time ago.

Downstairs, Tom was lecturing his mother on the evils of cholesterol. "Go to work on an egg, darling," she was telling him in reply. "If it was true in the Fifties, dear, then I don't see why it isn't true today."

He forced himself to bend down, closer to the thing. It was even more revolting at close quarters. He stared at it aghast. The tumour was pink and red and raw and about the size of a toe. He could barely believe that the thing had grown so much overnight. And the worst thing was, it looked like – well, if he hadn't known better, he would have sworn that the thing had a face! A tiny screwed-up scrunch of a face, hidden in the folds of its flesh. Two little evil eyes and a nose like a lump of uncooked kidney. How the bloody hell could this be allowed to happen?

He put the tweezers back onto the bathroom shelf. Good God! Of course he was hallucinating. A tumour with a face! What the hell would he think of next? He bent down to pull up his pyjama trousers and as he did, he stared intently at the strange, pink lump – almost as though he was willing it to – to what? To move? To wink at him?

He shuddered. Part of him wanted to call out to Daphne – shout her up to the bathroom to comfort him and tell him he was just being foolish. But he knew that he couldn't. That was the thing. He knew that if he did she would find out. If she came up to the bathroom, she would see the tumour. And she would want to know where it had come from.

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Robert grinned internally as he motored towards Pickering. His lips were puckered and a jaunty version of *Smoke on the Water* rang around the Peugeot's leather interior. "Pamela, Pamela, Pamela," he thought to himself – drumming out a happy rhythm on the steering wheel.

He loved mornings like this. Heading off to a conference with a brand new suit and a packet of Durex Featherlite in his pocket. What more could a man want? he asked himself.

Ahead of him, the morning sunlight settled on the road and glinted on its shallow crust of frost. Even the tarmac seemed to be alive with promise and excitement.

Robert reached down and scratched at a nagging itch on his inside leg. He wondered what it was about extra-marital nookie that got him so excited. Perhaps it was just the danger of being found out. Perhaps it was the frisson of excitement at the knowledge he was doing something naughty and illicit. Or perhaps it was simply the thrill of being reminded that he was still attractive to people other than Daphne. Whatever it was, it was damn good fun.

He picked up a tape from the dashboard and slammed it into the player. *Fat Bottomed Girls* by Queen blasted out of the speaker. "Fat bottomed girls, you make the rocking world go round!" sang Robert, out of tune. He swerved with skilled precision to avoid an early morning hedgehog.

"Hi-ho, boyo. Nicely done," he noted.

He grinned at his reflection in the dashboard mirror. It was going, he told himself, to be a bloody good day.

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"Dad, do you have a minute?"

Robert found himself jolted from his reverie in the bathroom.

"Yes. Um, what? What is it?"

"Um – "

"I thought you'd finished in the bathroom."

"I have."

"Well then. You should let someone else have a turn."

"Yeah, yeah, I just ... I wanted to talk to you about something. That's all."

"All right." He waited expectantly.

"I mean to your face."

Robert rolled his eyes. What was the matter with the boy? He never usually wanted to talk. Not unless he needed some money for something.

"Do you need some money?"

"No, Dad, I just want to talk."

"Fine!"

Robert stared at the thing on his leg. Why did he have to pick now? He hastily pulled up his pyjama trousers and shuddered as the fabric brushed against the lump. "I'll be with you in a minute, alright? Just let me finish shaving."

"All right. I'll see you downstairs then."

"Okay."

Robert waited until he heard the sound of his son's footsteps on the stairs. Then he turned around and surveyed his face in the mirror. Bloody Hell. Actually, a shave might not be a bad idea. He reached out to pick up his shaving foam and picked up Tom's by mistake. *Coconut and Buttermilk Shaving Mousse* from the Body Shop. Funny to think of him scraping his face with a razor every morning. Funny to think he was old enough to need to.

Robert put the mousse back on the shelf. He paused and then very slowly took his trousers down again. Perhaps it was just a cyst, he told himself. Or a wart. Or perhaps some kind of displaced verruca.

He stared at the thing as it squatted on his thigh – tiny and malignant. Somehow it seemed to radiate anger. The thing stared back at him, or so it seemed to Robert. No, he thought, it wasn't a verruca.

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"What do you mean you don't want to have sex?"

(It had not been a bloody good day.)

"I just – "

"You just what?" Robert stared at the aging blonde sitting next to him in bed.

"I just thought it might be nice if we – well ... If we held each other for a change."

"Held each other?"

"Yes."

"Held each other where?"

Things had started badly at the conference. His carefully worded sales pitch about the benefits of self-inserting tent pegs had seemed to leave his audience cold. Indeed, one rather elderly gentleman from *Jemworld Plastics* had actually fallen asleep in the middle of it. Sadly, it seemed that things were unlikely to get much better from hereon in.

"Robert – "

"What brought this on?"

"I – ".

"I thought you liked having sex."

"I do, it's just, I just – "

"You just want to hold each other."

"Yes".

Robert rolled his eyes and leant his head back on the polyester pillow. The evening was not going according to plan. Pamela had spent the whole of dinner going on about her son – a scrawny, ginger twelve-year-old called Kevin. "He's very, very sensitive, you must understand that," she had told him at the outset of the meal.

Robert had felt something shrivel up inside him. He knew from past experience that this sort of motherly proviso could only mean one thing. Kevin was a psychopath. Sure enough, they had barely finished the seafood cocktail when it emerged that Kevin was up on charges. He had apparently been caught looting vegetarian burgers from the local Co-op. God knew why.

Pamela had wanted to get a "masculine perspective". Should she try to deal with the problem herself or should she (as the police advised) resort to behaviour counselling? Frankly, as far as Robert was concerned, a swift boot up the backside was probably the best solution, but Pamela was not convinced.

He stared at her thin, firm breasts – clearly visible through the fabric of her negligee. God, they looked incredible. So different to his wife's huge bajumbas. Daphne's breasts, though not without their charms, seemed to rest upon her chest like a pair of giant cushions. Pamela's looked soft and pliant. Small, doughy things he could grasp in a single hand while he was fucking her.

"Rob? ... Rob?"

"What?" He suddenly realised Pam was speaking to him.

"I was telling you about Kevin."

"Oh. Yes."

She stared at him, her thin, tanned face pouting suspiciously. "Were you even listening?" You weren't even listening were you?"

"Of course I was." He rubbed a friendly hand across her thigh.

"What was I saying?"

"You were saying you were very worried."

"No I wasn't."

"Oh."

He let his fingers worm towards her crotch. She slammed her hand down hard upon his fingers. God, he thought, she was sexy when she was like this. He peered up at her pouting face, her thick, pink lips so perfect for kissing and sucking.

"No I *wasn't*. For Pete's sake, Rob, I was saying I might send him to stay with his granddad in Norwich."

The spell was broken. Images of Norwich flooded his brain, causing his cock to shrivel up like a prune. "Bloody Hell, Pam!"

"Don't 'Bloody Hell, Pam' me! I was expecting a bit of sympathy from you. You *are* supposed to be my boyfriend."

