

The Street

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Of all the women I've known and loved
I'd love to meet them all again.
And, yes, I remember when
Their acts, their words, their sentiments,
Could make my life complete.
But would they still acknowledge me
If encountered in the street?

This book is dedicated to every one of them just in case.

LONG ROAD was the first published in the TGWU RECORD
in August 1981

*In the street where I live
the neighbours vote Labour and rarely give
To collectors who call at the door.*

Chapter 1

Number 31 Hampden street. A two up, two down, red brick terraced property replicating thousands of similar dwellings. They had marched inexorably across the rapidly changing landscape of Victorian Britain in a bid to meet the growing demands of an unstoppable industrial expansion.

But that was a long time ago. Laura and I bought the place in 1977. That too, now seems a long time ago. If there's still any doubt about the milieu, just think Coronation Street.

I opened the door of the hire van with eager anticipation and not a little nervous hesitation.

'This is it then.' Drummed my fingers on the steering wheel. Looked out at the cream and brown painted front door with its distinctive curved brick lintel and brass numbers. All right, every house in the street had exactly the same curved brick lintels but that didn't stop them being distinctive.

'Aren't you getting out then?' Laura was already fumbling for the door handle. 'I can't wait to go inside.' She looked at me pleadingly.

It was unquestionably an auspicious occasion. There was an

urge to savour the moment though. It wasn't every day you bought a house; a first house at that. 'No rush. I just need a minute,' I said drawing the keys from the ignition and fingering the key to our new home.

Not that the journey had been particularly tiring. Newcastle wasn't that far away as distances went. But as Neil Armstrong might have said, it was only two short steps from the van to the brown and cream entrance of number 31, but for me this represented a huge leap into the hidden depths of an unknown future.

'OK, let's do this then.' The van couldn't have been parked any nearer. 'We'll not have far to carry things.' I said brightly. 'It's not even raining.' Changing the keys from one hand to the other I swung my right leg onto the kerb. 'I can't wait,' I said with mounting excitement, feet now planted firmly on the pavement. 'Our very own house.' I flashed a look of endearment in Laura's direction. At the same time my jacket caught on the van door handle and with an ominous jangle the keys dropped through a rainwater drain in the gutter, disappearing into the murky depths below.

That's the sort of thing you tend to remember in life: when an important moment gains a veneer of credibility by not

conforming to one's expectations. But we did manage to retrieve the all-important keys thanks to a coat hanger Laura eventually extracted from the bottom of her suitcase. The whole debacle didn't detract from the sense of wonderment and pleasure experienced on opening the front door. Maybe it was even emphasised. Two children waking up on Christmas morning to see what Santa has left.

There was a tiny vestibule just big enough for the entrance door to open before stairs rose steeply up to the first floor. On the top landing a door to the left opened into the main bedroom – well, the only bedroom. Another door directly in front led to the second bedroom which had been made into a relatively spacious bathroom. Downstairs corresponding rooms were, in front, the living room and at the rear, the kitchen. Out back there was a small yard with high brick walls. Looking out the quarter paned sash windows in front, at the houses opposite, was almost like viewing a mirror. But there was one difference to Hampden street that thousands of similar streets would not be able to boast.

This was the reason we'd chosen to buy number 31. One of the reasons. Obviously, it wasn't the only consideration. But, if you opened the front door, stepped out onto the pavement, turned your head to the right, at the end of the road was a wall. It was a very prominent wall. Not any old wall. This wall was

standing on a high grassy bank and was built of pale limestone. It was centuries old. It surrounded the city it was originally built to protect, superseding an earlier Roman wall. This wall, so closely visible just at the end of our road, was nothing less than part of the ancient and historic York City Walls.

Not many people have the privilege of choosing where they live. A majority must be influenced by their jobs or by family ties. Financial situations need also to be considered and, of course, if really digging deeper, prejudices: race, social status, practicalities of shopping and transport access, town or countryside, inner city or suburbia. The list goes on.

Laura and I met as students. To be honest she was the first woman I'd slept with. For someone such as myself: a spoilt inhibited mother's boy whose father had left years ago, perhaps it wasn't surprising that it required a person of Laura's calibre to take my cherry. As someone married and divorced, and having at least one current boyfriend, she seemed adequately experienced in the fruit picking business. It was an unforgettable occasion involving nasty nylon sheets and a visit to the doctors. We were both mature students (although is anyone really more mature at seventy than at twenty-six?) and amongst all the eighteen-year olds we shared at least that much in common. Laura had also once been a Sunday school queen (God forbid) at her local Methodist church. The crinkly edged black and white photo she

showed me was an endearing memento and I'd often compare it, in my mind at least, with a similar black and white photo of myself dressed in ridiculous tights and addressing a fake trumpet respectfully in the direction of my own Sunday school queen. What hope did our generation have?