Boyfriend! Robert rolled his eyes. "Yes. That's right. Not some glorified agony uncle."

"Rob!" Pamela stared at him reproachfully.

He turned away from her, taking a hefty lump of the duvet with him. Women! Pamela grabbed her side of the duvet and pulled it back.

"There's no need to be so goddamned huffy. I only asked your advice."

"Well I don't want to give it. I already told you what I thought and you didn't take a blind bit of notice. What's the point of giving you any more?"

Pamela thumped him.

"Hitting a child is never a solution. In fact," she told him primly, "it's more likely to be the cause of further problems."

"Thank you. Thank you Claire bloody Rayner."

He sat up and swung his legs out of bed.

"What are you doing?"

"Going to get a drink."

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"Good grief Robert, you look terrible!"

"Thanks."

"Really terrible!"

"Thank you, Daphne. I get the message."

"Well, I'm only saying. Have you actually brushed your hair this morning?"

"Yes."

"Really? Well you haven't done a very good job of it."

"Listen, it's *my* bloody hair!"

"I know that Robert!"

"And I'll wear it how I bloody well like!"

"Fine. If you want to look like a raggle-taggle gypsy, it makes no difference to me ... Although people are going to think you look very peculiar."

"Well, they can think what they bloody well like."

A pause.

"Fine."

Another one.

"There's no need to shout."

"Sorry."

"You're eggs have gone hard."

"Have they? Oh." If he was honest, he wasn't really feeling very hungry. He looked around. "Where's Tom?"

"He left half an hour ago, Robert. He's working this morning remember? Honestly, you were an age in the bathroom."

"Yes. Well."

"What were you doing up there?"

"Nothing."

Daphne gave him one of her glances.

"Well you seemed to be taking a jolly long time over it."

"Hmmm." He prodded his egg yolk.

"You know he wanted to talk to you this morning."

"Yes. Yes." She was right. The things were solid. "What about?"

"I don't really think it's my place to say."

"Oh."

"Talk to him tonight."

"Yes. I will."

"Well make sure you do. It's important to him, you know."

"I know, I know."

He set to work, slicing his congealed eggs into manageable strips. He supposed he ought to eat something. He felt a momentary pang of guilt as he cut in to the eggs. He had to admit, he never seemed to have time to talk to Tom these days.

"You'd better hurry up with that," Daphne tutted sternly. "You're supposed to be in the office in half an hour."

"*I KNOW!*"

"Well I'm only *telling* you Robert! Honestly," she planted a kiss on his tousled head of hair. "I know I'm a naughty old nagger but you *do* know it's just because I care."

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Robert stalked like a panther into the bar. The Forte Travelodge was not the most conducive place to have an evening drink, but he bloody needed one. He had left Pam weeping on the bed sheets upstairs and muttering veiled threats about not wanting to see him ever again. As if! The woman was a barnacle. He'd practically had to prise her off his leg when he had left her the last time.

He looked around in disdain. The bar was nearly deserted – a wasteland of faux-leather furniture. In the corner, a fleshy businessman sat poring over the screen of his computer – his belly encroaching like a glacier onto the keypad. A few

stray pubic hairs were peeking out between the buttons of his shirt. At the other end of the bar, a stoutish man with a trilby hat was reading a paper.

Robert snorted. Bloody Hell. Fancy spending Friday night in a place like this! Clearly the weekend was not going to go according to plan. He had told Daphne that he would not be back until Sunday and he had been looking forward to a weekend of golf and some serious top-level shagging. Mind you, with Pam in the mood she was in, it looked like even the golf might go for a Burton. He sighed. She was a good little player as well, Pam. Always put up some stiff competition. In a way he enjoyed the time he spent on the links with her almost as much as the time they spent in bed. He wondered for a moment if he should go up and talk to her. But no, it would only be another emotional angst-fest. There'd be time enough for that later on.

Robert peered at the man at the bar. He seemed to be doing a crossword – *The Times* by the look of it. Good. He could do with some intelligent conversation.

He stomped across and clambered up onto one of the wooden stools. He grabbed a copy of *The Daily Mail* from the end of the bar and settled himself in the seat. Then he ordered a whisky and dry ginger.

The paper was the usual mix of outrage – moral and political. Four pages devoted to the latest *Big Brother* – all of them explaining why nobody should watch it. He flicked through it rapidly. Kidnap on page three. World's biggest dachshund on page seven. The *Femail* section was quite interesting. They were talking to a woman who claimed she had only ever had casual sex. What a joke!

"Have you seen this?" he enquired of his companion at the bar.

The man glanced across at the article.

"I tell you, my friend, there's no such thing as casual sex anymore."

The man turned to look at him, an eyebrow raised.

"It's supposed to be everywhere these days isn't it? Falling moral standards and all that! Well. Not in my experience it bloody isn't."

The man made no reply. Maybe he'd picked the wrong person to try chatting to, thought Robert. He tried again. "Mind you, I suppose Pickering isn't the place to go looking for it, eh?"

The man smiled suddenly. "Woman trouble is it?" He folded up his paper.

"You could say that. By the way: hope you don't mind me butting in."

The man paused, then grinned at him. "Not at all. Nice to have some company."

Robert sipped his drink. "How're you doing with that crossword?"

"Not too bad. Only got two left to do. Any good at them?"

"Not too good at the cryptic ones, myself, old man."

"You surprise me."

"No, no, I prefer the quick and easy ones in the good old *Daily Mail*."

"I see."

The man looked at him appraisingly. "It's a knack."

"What is?"

"The cryptic ones. You just have to learn how to read the clues."

His companion gave him a significant glance and took his hat off. He put it down on the counter. Robert frowned. There was something rather odd about this chap but he couldn't quite put his finger on it. He shook his head. No doubt it would come to him. "Go on. Hit me then."

The trilby hat man raised his eyebrow.

"You're not serious?"

"I meant with a clue."

"Oh ..." A smile. "I see." He reopened the paper. "How about this one? 'Cross a well-fitting undershirt – belonging to Tiresias perhaps?'"

Robert frowned hard, screwing his face up into a mask of concentration.

"Doesn't strike a chord?"

"Fraid not, old boy."

"What a shame." The man tapped the paper with a badly chewed biro. There was a faint smile playing around his lips. What was so funny, wondered Robert

to himself? He quickly checked to see that his flies were done up. They were. So what was the problem?

"How about this one?" The man read out another clue.

Again no joy. The man closed the paper and slid it underneath his trilby hat. Then he ran his fingers through his short, grey hair. "I must say, I like your trousers."

"Oh. Oh, thank you." Robert frowned. "My wife bought them."

"I see."

Robert looked down at his trousers. They seemed like perfectly ordinary, bog-standard slacks to him. Again the man was smiling. It was almost, thought Robert to himself, as though the fellow found him amusing. Then it dawned on him. Perhaps he was a woofter. All this talk of trousers. Perhaps he thought that Robert was trying to chat him up. Bloody hell. Better put a stop to that. He turned. The man was looking at him again. Head cocked to one side. There was no doubt about it he was definitely a woofter.

"By the way. Just to get things straight ... I'm not chatting you up or anything. You do know that, don't you?"

The man furrowed his brow. "I didn't think you were."

"Oh ... good, well, good." He mopped his brow. "It's not that I've got anything against it, of course."

"Of course."

"I mean, I've got a son and he's a bit ... well, like that."

The man smiled at him sympathetically. Now he felt embarrassed. What did he have to go and bring Tom into it for?

The man leaned forward. "Don't worry about it. It happens all the time. People getting the wrong idea I mean. You're not the first." His voice was rich and velvety. Deep and mellifluous. And yet somehow ... not quite right.

Robert stared at him for a moment. Then the light began to dawn.

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Tim Forrester peed noisily into the urinal.

"We had that Durkin lad in this morning. You know the one. Fancies himself. Too much gel in his hair. Looks like a Pritt-stick. You listening?"

No answer.

"Anyway, I was telling 'im ..."

Robert sighed. He sat with his trousers round his ankles and stared at the cubicle door. Outside, the voice of his urinating colleague droned on.

"I told him, I said, 'you take some advice from an old-timer. You're never going to get nowhere in this firm if you go around with an attitude like that.' And he looked at me and he said, 'Attitude? I haven't got an attitude!' All incredulous and cocky like. And *I* looked at *him* and I said, 'Oh you have lad! It's written all over your hair.' Anyway, that stumped him. Cocky get, didn't know what to say!"

Robert let his head fall sideways and bang on the toilet wall.

"What you doing in there, me old matey-boy?"

"Very little really."

"You wanna be careful you know, me old Rob-Rob. Straining too much and all that. Don't know if I ever told you about my cousin Ron? Shat up a kidney he did. Straining too much that did it."

"Right. Right. I'll bear it in mind."

"You do that. Right. Well. I'd better be off. Can't stand around chatting to you all day. I've got ten thousand units of laminate flooring to shift before Thursday morning. See you later my old Robbie-Doodle."

"Yes."

"Don't dawdle over the doodle, so to speak."

"No. Bye, Tim."

"Doodle-oo!"

Robert heard the door slam. God, what a twat! He heaved a sigh of relief. If there was one thing he couldn't stand, it was people talking to him in the toilet.

He'd always felt the loo should be a bastion of gentlemanly silence. He bit his lip and stared down at his leg.

The thing was definitely bigger – if anything more red and raw than it had been that morning. He stared at the little lump of flesh, trying to make out the tiny, withered face. Had he imagined it, he wondered? The question had been obsessing him all morning. The knowledge of the thing's presence was starting to affect his work. He hadn't eaten a thing all day and he'd barely noticed the buttocks of Julie from accounts when she'd come round to pick up his order file. Normally the mere thought of Julie's posterior was enough to send him down to the washroom, but today he had only had one thought on his mind when he entered the cubicle.

He had first noticed the growth a couple of days ago. He'd been away at a plastics convention in Pickering and on the way back he had stopped at a pub and changed into a pair of driving shorts. It was then that he had noticed the ugly blemish on his inside leg.

At first he had passed it off as a bite or a rash – an allergic reaction to the seafood cocktail he had eaten the night before. But as the day wore on, the mark had darkened and expanded. By the time he had reached the village it had spread across his leg, and he had woken the next morning to find it puffed up and horribly discoloured.

As he stared, he found himself thinking of his old boss, Duncan Rogers. Duncan Donuts they'd called him. He used to get through a box of the toffee-flavoured ones every day. That had been cancer. Pancreatic. They'd found a lump the size of a fist inside him. Size of a fist! Six months he'd lasted, after they'd found it. That's how long it had taken for it to eat him up from the inside out. Like a doughnut taking revenge.

Something wet landed on the skin of his thigh. He suddenly realised he was crying. Sobbing in the toilets like a woman! What the hell was happening? What had she done to him? What had she done to him, that bitch?

He watched as the tears trickled through the hairs upon his thigh. It was nearly three years ago now, since he had last seen Duncan. He had barely thought of the old boy since then. Life had gone on. Things had been busy in the office. It had seemed a little strange without him for a while. But not for long. The space he had left had soon been filled. Robert himself had gotten a promotion. Duncan had laughed with him about it, the day before he left.

Would it be the same with him, he wondered? A cheap bottle of whisky as a goodbye present and then a quick round of promotions the minute he was out of the door?

Ha! He rubbed the tears from his eyes. It was half-past eleven. He supposed he ought to be getting back to work.

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"Bloody hell. You're a woman!"

"Yes. Polite of you to notice."

"But ... Oh shit! I'm sorry."

"Not to worry. It happens all the time." She grinned at him. Her eyes seemed to sparkle with amusement. "Nice to meet you. The name's Beatrice. Beatrice Lehmann."

"I see. Ah ... Robert Roberts." He put out a hand. She shook it, her eyes wandering across his face as she did so. Her fingers were surprisingly thick and strong.

"Erm ... I didn't mean to – that is – to imply – "

"Listen, if you're feeling bad about the gender thing, you can always buy me a drink to make things up."

"Er ..."

"A whiskey. Straight. No ice".

"Straight." He sipped his own drink, savouring the ginger.

"It's how I *like* my drink Mr Roberts. And my men."

"Ah ..." He gave her a sideways glance as he signalled for the barman. *Was* she coming on to him he wondered? "Whisky. Straight. No ice." The barman turned to find a glass.

God, how embarrassing, thought Robert. He looked Beatrice up and down. He remembered reading somewhere that a lot of men found women sexy in gent's clothes. Beatrice looked like Russell Grant. Mind you, she seemed to be a good sport. Funny, now he knew she was a woman, he would have had her pegged as

a lesbian if it hadn't been for that comment about the whisky. He perused her clothes for a moment. A purple shirt – *Burttons* by the look of it – and a dark green corduroy jacket. Neither of them fitted very well. Perhaps her own clothes had got wet or something and she'd had to borrow them off someone. Better not ask. Ladies could be funny about stuff like that.

The barman arrived with the drink. Beatrice took the glass and sipped it, puckering her face in appreciation. She turned to him and smiled.

"So. What brings you to the cultural Mecca that is the Forte Travelodge near Pickering."

"Ha! Very good!" (Sense of humour too). "I'm here for a conference. Plastics. Injection moulding. That sort of thing. New innovations. That's what *I* do. Marketing new designs."

"I see. How very fascinating."

The woman began to trace a snaking design upon the tabletop with her finger.

"Well, no not really."

"Come come, Mr Roberts. I'm sure that it's a very specialised line of work."

"Well. Yes I suppose it is ..."

"Of course it is."

He stared at her. She had a faint moustache, he noticed.

"Are you here alone?"

"Yes. Yes I am."

"Oh. I thought perhaps you were with that woman - the one you were having dinner with tonight."

"Ah ..." So, she had been watching him. "Yes. Just a colleague. Think she felt she needed an early night."

"I see."