Naturally, bearing in mind our own experiences of the state of married bliss, neither of us even gave a nod in the direction of such an outmoded institution which seemed largely to be cultivated for the benefit of maintaining a neat rein on an otherwise diverse society. Or maybe we'd both become cynical. But live together we did. With the aid of an inheritance left by my recently dead mother it seemed a natural progression to buy a house together. Neither Laura nor myself were tied by jobs. Neither of us really wanted to pursue the lives we'd trained for. Had I seriously imagined I'd be able to suffer the confines and stifling dictates of life in a classroom; trapped each day within four square walls governed by strict timetables and authoritarian school bells?

So, there were no restrictions to be considered. We didn't have jobs. We could live anywhere we liked. Since first visiting the city many years previously I'd always liked York. There was something special about a town within a city wall. In Britain there are probably only two or three contenders yet other such magnificent cities as Bath and Edinburgh were also in the

running. York seemed the most convenient though when thinking of visiting any friends or relatives; not that it was particularly near Newcastle, Bristol London or Norfolk. Anyway, York it had to be. Naturally, if choosing to live somewhere with an encircling wall it would be only right to live within the limits of that wall; to appreciate the peculiar feeling such an existence could provide. OK, it might seem paradoxical that having rejected the idea of working in the confines of four square walls I should actually want to live in a town with walls all round. I'm not even going to try to explain.

To begin with we were those kids playing at houses. Everything was new to us. There was no time to indulge in free floating anxieties: would we miss Newcastle with its friends, families and acquaintances? Did this unfamiliar city feel hostile? How were we going to earn money? Would we find jobs? Were there to be any new friends? Buying replacement curtains, repainting the living room, choosing a bed and trying to get rid of a pervading reek of garlic in the kitchen were all time-consuming distractions. Why would we even think about neighbours?

But as days subtly turned to weeks and weeks to months it gradually became clear that Bishophill, the area in which

Hampden street was located, was no average two up two down Victorian terraced locale. At a time when gentrification was still a new word Bishophill was up there in the forefront. A year or two previously the local authorities, still in a sixties 'pull it all down and replace with reinforced concrete mode,' had sought to do just that. Fortunately, a group of forward-thinking young professionals had formed themselves into a band of activists sufficiently influential to be able to prevent more than a tentative amount of demolition. Bishophill seemed set for a rosy future. Consequently, an interesting cross section of society now lived shoulder to shoulder in an area which, we were soon to discover, was both up and coming and also not without its share of gossip intrigue and scandal.

With the houses all being so close together it was natural that people quickly came to know their neighbours. Before long it seemed Laura and I were on nodding terms with several other young couples living nearby. Soon we were being asked into familiar sized rooms of well-trying proportions to drink camomile tea while discussing the merits of inner-city rejuvenation, as more coke was stoked onto James and Becky's Aga. Inevitably Val and Geoff would have us round for a meal or we'd be invited to baby sit for Jessica and Rob while they took in a French movie and a pizza at Bibi's. By the time regular employment had been established parties had become a frequent feature for Laura

and myself and we could often be seen scurrying along the street clutching a bottle of wine, a gift wrapped bunch of flowers and half a Stilton.

Whether the case or not, with hindsight it would be easy to think that nothing in life that occurred in Bishophill was planned, nothing calculated, nothing preordained. It all just happened. To begin with there was the question of gainful employment. Certainly, without a doubt we didn't want to teach; perhaps, deep down, were incapable. For a long time, I harboured far-fetched notions of opening some little art house cinema. It was as unrealistic as wanting to be a train driver. Before training to be a teacher, though, I'd driven buses in Norfolk for five years then, as a student, had driven coaches throughout the long summer holidays. There was no problem at all, therefore, in gaining employment with York Pullman Bus company as a private hire coach driver. It was only too easy. Laura became manageress of a tiny shop off The Shambles selling designer dresses to a discerning clientele in Whip-Ma-Whop-Ma Gate, indisputably the shortest street in York. With just one house and one small shop there was no way you could question this claim. Much later we might have questioned whether our choice of jobs had really been in our best interest.

There was still a faint smell of garlic lingering in the kitchen despite all our efforts to eradicate any evidence of the previous owner. I switched off the electric kettle; unplugged it at the wall. It was a fussy little habit Laura had inaugurated. 'Do you want lap sang or camomile?' I shouted, only too ready to go along with her petty foibles. 'Actually, I don't think there's any lap sang left.'

'What?' Laura's voice drifted down from upstairs where no doubt she was still luxuriating in the bath. 'I can't Hear you.'

'I said,' I said more loudly. 'Do you want lap sang or . . .'

'I wish you wouldn't try and have conversations when you're not even in the same room.'