Her finger continued to trace the pattern on the bar. Robert sipped his whisky and ran a sweaty finger around his collar. There was something about this

woman that was making him feel nervous. The way she seemed to stare at him – almost without blinking. Why on earth had he lied to her about Pamela? He noticed with surprise that he had the most enormous hard-on. Could it be that he fancied her, he wondered? He surreptitiously moved the edge of his jacket so it covered up the bulging lump of flesh inside his pants.

"So. What do *you* do?"

"I'm an archaeologist. Been digging at a site not far from here. Neolithic."

"How exciting."

"Yes, yes it is."

"So ... Cavemen then?"

"Well. Not quite."

He noticed with a start that she was staring at his crotch.

"That – that must be interesting. Digging up the past."

"Yes. Yes it is I suppose. It's amazing what you can find when you start rooting around. Things that have been buried for thousands of years. Waiting to tell their stories. Waiting for you under the ground. Silent!"

Her eyes flashed.

"Yes, yes I'm sure. So ... Come across anything interesting recently? Er ... Dig-wise I mean."

She smiled at him. "Oh yes. One or two odds and sods. I found the most wonderful Celtic bowl at a site near Chelmsford the other week. Horniest little thing you ever saw. The design included a number of chthonic figures so I think we might have stumbled on a burial site."

A pause.

"Listen. I don't know about *you* but I'm feeling desperately horny."

Robert nearly choked on his whisky.

"Steady, old boy".

When he had finished spluttering, he put down his glass and found to his surprise that she was staring at him with a look of unashamed hunger in her eyes.

"What do you say we finish our drinks and head on up to my room?"

"Er – well ..."

"I'm a bloody good fuck, you know."

"Oh," he muttered weakly. "I don't doubt it."

He turned and carefully studied the writing on the bottles behind the bar. Beatrice wasn't the sort of woman he'd usually look at twice. For starters she had to be in her middle fifties. Normally he went for people younger than himself. She was also somewhat stout around the middle. Whatever shape she did have had been subsumed beneath the massive purple shirt. She was also wearing trousers – grey woollen slacks that gave her legs a fattish, dumpy look. And yet, he had to admit to himself that there was something about her – something about her eyes. Yellow eyes! That was it! Yellow eyes, he realised with surprise.

"Listen. All that stuff about casual sex ..."

"I quite agree."

"What?"

"I quite agree with you, Mr Roberts. You can't get a decent fuck for love nor money nowadays. Let me tell you, archaeologists aren't much cop in bed. Except for myself of course."

"Ah."

"So what do you think?"

Her eyes seemed to pin him to his chair.

"Um ..." He had to admit, he was half tempted. She might be rather strange to look at but Beatrice was having the most incredible effect on him. She smiled at the bulge in his trousers sympathetically.

"Listen Mr Roberts, I don't expect you to make a decision straight away. After all, we *have* only just met haven't we?"

"Yes, yes. Well, yes of course we have."

She rapped him smartly on his knee.

"Well then. You finish your whisky first."

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"So. Is it – Are you alright with that?"

"Hmm. Yes." Robert poked reflectively at a pile of cranberry jelly.

"It's just," Tom continued, "I'd like to know that it wasn't a problem."

"Of course ..." Robert frowned. Perhaps he ought to go and see a doctor.

"It's just it's someone I really like that's all and I think – I think you ought to meet him."

"Of course. Yes. Yes of course." He lifted the pepper pot and began to liberally shower his meal with grains of ground black pepper. He normally liked these *Marks and Spencer's* ready-meals but for some reason, tonight the food didn't seem to be tickling his fancy. He looked across at Daphne to see if she had noticed. No doubt there would be hell to pay if he didn't finish up.

"Thanks dad. Thanks. I think you'll like him."

"Like who?"

Tom stared at him for a moment.

"Jonathon."

"Who's Jonathon?"

"My boyfriend!"

"Oh. What boyfriend?"

Tom slammed his fork down in to a half-eaten pile of mashed potato.

"Fucking hell!"

"Language, Tom!"

"Language, Tom!" he repeated in a squeaky imitation. "Honestly, mum, he hasn't heard a bloody word I've said."

Robert let the pepperpot drop in to the pile of untouched turkey dinner on his plate.

"Robert!" Daphne stared at him severely.

"I – "

"Where are you going Tom?"

"Out."

"What about dinner?"

"I'll eat it later."

"Robert!" hissed Daphne again, as Tom made a swift exit from the room.

Robert plucked reflectively at his moustache.

"Sorry. Think the old mind must have been elsewhere."

Daphne picked the pepper pot gingerly out of Robert's turkey dinner.

"Yes. Well. It's always elsewhere these days, isn't it?"

• • • • •

Robert stood with his trousers round his ankles, hard-on casting shadows on the wall. The whisky he had swallowed in the bar had left him woozy and he swayed back and forth upon the carpet in his stockinged feet. Beatrice kept her shiny yellow eyes upon his face. Yellow like a cat's eyes. Like contact lenses?

He smiled as he watched her, slowly undoing the buttons on her too-big shirt. Her fingers scuttled nimbly down the front of the garment – moving slowly downwards to the button of her flies.

"So ... Do you do this often?"

"What's that?"

"Pick up strange women in hotel bars?"

"Ah. Well – "

"Only when you get the opportunity?"

"Ha! Quite!"

She pulled him towards her. He felt his cock brush against the bristly fabric of her trousers. He put up a hand and pushed the too-big shirt from off her shoulders. For a woman in her fifties, her breasts were in immaculate condition. Her skin was soft and smooth and her nipples! He imagined squeezing them between his fingers.

He smiled at her. She didn't smile back.

"One thing."

"What? Ah!"

She suddenly had his scrotum in her hand.

"What you said about casual sex ..."

"W - What about it?"

"If you're going to fuck me, Mr Roberts, you had jolly well better be one hundred per cent committed"

He felt her fingers reach around his arse ...

• • • • •

No sleep. No sleep. It had been three nights now and still no sleep. He was going to lose his marbles if he didn't get some soon. He yawned and rubbed his tired face. The skin felt almost electrified with tiredness. The nerves jangled wildly under the surface. He felt as though someone had plugged him into the mains. He put out an arm and brushed the hair of the sleeping figure beside him.

"Wha' ... who's there?" it mumbled. It was Daphne's voice speaking. For one half-mad moment he had thought it might be Beatrice. Robert groaned softly. Beside him in the darkened bedroom, Daphne dozed fitfully in her cotton nightie.

He turned and stared at her sleeping face – strangely youthful when it was clean and bare of make-up.

He had always thought of Daphne as a good old girl. Someone hale and hearty who would organise his life. Someone who would be there for him if the chips were down. But now the chips *were* down and he found that he didn't know what to say to her. Truth be told, they hadn't really had a proper conversation in years. Bickering! That was all they really did nowadays. Chuntering at each other. Grizzling at petty irritations.

Would she miss him if he were gone, he wondered? Probably. She was like that. But then, she didn't really know him. Didn't know about his secret life. Didn't know about the thing on his knee. Didn't know about all the affairs and the women and the assignments. Poor old Daph-ers. To her he was just the same old Robert. Just slightly vaguer and grumpier than usual.