Stepping into the living room, I pushed open the door and shouted up the stairwell. 'Do you want lap sang or camomile?' I repeated. 'I'm making some tea.' As I spoke my arm brushed against the pile of coats hanging precariously on the back of the front door. Laura's fake fur dropped to the floor.

'I'll have lap sang please.' Her voice came down the stairs sounding muffled and impatient as if she were speaking through a towel. 'We'll have to hurry up you know. Jessica said to come about seven.'

It wasn't the first time we'd be going to Jessica and Rob's, but it was the first time they'd asked us round for a meal.

I looked at my watch. 'It's only six fifteen,' I said loudly.

'I'll have lap sang then.'

'Actually, there isn't any lap sang.'

Forty-five minutes later we were standing before number 6 facing its two-tone green front door. I clutched a bottle of Presto's best plonk closely to my chest while Laura's slender fingers pressed on the bell push. It was a fine spring evening. The old stone paving slabs were dry underfoot and at the end of the road birds were singing in Bishophill Senior. Trees in the graveyard were already in full leaf behind wrought iron railings. A faint rumble of trains drifted on the still air. The door opened and Rob stood there smiling. He was taller than I was, dressed casually in designer shirt and jeans, and wearing National Health glasses. He was an unashamed admirer of John Lennon. His shoes were real leather and his watch was probably much more expensive than mine. He could afford it with his architect's salary from British Rail.

'Ah, come on in.' There was a slight affectation I thought; something to do with the supercilious smile, or maybe it was the forced chuckle. Perhaps I was secretly jealous. 'Jessica has just popped out to get some milk,' he said, kissing Laura lightly on the cheek and ushering us into the living room. 'Make yourselves at home.' His arm swept an invitation towards the

sofa and armchairs before he disappeared in the direction of the kitchen.

Although exactly the same as our own living room with regard dimensions this had a completely different feel. The curtains matched the dark green upholstered furnishings. Black and white Escher prints hung on pale green walls and a potted fern stood beside the fireplace. The door and floorboards had been sanded and varnished while a classical guitar leaned elegantly in one corner. As I lowered myself into the armchair opposite Laura, we heard the front door opening, saw Jessica's form pass by the window. A moment later she came into the room.

Jessica was unmistakably attractive. She had lively shoulder length auburn hair that always seemed to be exactly what shampoo adverts aspired to and wore flouncing cotton print dresses that hung at just the right height above slightly tanned shapely legs. She was American, from Philadelphia but spoke with hardly an accent. She was friendly and unpretentious. 'Hi. Glad you could make it,' she said dropping onto the sofa and crossing one leg over the other so that her white ankle socks highlighted her bare calves. 'Rob's fixing some drinks. Dinner will be ready in about twenty minutes.' She had one particular habit, I noticed. Every so often she would run her tongue over her top front teeth. It was endearing rather than annoying.

Rob came in carrying a small tray with glasses. 'It's Martini,' he said passing the first to Laura. 'Sorry I didn't ask.' He gave one of his little grins. 'Hope that's all right.'

Laura was already sipping her drink before I'd taken mine. 'My favourite,' she said, now looking fondly at the pale brown liquid. 'How did you know?' Her eyes turned to meet Rob's.

I can't remember what the meal was. Probably pasta carbonara, if there is such a dish, no doubt with parmesan cheese. I've never been that hot on fancy food. It doesn't matter. There was plenty of wine. We ate round a table in the kitchen. Their kitchen was bigger than ours. Being an architect Rob had designed an extension in the back yard making for a larger eating and cooking area and including a bathroom. It meant that upstairs there was a bedroom for their four-year-old daughter Elizabeth.

'Thanks for baby-sitting, by the way,' Jessica said.

Her eyes really were rather lovely: large, (although the subdued lighting probably helped) brown and looking directly into mine. 'There's actually a baby-sitting circle you know.' She turned to address Laura.

'Oh, yes.' Rob wasn't going to be left out. 'It works on a ticket system.'

Laura was apparently more than simply interested in the baby-sitting circle. She purred a sort of acknowledgement in

Rob's direction.

'Yeah, we're very democratic in Bishophill.' The wine was definitely kicking in with a vengeance. 'Actually.' Rob tried to sound casual but was doing one of those little grins that I later came to regard as his trademark. 'It was partially thanks to me, we're still here.' Jessica did that thing with her tongue. Laura was all ears. 'Yeah, I was on the committee that helped stop the demolition.'

I took another swig of wine.

'Do you ever want kids?' Jessica gave her husband a reproachful glance before turning to Laura again. She seemed genuinely concerned.

I watched Laura as she searched for an answer. 'Not really,' she said slowly, 'that is – no, definitely not.' It was something we'd talked around rather than about. I knew, from certain things Laura had referred to, that the notion of children of her own was an alien idea. I wasn't bothered one way or the other. Not at that stage leastwise. Didn't specially see myself with bottles of milk, baby wipes and dirty nappies.

'What about you Howard?'

I chewed on my last mouthful of cheese. Looked doubtful.

Rob leaned over the table to top up Laura's glass. 'So, what d' you make of Jim Callaghan, then?' He cut in, not particularly caring one way or the other about babies.

'Well,' I said haltingly.' Politics wasn't really my scene. 'He supported the referendum to remain in the EU didn't he and he's well in with the trade unions.' That part if nothing else was a point I could surely speak about with some authority. It was obligatory in my employment to be a fully paid up member of the TGWU. Not that I ever went to the meetings if they could be avoided.

Perhaps sensing a lack of enthusiasm Rob faced Laura again. 'So where is it you work Laura?' His eyes were smiling above the wire rims of his John Lennon glasses. 'Somewhere in town?'

'Sarah Coggles,' she said without hesitation. 'It's in Whip-Ma-Whop-Ma Gate.'

'Yeah, I know where you mean. Sure.' As if Rob ever bought dresses, I thought. Mind, he perhaps bought them for Jessica. 'Does it ever get busy then?' Another nervous little laugh.

Before Laura had a chance to answer Jessica looked at me with those lovely eyes. 'You work for York Pullman don't you?'

I hesitated, felt almost ashamed.

'So, you're a bus driver are you?' Rob interrupted.

Was he trying to sound superior? I thought about my expensive private school education, about the Government's annual expenditure on training teachers, about . . . ?

'So, are you going to Pam and Martin's next week?' *Thank you Jessica for changing the subject.*

'Pam and who?' Laura said.

'Where do they live?' I said.

'Ah, yes, Pam and Martin,' Rob said with a knowing smile and nervous laugh. 'They live in the next road; in Fairfax street.'

'Oh,' Laura joined in readily now that the subject was less personal. 'Isn't Pam a teacher? I think I might have met her the other day. She came into the shop.'

Fairfax street was the same length as Hampden street, with the same terraced housing. It ran straight and parallel, its backyards sharing a partition wall with our own.

'Her husband is a teacher, too,' Rob said, at the same time realising there was no more wine and reaching for another bottle from a shelf behind. 'Martin.' He said affirmatively, now looking around for a corkscrew. 'Martin is a teacher too.' He found the corkscrew and began twisting it into the bottle neck. 'He's an English teacher in Wakefield.'

'I'm sure they'd love you to go,' Jessica said encouragingly. 'They're a really nice couple.' Her American accent somehow sounded more noticeable. 'Come, why don't you?'

'Yeah, go on,' Rob said.

Laura looked at me questioningly. 'I don't see why not,' I said. 'That's if I'm not working,' It was the biggest downside of my job. Normally you didn't know more than two days in advance what you'd be doing.

'Never mind.' Rob began to pour more wine into my glass. 'Have a top up.'

I put my hand over the rim. 'Whoa,' I said hurriedly. 'I've got to be up at Five thirty in the morning to do early workers.'

It was dark, the air noticeably cooler, as we stepped out of Jessica and Rob's hallway into Hampden street. With much kissing and waving, the door finally shut behind us and we strode off along the paving stones towards number 31, heads reeling, minds whirling and steps none too steady.

The night wasn't really cold. At least it didn't seem to be. Maybe we were too drunk to care. The streetlights cast fluctuating shadows as we passed slowly by each one. They looked to be the original lamp standards now modernised; converted to electricity decades ago. The sodium glare prevented any view of the night sky. It could have been total cloud cover or crystal clear. There was a faint hum coming from the railway not far away. The suppressed throb of shunting diesel engines. You could almost smell the exhaust fumes.

'What did you make of that, then?' We were halfway along the street, walking arm in arm, more for support than any other reason. 'Don't go so fast.' Laura was dragging on me.

'I've got to be up in five hours' time,' I said more testily than

intended.

'Yeah, I know.' She still pulled me back to her pace. 'But what d' you make of Rob?'

I shuffled on a couple more paces, let go Laura's arm to search for the door key in my pockets. 'Why, what d' you think of him?' I tried the other pocket.'

'He wears really nice clothes.' She spoke wistfully, as if I dressed like a tramp.

'I think he's a bit pretentious,' I said, taking the keys out of my jacket pocket and trying to hurry us along. 'Jessica is nice.'

'But he's so charming. I love the way he smiles.'

'That simpering grimace, you mean.'

Laura stopped abruptly. I nearly fell over her. 'Whoa,' I said. 'What's up?'

We had halted two doors before our own front door. There was a cast iron lamp-post directly beside us. I could plainly make out the number on the nearby door.