He peered at her in the darkness. He'd thought her very beautiful once. What had changed, he wondered? Was it him or her? Did she still love him like she used to do?

The thought occurred that maybe Daphne too had an "other life". A life that he knew nothing about. A life of secret lovers and forbidden trysts in – oh for Christ's sake – where would Daphne have a forbidden tryst? Probably the garden centre.

Well. Good luck to her if she was. She deserved someone who really cared for her. He rubbed his eyes with tiredness. Fuck, he needed some sleep. He had barely had a wink since the night he had spent wrapped up in bed with bloody Beatrice. What little he had managed to snatch had been haunted by the thing upon his leg. Every time he had closed his eyes, he had seen it. Suckered to his thigh. Wrapped around his leg like a baby, clinging to its mother.

Robert froze. That was what the thing reminded him of. A tiny, half-formed baby! An evil little embryo! A vile little half-baked child! Oh shit! He almost laughed to himself. It wasn't bloody cancer at all! He was pregnant! Bloody *pregnant!*

He giggled.

"Wha ...? What ...?"

"Nothing," he whispered gently. "Go back to sleep."

He quietly swung his legs out of bed and felt for his slippers in the dark. He found his dressing gown and then padded out onto the landing. Pregnant! And no idea where the bloody father was! He rolled his eyes. "Jesus Christ!" he muttered to himself. What the hell would he think of next?

He shuffled towards the stairs and paused outside Tom's room. He cocked an ear to see if his son was still awake. He often heard him exercising in the middle of the night. It was strangely comforting, hearing the steady clink, clink, clink of the weights or the swoosh of the rowing machine as Tom rowed steadily off to God knew where. Somewhere far away from *him*, he imagined.

He listened for a few seconds more, but the room was silent. Tom must have gone to sleep. He felt a momentary pang of guilt over what had happened at dinner. Bloody Beatrice, he thought to himself. It was all her fault. Making him look like a bad father. God, if he could only get his hands on her! What he wouldn't do!

He smiled an evil smile as he padded down the stairs. There were one or two things he could think of.

• • • • •

Robert drowsed in the darkness of Beatrice's bedroom. Beside him, the owner of the room snored softly in her sleep. He turned on the bedside light and watched her for a while. In the half-light he could see the shadow of the faint moustache upon her upper lip. He wondered for a moment if Beatrice had a husband, but decided this was unlikely. She seemed too much a force of nature to go in for such conventional banalities as getting married. Besides, if she did, she would hardly need to spend her evenings picking up men in Forte Travelodges would she? Or would she? Perhaps her husband was ill, or just uninterested in sex. Or perhaps he *was* interested but just couldn't satisfy her. He gingerly put out a hand to fondle his manhood upon which, he was fairly sure, he would find teeth-marks in the morning.

Certainly, sex with Daphne was nothing much like this. Whilst a great deal less impregnable than one might imagine to look at her, she was very much one of the lie-back-and-think-of-England brigade. Indeed, such was her patriotic concentration during sex, that Robert always half expected her to burst out with a chorus of *God Save The Queen* upon climax.

Beatrice however was a different kettle of fish. Beatrice was proactive. Beatrice was exacting. Beatrice had fucked him with an almost archaeological precision – peeling off the layers of his clothing and then beaming with joy at each new discovery underneath.

He smiled at the memory and picked at the stitching of the patchwork quilt that currently covered them both. The quilt was heavy and warm and he felt safe beneath its multicoloured patches.

"I always bring my own bedclothes," Beatrice had explained. "You know how it is with these terrible hotels. You can never be sure that they're not going to give you nylon bed sheets."

"Er ... Is that bad?" he had enquired.

"Of course it's bad, you silly arse. They stick to your pubes like Velcro." And with that she had ridden him until his cock had ached.

• • • • •

Robert moved across to the fridge and took out a bottle of milk. His mother had always sworn by Horlicks. He was still seething internally at the thought of Beatrice's treachery.

His hand shook as he lifted down a pan from the cupboard by the sink. No sleep. He angrily tipped the milk into the pan. Was it some sort of punishment, he wondered? This hideous growth; this pregnancy gone wrong ...

There was not a shadow of a doubt in his mind that Beatrice was somehow involved. How could she not be? A strange, yellow-eyed woman who had fucked him and left him? Left him without a word of *thanks*? What a bitch! How could she have done that to him? And now there was this – this thing on his leg! This thing that had appeared the day after she had left him!

He turned on the gas and lit the flame. It caught with a satisfying whoomph. He stared at the milk as it swirled around in the pan. It was almost mesmerizing. He took out a wooden spoon from the implement jar and began to stir. The milk was beautiful. Like something from space. Like a black hole only white.

He found his mind slipping back to the time when Daphne had been pregnant with Tom. God, he had been the proudest man in the world! Daphne had been ... well – huge. Swollen up with a brand new child inside her.

He remembered seeing a picture in a book of the foetus in its different stages of development. It had been beautiful – well, in a way – and somehow sort of terrifying. See-through and fragile; breakable, magical, perfect. The thought that he had played a part in making something so incredible had left his mind reeling. He had never been so happy in his life. And yet somehow, he had never quite managed to let those close to him *know* how he was feeling.

And when the child was born! He had been there in the theatre when it happened. He could see it now, his wife lying like an animal on the bed, panting

and gripping his trembling hands in a hand more like a vice. He had been so proud of her then. Proud and amazed and mystified as his son had been plucked from her body. Pulled out, red and waxy, by the doctor and then handed to his wife. She had held him like a trophy.

His cheeks coloured with shame. Why had he not been able to tell her? There had been attempts of course. He had tried many times in the early days to communicate what he felt. But he had never managed it. Words had failed him. Either that or –

– The milk bubbled over. Robert turned off the gas.

One night, he had come home stocious – a babbling mess – from the office. He had gone out drinking with some colleagues. Tim Forrester had been there, he remembered, grimacing. They had started drinking straight after work and yet it had been after twelve when he had got home. He remembered fumbling the key into the lock and stumbling across the hallway. He remembered collapsing in a heap at the bottom of the stairs. And worst of all he remembered Daphne standing over him in her slippers. The boy had been upstairs, sleeping in his cot. He had lain at Daphne's feet and tried to explain how he felt about her and his son. He had babbled, spitting out words incoherently, weeping at one point, singing at another.

It hadn't worked. Daphne had raised an eyebrow and ordered him to bed, quite rightly, in the spare room.

Robert shuddered with shame. He tipped a couple of teaspoons of Horlicks into a mug and poured the hot milk on top of it. A skin-like scum floated on the surface and he poked it with a finger.

He had woken the next morning with a hideous hangover and discovered to his horror that he had soiled himself on the way up the stairs. It had taken him nearly an hour to clean them.

He had been so embarrassed, he had never really spoken of the incident again. And what was more, he had never really tried again to tell Daphne how he felt ... felt about the baby ... about her ... about anything really. He had somehow felt ashamed that his wife had seen him like that. And somehow the silence had never really gone away.

In many ways, he reflected, that was where his and Daphne's troubles had begun. Well ... his troubles anyway. He had never slept with other women before Tom had been born. And yet now it had become a sort of mania.

"I hope you treat me better," said a voice.

Robert looked around.

"It's not a very good start is it?"

His gaze travelled downwards to his leg.

"Crying all over me! Prodding me with tweezers! I hope you treat me better than the one you've got."

Horror-stricken, Robert stared at his leg. Surely this couldn't be happening?

"Aren't you going to answer me, daddy?"

The voice was sickeningly pure and sweet – a candy-soft purr of a voice – innocent but knowing.

Robert slowly put his Horlicks on the table and bent down, his finger wavering at the cuff of his trouser leg. A pause. And then he quickly pulled up the pyjamas past his knee. He could see the thigh-baby's ugly little face staring up at him.

"Wha ... what do you want?"

The thing didn't answer him.

"I heard you! I know you can talk. What do you want?"

Nothing. Perhaps he had been imagining it. He picked up the wooden spoon from the table.

"I warn you."

Nothing. He prodded at the thing with the handle of the spoon. Still silence. And then, all of a sudden – Robert nearly gagged – the thing's wizened mouth opened up and a tongue appeared! He gaped as it began to make a sound. It was blowing a tiny, filthy raspberry at him! Before it could finish, Robert began to beat it angrily with the spoon, slapping it hard with the flat end.

"Robert? What are you doing?"

He span around, knocking the Horlicks from the table.

"Oh, um - nothing. Just making a drink that's all."

Daphne gave him a disapproving look. He hastily straightened the fabric of his trousers.

"It's half past one in the morning."

"Yes, yes I know."

"I thought you were a burglar, creeping around."

"Sorry. Sorry."

"Yes, well." Daphne stared at the mess of Horlicks and broken mug on the floor. "Make sure you get that tidied before you come to bed. I don't want people stepping on it in the morning."

"Yes ... Of course."

Daphne turned her back to leave.

"I – " he almost spat it out right then. He almost asked her to help him.

"Hmm?" She turned.

"Nothing. Night, night."

"Yes." She smiled. "Night, night."

She blew him a kiss and left him in the kitchen.

• • • • •

Robert woke up with the pale morning light streaming in through half-open curtains. He was alone and naked in Beatrice's room. He put out a hand and to his surprise, he found that he wasn't in bed. Rather, he was lying on the surface of the mattress. There was no blanket covering him. There was no sign of Beatrice's non-nylon quilt. In fact, there was no sign of Beatrice at all.

He sat up in bed and looked around in alarm. The room was empty! The bedside table which last night had been covered with books had been cleared. Beatrice's coat no longer hung on the back of the door. Her clothes, which she had dropped last night on the floor, had disappeared.

He leapt out of bed and ran across to the wardrobe. Empty! A single, lonesome hanger dangled from the bar in the roof. He knelt on the ground to check the chest of drawers. They were empty too.

A terrible feeling of fear began to creep over him. Surely she couldn't have left him? Not after – well – not after what they had shared last night!

A sudden hope sprang up in his breast that she might be in the bathroom. He leapt to his feet and wrenched open the door. No. There was no-one there. Tiny drops of water speckled the bath and there was a wet towel hung on the radiator. She had clearly had a shower before she had left. How had he not managed to hear her?

He turned around and surveyed the bedroom. The only thing left in it was the furniture. That and his clothes. Someone had folded them in to a neat little pile and left them in the chair by the door. He dragged his trousers onto his legs and quickly flung his shirt around his shoulders. Where the hell had she got to?

Two minutes later he was pounding down the stairs towards the reception. He barely glanced at the pretty Asian girl who was working the desk.

"Where did she go?"

"I'm sorry, sir?"

"Where did she go? The woman?"

"What woman, sir?"

"The *woman*. The archaeologist! ... *Beatrice!*"

The girl at the desk gave him a wary glance.

"I'm sorry, sir, I don't really know what you're talking about. Er ... You do know you're flies are undone, don't you?"

"What?"

"Your flies, sir."

"Oh ... " Robert hastily pulled up the zip on his trousers. "Sorry about that."

"Don't worry sir. Happens all the time."

"Did you see where she went?"

"Who sir?"

"Beatrice! Miss Lehman!"

Blank incomprehension from the girl on the desk.

"Come on, you must have seen her! She looked like a man! Staying in room forty-five?"

The girl's cheerful expression was becoming rather fixed.

"I'm sorry, sir, but that lady checked out."

"Miss Lehman?"

"Yes, sir. Well ..."

"What?"

"Well ... If it's the same woman we're talking about, sir ... She actually checked in as Mrs Harman."

"Harman?"

"Yes, sir. A small lady. Very short grey hair."

"Mrs Harman?"

"Yes."

Oh shit! Robert dragged himself to one of the easy chairs in the lobby. He couldn't believe it! He couldn't believe she had gone. He couldn't believe she had *left* him like this! He had just had the best sex he'd ever had in his fifty-two years on the planet and now the woman he'd had it with had vanished! He cast a ragged stare in the direction of the receptionist.

"Are you sure she didn't leave an address? A telephone number? A ..." Think Robert, think! "The name of a museum or something?"

"No. No I'm sorry, sir." A pause. "Oh."

Robert looked up.

"I think she might have left *something* though."

"Yes?" A flicker of hope.

The receptionist rummaged in a drawer behind her desk.

"Here we are."

Robert stared at the thing she was holding.

"It's a pen."

"That's right. She left it behind when she signed the bill this morning. I'm sure you could have it. *We've* got loads and it's only a biro isn't it?"

Robert walked across to the receptionist and gingerly took the pen from her hand. It was bright green and it had the logo of a large insurance firm printed on the side.

A horrible sucking void began to open in the pit of Robert's stomach. The pen was entirely anonymous. They were given away free in the post. Daphne kept one in her handbag, he seemed to remember.

He shuffled back to his chair and sank down into it. She'd left him! She'd actually *left* him! She'd used him and then she'd left him. He felt disgusting. Disgusting and dirty, like someone's left-over fish and chip wrapper, thrown away in the street.

He cupped his palms and let his unshaven face sink down in to their sanctuary. He could still taste her. He could still feel the imprints of her fingers on his legs. He could still feel the ache she had left in his groin. She had been so close, so real and alive, and now she was gone. Vanished forever. Clearly she had not felt anything for him. Good God, she hadn't even given him her real name. "Casual bloody sex," he muttered to himself.

He was so absorbed in his misery, that he barely noticed the pain five minutes later, when Pamela passed him in the hallway and hit him in the leg with a number nine iron.

• • • • •

Robert sat in his dressing gown on the sofa and stared at the show on the television. Some kind of morning makeover. Two very camp men explaining how

a woman could clear up her oily pores. He had taken the day off. He was useless at work at the moment. Daphne was out. Tea and biscuits at eleven with Mrs Norse-Forleg, the lady who ran the Post Office.