'It's James and Becky's,' Laura said rather obliquely. 'This is where they live.'

'I know.' Was Laura more drunk than I thought?

'We've got to go in.'

'What are you on about?' I said. 'I've got to be up in only four-and-three quarter hours.'

'They aren't home at the moment.'

'So, there's no point in going in.' I was losing patience. 'Come on.'

'You don't understand,' She remained undeterred. 'They're away for the night.'

'Laura, for goodness sake.' I tried dragging on her arm, attempted a half-hearted move forward.

'Wait.' More a command this time. She was reaching up to the Stubb lock, key at the ready. 'I promised them, while they were away, we'd riddle their Aga.'

The air in the gloomy garage was heavy with diesel fumes. Two double deckers stood with their engines rumbling, blue grey smoke pulsing out of exhaust pipes. A yellow light shone from the grimy windows of the traffic office. Jock the duty inspector sat head bent over his desk. He looked up as I passed but didn't acknowledge me. I walked across the greasy concrete; past coaches lined up in their respective bays. My head was muzzy from last night. Ron, the diesel pump attendant, made desultory motions with a worn-out broom. He nodded as I crossed his path. 'Y' right then?' Inside, my coach was cold with an abandoned feeling. To hell with checking the oil, lights, tyres, all that shit. I turned the key and the Bedford engine clattered into

life. Let it warm up for a bit. At 5.45am it was obviously still not summer. Tacho discs hadn't been introduced yet. I checked my logbook and running sheet. Switched on the heaters. Naturally they blew cool air, but it would stop the screen misting over. They'd soon warm up once on the road. I was just about to select first gear, right hand already on the stubby brake lever, foot on the clutch when Jock strode over. He had some papers in his hand. Looked officious. Full of his own importance.

I'd already had one or two run-ins with the man. He was tall and walked with a straight back giving the impression of having been in the army. Uniforms were not in any way standard, provided or compulsory, yet he was always regaled in some smart dark coloured double-breasted jacket with silver buttons. Probably ex West Yorkshire Traction. The fact that he was Sottish was neither here nor there.

'Hey.' He stood squarely in front of my coach. Without running him over I was going nowhere. He waved some documents and came round to the passenger door. Resignedly I took my foot off the clutch as he pushed the manually operated door fully open and jumped onto the first step.

Several hours later, feeling tired but not completely dissatisfied, I set off for home. One of the advantages of this job was living

near enough to be able to walk to work. It's a huge plus. You don't have to worry about cars that won't start or being held up in traffic and you get some healthy exercise without really trying. Walking home always gave me a chance to unwind. The City walls gleamed in the late spring sunshine. As I crossed Skeldergate bridge the river Ouse threw glistening wavelets from the bows of a tourist river cruiser passing beneath. On the skyline, the Minster stood proud and solid, a monument to York's cultural past. Ahead the City walls loomed up guarding Baille Hill. Deciding against the climb back onto the Walls I skirted round Baille Hill, with its high grassy mound and mature trees and into Baille Hill Terrace. The houses were grander than ours, built with grey bricks and bay windows. They had small front gardens with iron railings and dormer attic windows. As I passed Bone Jones's house, Jessica cycled by with Elizabeth on a rear child seat. They both gave me a cheery wave. Small incidents like that make you feel you belong.

Passed Victoria Bar and Mrs Dooly's corner shop and here was Hampden Street. At the farthest end, the spire of St Mary's rose above the trees in Bishophill Senior. The street was deserted but for someone leading a small dog. There were one or two cars parked kerbside, and a boy in school uniform dragged a satchel slothfully along behind him. The ever-present hum of traffic on Nunnery Lane accompanied the usual distant sounds

coming from the railway: the main London to Edinburgh line, but none of this detracted from birds singing in the trees on Baille Hill. It was a haven in which to return home.

My footsteps quickened on turning into Hampden Street. I couldn't wait to tell Laura what Jock had told me this morning. Twisting the key in the lock I pushed the door open and shouted from the tiny entrance lobby. There was no reply. In a house this size it was quite clear she was still out. Odd. Usually, Laura finished work at Five. I was home earlier than expected. Maybe she'd popped to the shops. I dropped my jacket onto the armchair in the living room and moved into the kitchen. There was a note on the table, immediately noticeable and in Laura's distinctive writing. It was brief and to the point. 'Have gone for a drink with Jessica and Rob. See you later.'

*They're not very wealthy or financially healthy
But they're certainly not really poor.*

Chapter 2

Gladys was in Mrs Dooly's corner shop when I entered, minutes later. I said good evening to her, but she looked at me as if I was something stuck on her shoe. Even the thick coating of make-up caked to her sour face couldn't disguise the disapproving lines around her scarlet mouth. She turned back to Mrs Dooly, continued talking in that pseudo refined Yorkshire accent as if I wasn't there. Not all the houses in Hampden Street were occupied by newcomers. For all I knew Gladys had lived at number twenty-nine all her life. She certainly didn't seem to think much of anyone not born in the Street. Only once had she spoken to us. It was to ask if we could cut back the Russian vine in our back yard as it was blocking the light to her kitchen window.