Beside him on the cushions was Daphne's medical dictionary. *The Complete Family Health Encyclopedia*. He had told Daphne that he had a cold.

He sat glumly picking at his toenails with the file on a pair of nail clippers. The book beside him was vast. Robert had not known until a few hours ago that so much could go wrong with the human body. He had read and reread the bits pertaining to cancer over and over. He had also underlined a few pertinent passages.

"Cancer may cause a variety of minor symptoms. Any that persist for several days should be checked by a doctor. A scab, sore or ulcer that fails to heal within three weeks; a blemish or mole that enlarges bleeds or itches ..."

Enlarges ... Bleeds ... Itches ... It didn't say anything about it talking. He wondered again about going to see the doctor. Perhaps it would put his mind at rest. But what the hell would he say? "I had a bit of a one-night stand with an archaeologist who looked like a man and now I've got a talking growth on my inside leg"? Good one, Robert. Besides - what if she told him it was fatal? People died from cancers all the time. His own father had gone like that. Prostate apparently. Not that anybody had known at the time. He wondered if this had happened to his dad. Had it talked to him? His prostate? Had it chatted like the lump on his leg? Had it called him Daddy? Ha! Probably not. His father had made everyone call him David. He saw no reason why a prostate should be any different.

Where was your prostate, anyway? He looked it up in the book.

"Walnut-sized gland in the human body. Part of the male reproductive system. The prostate gland is situated below the urinary bladder and in front of the rectum. Its purpose is to create, store and secrete a clear, sticky fluid which is one of the constituent parts of semen."

Oh.

A pause. He gingerly pushed aside his dressing gown. He was going to have to do something soon. The thing was getting bigger.

"Beatrice, you bitch," he hissed to himself. "Beatrice, you utter bitch!"

"Did you not love mummy, Daddy?"

Robert closed his eyes.

"You're not really here."

"I am though. I am and I want to know."

"Shut up."

"Why do you never talk to me, Daddy?"

"Shut up!"

"Tell me more about the prostate. I want to know."

"Shut up, shut up, SHUT UP!"

A pause. The voice spoke again, more reproachful this time.

"Daddy. You're cross with me."

"I'm not."

"You are, I can tell by your voice."

"I'm not. I'm not anything with you."

"Why not?"

"Because ... Because you're just a cancer!"

"Daddy! I'm not. You know I'm not."

"You are!"

"I'm not."

"What are you then?"

"I'm your child, you know I am. Your love child. I'm your crime of passion!"

"Oh fuck off," he snarled. "Don't give me all that *Mills and Boon* crap."

"Don't swear in front of the children, Daddy."

"Fuck you!"

"You can't ignore me."

Robert flicked up the volume on the television.

"As you can see, Claire has combination skin. Very dry on the chin but oily around the nose and eyes."

"That's what you always do, isn't it? Turn up the volume. Tune out. Stop listening."

"Fuck *off!*"

"Well I'm not gonna shut up."

"Yes you are."

"Make me."

Robert stared at the thing on his leg, his eyes black and sticky with hate. "Fine. Fine. I bloody well will." He looked down at his hand. He still had the nail clippers.

"What are you going to do, Daddy?"

The voice was different this time. Wary, almost fearful, as though it knew it had pushed him a little too far.

Robert stalked in to the kitchen.

"Daddy?"

He flung off his dressing gown, lifted up his leg and balanced his foot on one of the kitchen chairs. Then he stared the thing full in the face.

"Daddy ...? Daddy, what are you doing?"

The tiny blades of the clippers bit into Robert's leg. A thousand volts of pain shot through him. It was all that he could do to stop himself from screaming out. He opened his mouth in a silent shout and as he did so, he swung himself around so that he was sitting on the kitchen table.

He stared at the little lump of flesh on his leg ... The baby. It was bleeding. A watery fluid was leaking from the wound. It trickled down his shin and within it he could see a scarlet trail of blood.

Robert paused. He cocked his head and listened for a second. The kitchen was as still and silent as the grave. If he was going to do this thing, he had to do it now.

He lifted the clippers again and made them bite once more into the baby. This time, he nearly gagged as he tried to choke back the pain. He prodded at the wound with his finger. The flesh tore a little but the baby was still clinging on to him. Through the watery veil of his tears, he could see its little face, like a monkey's face, looking up at him.

"What are you doing, you stupid man?" it asked him. "What are you doing? I'm your baby."

"I don't care, I don't care, I don't bloody care," Robert sobbed. "You're not my child."

"Oh but I am," the baby told him. "I am and you can't deny me."

Robert suddenly grabbed at the baby's body, digging the clippers deeper into the fleshy bulb of its head.

"Stop it, Daddy, stop it!"

"Shut up, shut up, shut up!"

He could barely feel the pain any more. He knew what he had to do.

"You're hurting me, Daddy! I love you! I love you, Daddy, I *do!*"

Robert ignored it. The thing was nearly severed now – severed from his body. In a moment, he could throw the thing away. In a moment he would never have to see the thing again. In a moment, the child would be gone.

"Daddy!"

He wrenched the thing from his body and then threw it to the floor. Then he settled back, weeping in pain and triumph. He suddenly realised he was sitting in Daphne's breakfast.

He put the nail clippers down on the table. For a moment, he barely dared to breathe. He could hardly believe that the hated thing had gone.

Fuck! His hand had begun to shake like a thing possessed.

Fuck! Oh fuck-fucketty-fuck! What had he done? He'd murdered it! He'd killed it. He'd killed his goddamned child! He stared at the thing as it lay on the floor, shrivelled in a pool of blood. He stared at the blood still trickling down his leg. He suddenly felt a great weight of pity. He felt like he wanted to scream out, to pick the thing up and hug it to his chest. He felt like he wanted to fall to the floor and beat his fists on the ground. He felt like he wanted to wail and shout and cry. But he didn't. For some reason he didn't.

Instead he simply looked at the baby.

"Poor thing," he said. "Poor thing."

He stared for a moment more at the once hated infant. It looked bizarrely fragile on the kitchen floor. Then he very calmly went to the kitchen cupboard, took out a matchbox, emptied it of matches and put the baby inside. He closed the lid and left the box upon the worktop.

Then he put his dressing gown back on, padded silently upstairs and put a dressing on his leg.

When that was done, he started very carefully cleaning the kitchen. He scrubbed the floor and washed the blood off the nail clippers.

Next, he picked up the matchbox and went outside. He found a trowel and carefully dug a small hole in the ground near a laurel bush. Then he buried the child in the hole. He kissed his fingers and patted the ground down so that it was firm. Then he stole a small rock from Daphne's rockery and placed it on the child's grave.

He stood there for a moment or so – swaying in the breeze. Then he went upstairs and climbed into bed.

A short while later, Daphne arrived home. He heard her humming a snatch of an old Joni Mitchell song in the kitchen. It seemed the emergency clean-up had passed muster.

She called up to him to ask if he wanted an omelette for lunch. He shouted back that he didn't. He spent the rest of the day in bed. When Daphne came up to

check on him, she found that his pillow was wet. A fever, he told her. She patted him on his brow and changed the pillowcase.

• • • • •

Six months had nearly passed before Robert allowed his thoughts to turn once again to the thing that had grown upon his thigh. Summer had descended on the village, bringing with it insects, swallows and balmy heat. After its emergency amputation, he had tried his best to stop his mind from dwelling on the thing. He had been terrified that it might return, as though simply thinking of it might prompt its reappearance. But his leg remained blemish free. All that was left of the baby was a tiny white scar where his flesh had knitted itself together once again.

It was the twenty-sixth of August. Robert sat in a deckchair by the gazebo in the back garden. Daphne and Tom were both out – Daphne at a meeting for the Church Bazaar in November and Tom ... well ... God-knew-where with God-knew-who. Things within the family had not got much better since the baby had been lost.

Robert sat and stared at the newspaper in front of him, trying to focus on Peter Hitchens' byline. No matter how hard he tried, he couldn't seem to concentrate. Thoughts of the long-gone infant seemed to sidle into his brain.

He sighed and put the paper down, picking up the half-empty can of Tetley's by his chair. His eyes seemed to move of their own accord to the laurel bush that grew beside the hedge. He took a sip of the now-warm beer. Around the bush were numerous heavy rocks – each one a memorial for one of the many family pets which had died when Tom had been a youngster. Amongst them was the slightly smaller rock that he had pinched from Daphne's rockery. It was towards this that Robert began to walk.

When he got to the bush, he reached out a hand and fondled the dark, green leaves between his fingers. Then he slid them down towards the moist, brown soil below him. He lifted aside the rock he had used as a makeshift gravestone. It felt warm and smooth within his hand. He held it for a moment, enjoying the sensation. Then he put it down and began to dig. A small mountain of earth began to accumulate beside the stone. It took him no more than five minutes to unearth the little matchbox into which he had placed the remnants of the baby. He held it in his hand for a moment. He realized he was trembling. He stared at the box. *Cook's Matches*. When he had been a little boy, he had always loved the smell of matches – the smell of the side of the box where you struck them ... He bit his lip and then, with a quivering finger, he pushed open the box's inner chamber.

He hardly knew what he expected to see. Something terrible perhaps ... the baby's tiny face staring up at him? Laughing? But no – the thing in the box looked tiny now – hardly more than a pimple. Of course, Robert told himself, it had shrivelled in the intervening months. He frowned at the thing, almost mesmerized, searching every facet of it. Had it really been nothing more than this? This knotty little wart of withered skin? It seemed that he had been scared of almost nothing.

He snorted, making a gallumphing noise through the bristles of his moustache. To think he had believed that it could hear him – see him!

He tipped the box from side to side, letting the little verruca-thing roll back and forth on the cardboard. It didn't have a face. It didn't have anything! How could this little ball of flesh have called him daddy?

"Hi, dad."

Robert spasmed, sending the "baby" spinning into the air.

"What you doing?"

"Nothing – er – nothing!"

He deftly caught the baby with his pipe-hand.

"What you got there?"

"Nothing – er – nothing. Just some matches."

"Oh – right. This is Chris."

Robert somehow managed to focus on the skinny-looking youth beside his son.

"Oh. Hi."

"Chris and I are sort of seeing each other."

"Ah ... right ... good."

"So I thought we might watch some TV together."

"Yes. Yes."

There was an awkward pause.

"Okay! Well I'll see you then."

"Yes. Yes. Yes."

He knew he was expected to say something else but nothing seemed to be coming out.

Tom frowned at him.

"Come on, Chris." He grabbed the skinny youth by the hand and pulled him through the door into the house.

Robert sighed heavily. He stared at the patch of earth beneath which the baby had been buried. Beyond the fact that it had been recently turned, there was nothing to suggest that it was in any way different to the rest of the garden. He put out a hand and pushed it into the warm, brown soil.

He wondered what Beatrice was up to now. Digging something up somewhere, no doubt. He pictured her kneeling in a field somewhere, grubbing in the ground with a trowel. There had been moments over the last six months when he had begun to doubt that the whole thing had ever happened. He had almost vanished Beatrice from his mind as a dream. A mirage. A phantasm of a cross-dressing archaeologist. But no. He knew that she had been real. Pamela had not spoken to him since that night they had spent together in Pickering. Besides, if he closed his eyes he could still almost taste the sex. She had, true to her word, been a bloody good fuck.

He wondered idly if she really was an archaeologist. After all, she had lied to him about her name; perhaps she had given a false occupation as well. He wondered if he had been a one-off? It seemed unlikely, considering her skill in the sack. Perhaps even now, he thought to himself, she was stalking the bar of some cheap hotel ...

He smiled for a moment.

The smile faded.

What had happened to his family, he wondered? What had happened to him? He and Daphne had been "in love", he was sure of it. They had used to do things together. They had used to bloody *talk!* And the boy! The boy had been the pinnacle: the shining light at the centre of his life ...

He thought of him now, inside on the sofa, holding hands with the skinny youth he had brought home. It wasn't that he minded, it was just ... he just ... he didn't know how to tell him that he didn't.

They had played together in the park, Tom and he. Robert smiled at the memory. The boy had sat on the edge of the bath and watched him shave in the morning. Occasionally he had copied him – scraping Boots' own shaving foam from his cheeks with ... What had he used? The back of a yellow plastic rake from a miniature gardening kit. The two of them had been so close! And now what had happened? The silence had set in. The boy was a man – an active man – doing all the things that young men did, and he didn't know what to say to him. Truth be told, he hadn't known what to say for many years. He wanted to go up and tell his son that he loved him. Tell him that he hoped he was happy. Tell him that he was proud of him. But he didn't know how. The words had somehow deserted him.

Silence ... God, he hated it! The garden was silent as well: the evening still and soundless. The wind had taken a break that day and even the trees were still.

He hefted the remains of the thing in his hand. It was small but hard, like a pebble or a marble. You could really do some damage with something like that, he thought to himself. He stared across at next-door's garden. That was silent too – unmoving in the heavy summer haze. In the corner, by the allotment, was a greenhouse – newly re-glazed. Mrs Appleton, the lady who had lived next door, had fallen through it last year whilst having a heart attack. It had taken Mr Appleton nearly six months to get around to having it repaired.

Robert stared at the greenhouse. Stared at the reflection of the garden in its panes. Then he lifted the remnants of the thing in his hand. He swung his arm back as far as he could and then bowled. The baby arced through the air towards the greenhouse. It hit home, smashing a noisy hole in the glass. Hundreds of tiny see-through shards went tinkling to the ground and in the garden beyond Mr Appleton's, a flock of startled starlings took to the air.

From the corner of his eye, he noticed a face appear at the French windows. It was Tom.

"What are you doing?" he mouthed.

Robert held up his hand and then pointed to his ear. Listen.

He watched as the silence slowly slid back into place. After a few more moments, the birds began to flap back into the garden, one by one at first, then in small,

squabbly groups. Robert smiled at them. Then he wandered inside to find his son. It was about bloody time, he thought to himself, that he started to make a little bit more noise.