She paid her money, taking an eternity searching for change in her purse, and left. 'Evening Mrs Dooly,' I said. 'Been a nice day.' Always felt obliged to say something. Mrs Dooly's was the only corner shop now operating in the area, the others being bricked up and turned into residences. It saved the five-minute walk to Presto's. 'Can I take a bag of Coalite please. It's still nice

to have a real fire don't you think?' She hefted a bag from the pile behind the counter so as not to disturb the one on display in the window. An odd sort of window display. 'That'll be five pounds please duck.' She came round from the counter and dropped it thankfully at my feet. Like most places now, York was a smoke free-zone but you could still use Coalite.

At home I laid the coals carefully on top of some old newspaper and fire-lighters and struck a match. As usual it was ages before I could relax my attention from keeping the fire going and concentrate on the more important business of seeing what there was to eat. And still Laura hadn't returned. On the top shelf of the pantry, right at the back was an opened packet of spaghetti. Not my favourite. In fact, given the choice I'd definitely say 'no.' Still, there was no choice. I wasn't going back to Mrs Dooly already. I reached up, noting the persistent smell of garlic and, filling a pan of water, placed the remaining spaghetti in the pan on a lighted gas burner.

The water eventually began to boil, bubbling over the top of the pan where I'd filled it too full and making the gas flame sizzle. I looked at the green plastic clock on the wall. Still no Laura. The radio was playing now: local news. Apparently, the Dean of York minster was suggesting some sort of entrance fee for visitors, traffic was stacked up on the A64 due to an accident, and it was going to rain tomorrow. There was a loud knocking at

the front door. Turning off the gas under the spaghetti I moved out to the hallway, reached for the Stubb lock. The door opened and there was Laura.

'I forgot my key,' she said pushing past me and taking her coat off at the same time.

'Where've you been?' It sounded as accusative as it was.

Laura was trying to hang her coat precariously on top of an already unstable pile. 'I left a note,' she said, as if that was an answer.

'Yeah, I saw it.'

'Well?'

'Well, what? It's twenty to ten,' I said glancing down at my watch.

'So?' Her coat was now secured on top of the others. She walked through to the kitchen noting the glowing fire in passing. I followed. "Yummy, spaghetti," she said looking at the pan. 'My favourite.' She began to busy herself straining the steaming water, laying out plates, placing knives and forks on the table. 'Can you get the pepper and salt,' she said, moving towards the doorway. 'I've just got to go and have a pee.'

I put an arm out to stop her. 'I didn't think you'd be this long.' It came out like an insult. 'So where exactly did you go?'

'I told you. I had a drink with Jessica and Rob.'

'All this time?'

She pushed past me. 'I'm desperate. Mind.'

'It was a long drink.'

'That's why I need a pee.'

'You went straight from work?' I couldn't leave it alone.

'Yeah, we went to the Wellington.' Already halfway up the stairs by now.

I was trailing after her, voice a bit raised. 'But I saw Jessica and Elizabeth on my way home from work. They were heading off in the other direction.'

She turned before closing the bathroom door. Shouted over her shoulder at me. 'Yeah, well. Only Rob could make it in the end.'

Green Park London. It really was green, particularly so at this time of year. Who could believe they were in the heart of such a vast city? Who would have thought Laura and I would be strolling hand in hand practically beside Buckingham Palace? Who could believe this was work and I was getting paid to do this? It should teach me not to always expect the worst out of life. When Jock had approached me the other day it wasn't to tell me off for not checking the engine oil but to say they'd had to change the rota around. I'd been put on London weekend. There were several remaining un-booked seats and yes, of course it

was OK if Laura went with me.

I'd driven a perfunctory tour round the more well-known sights of London. That was all anyone expected. London was beginning to change. It was no longer the dirty depressing place of soot stained buildings of no particular interest with weed grown bomb sights that, as a child growing up in suburbia, had been all too familiar. Laura and I then treated ourselves to a river trip down to Greenwich. The river too had changed. No longer was London one of the greatest ports in the world serving an empire on which the sun never set. I'd known something of this. Hadn't my father worked for the Port of London Authority. Probably the only times I ever saw him were on free river and docks cruises run by the PLA. Now the Thames seemed empty and desolate with its rusting cranes and disused warehouses.

But let's not get too maudlin. The main attraction of these London weekends was more often the opportunity of staying in a smart hotel rather than rubber necking Tower Bridge and St Paul's Cathedral. That's mostly what the majority of passengers went for. The chance to experience how the other half lived. A way for workers to escape from dreary lives spent on lates at Rowntree Mackintosh; hypnotised by hundreds of almond whirls or chocolate rum truffles juddering by on a conveyor belt as endless as the shift.

And the hotel was indeed luxurious in its grandiose

surroundings just off Green Park, a stone's throw from no less an icon of wealth and social status, than the Ritz. The spacious bedroom, with its subdued lighting and thick pile carpeting, surrounded me with appreciable opulence as I sat writing my diary at a finely polished wooden work top. There was a desk light beside me and a large wall mirror in front. As I paused, looking at myself in the mirror writing my diary, I thought you couldn't get much more egocentric than this. Laura was lying on the sumptuous double bed, covers pulled up above her breasts, chin resting on cupped hands. I could tell by her shoulders she was wearing nothing under the sheets.

'Are you coming to bed?' Her tone was unreadable.

'Just got to finish this off.' I bent back to the half-completed page.

'I don't know why you bother.' There was definitely a touch of irritation now. She patted the bed, spoke more enticingly. 'Come on. You can leave all that till the morning.'

'I've got to fetch the coach in the morning. It's two miles to Bayswater Road coach park from here.'

'All the more reason to come to bed now.'

Finishing off the sentence I was writing, I closed the diary and swinging round in the chair to confront Laura, suddenly said: 'So are you seeing Rob?' Not sure where this came from. Why the unexpected outburst? Obviously festering somewhere at the

back of my devious thoughts. It was harsh and uncalled for, especially following such a lovely day. At first Laura looked at me as if I'd suggested we set light to the discarded tissues in the litter bin. I continued just looking at her intently. Watching her expression closely. It felt like too long before she answered.

Then she said: 'Course I am. I told you I went for a drink with Jessica and Rob the other evening.'

'But I saw Jessica going off with Elizabeth in completely the opposite direction.' I remained seated, not moving except to turn my pen over and over with agitated fingers on the shiny desktop. As I spoke again, I began staring fixedly at the electric kettle and two cups and saucers on the same desk. 'I don't believe you.' I could make out a distorted image of Laura reflected in the kettle.

'Suit yourself,' Laura said, again patting the bed sheets invitingly. 'Come on. Don't let's waste this gorgeous bed.'

Reluctantly I made a move towards the bed, stepping out of my jeans and dragging off my shirt before pulling the sheets back and climbing in beside her.

The morning dawned overcast and rainy. The fine weather was over. I threw aside the curtains and looked at cars passing by at the end of the street. The pavements were wet. A woman

hurrying along the road below was taking no chances. The reflections of her and her umbrella rushed along the shiny tarmac in front of her, always two steps in advance. 'I'd better not hang about,' I said still gazing out of the window. 'I told everyone we'd leave sharp at nine. I'll try to be parked outside about ten to.' It was Quarter to seven. My alarm had gone off only moments before. Somehow, I hadn't slept that well despite the comforts of a king size double. Beside me, Laura had seemed hot clammy and restrictive. 'Don't be late then,' she said, turning over, switching the bedside light out and pulling the quilt over her. I wasn't intending to be late. That was why there were two hours left before it was time to leave. Plenty of time for a cup of tea and bacon sarnie on the way to Bayswater.

'You all right love?' The usual banal but nonetheless expected comments. It's what they all wanted, what they'd paid for, what they gave their tips for. I heaved another suitcase into the boot.

'Is that the only one?' It was big enough for a two-week cruise so it should have been. The slow-moving queue gradually diminished as each person ensured their luggage was safely stowed before walking round to the front of the coach and climbing aboard. I slammed the boot lid shut, went round to the front myself, and stepped up into the aisle to complete a head count. 'OK folks. Hope you all had a good time.' A brief pause while I acknowledged their slight nods or smiles of agreement.

'We won't be hanging about on the way back,' I continued. 'I expect you all want to get home as soon as possible.' There were more murmurs of consent. 'Specially now the weather seems to have turned,' I added, easing into the driver's seat, checking the passengers once more in the mirror before turning the ignition. With the engine running assuredly I picked up the mike before finally moving off. At the same time, I caught Laura's eye staring into the mirror from where she sat three seats back. The sound system crackled then settled to a steady background hiss to my words of comforting reassurance.

'Just in case you are wondering, folks, we'll be stopping only the once at Leicester Forest services in about three hours' time, depending on traffic. It's a Sunday so there'll be lots of cars but not many trucks and despite the rain I can't see any reason for hold-ups.' Little did I know. 'So' I paused for effect, looked in my offside mirror in readiness for pulling out. 'Just sit back and enjoy the journey.'

The food at Leicester Forest was, as usual, poor to mediocre. At least it was free. Coach drivers always ate for nothing. I had the full works: steak and kidney pie, peas, mash and gravy. Laura settled for coleslaw salad. We had to pay for hers. All the passengers were back in time, no one mistakenly returning from the high-level restaurant to the wrong parking area. It was easy to do this, and you'd be surprised at how often people did. We

left the slip road sharp on time joining the three carriageways all equally immersed in a dense enveloping spray. Cars were heading home nose to tail. Many occupants no doubt having been visiting family or friends for a Sunday meal.

At this time in history, coaches were still allowed to do seventy and use the third lane on motorways. Most usually did. I was no exception. As keen to get home as the rest. Time was money. The less time taken meant more money per hour. No clocking in. Besides, there was a film on the telly tonight I wanted to watch. Fine rain and spray were making visibility poor to say the least. The wipers were working on overtime. I was in the fast lane doing a steady seventy but keeping a good distance from the vehicle in front. Plenty of margin for error. Glancing in the interior mirror I could see many of the passengers were already nodding off following a heavy lunch and hectic weekend. I was keeping an eye in the nearside mirror in readiness to pull back into the second lane when sufficiently well past the van we were overtaking.

The World suddenly shattered before my eyes. A blast of sharp wet air hit me with the force of a power hose. I was conscious of rushing wind and loose objects flying in swirls around me. There were loud bangs and people were screaming.

It's a cliché to say time stopped still or took on a dream like quality. It seemed to though. In reality it was a split second

before I was aware that the windscreen had shattered. Wind and rain were driving in blindingly and there was an urgent need to pull over to the hard shoulder. Thankfully this was accomplished in a safe and orderly manner and soon I was assessing the damage. Apart from a few minor cuts on my face and hands there were thankfully no injuries. The passengers, understandably, were shaken especially those sitting near the front. The power of driven wind had forced the Perspex skylights to open in the roof, causing newspapers and any other loose lightweight objects to fly backwards into peoples' faces, adding to the confusion. Fortunately, there was no serious outcome. Apart, that is, that we were now out of action on the hard shoulder in pouring rain a mile or more from Leicester Forest services but still some hundred and twenty miles from home.

A day or two later and I'm at Navigation road. Inside the garage. Just finished a crap shift on Helperby service. It always seems to be winter at Helperby. The inhabitants, the same grey, brown colours as the countryside. Doomed never to escape. Part of the eternal landscape. I've dieselled up, parked up and cashed in. Foul mood. I'm supposed to be a coach driver but due to lack of bookings my excursion to the Dales was cancelled. I hate doing

service work. Up and down endlessly to Helperby with half-witted morons. Already I'm having second thoughts about the job. John Simmons the traffic manager has asked me to take the takings to the main office at Bootham Bar. I've never felt at ease with John Simmons. Get the impression he doesn't like me. Sees me as a threat for being better educated than he obviously ever was. 'You can go in the Land Rover,' he said. Tell Gavin you're using it.'

Gavin wasn't to be found. Not in the pits holding a greasy spanner. Not on the phone in the parts shop. Not in the unsanitary washroom with its disgusting toilet, filthy sink and towel that looked more like an oily rag. I found him outside, sitting on the wall drinking a mug of tea. He still hadn't forgiven me for calling him out to the M1 the other day with the windscreen problem. As if it was my fault. Gavin had to drive my coach back in the pouring rain with no windscreen while I took the passengers home in the replacement vehicle. They were ultimately very content, thanking me profusely and showing their appreciation by delving deeply into their pockets before finally getting off the coach four hours late. Maybe that made up for Gavin's ongoing disapproval.

Right now, he said: 'What d' you need the Land Rover for?' As if I might be going joy riding.

'Simmons said to take the cash to Bootham,' I said.

'Put some diesel in it first.' Gavin said.

'I'm in a hurry,' I said.

'You will be if you run out diesel and have to walk back,' he said.

Cursing York Pullman, John Simmons, Gavin and life in general I threw the bag of money onto the front seat of the Land Rover and fired it up. Just as I wanted to be home early, here I was pissing around at everyone's beck and call. It was the party at Pam and Martin's tonight. Didn't want to miss it. It was already half past ten. Don't know why the cash couldn't have waited till tomorrow. Wasn't as if anyone would be at work in the office. Wasn't even usual for John Simmons to be around. I'd told Laura, naturally enough, not to wait for me. I would join her at the party as soon as possible. It was the first time I'd driven the Land Rover and while, no doubt, they are vehicles of highly creditable pedigree, this one was often used for towing broken down buses. Over the years this had added to its general anti-social demeanour.

Finally, at home, I made time for a tentative wash, a change of clothes and within ten minutes I was slamming the front door and heading in the direction of Fairfax street. As I rounded the corner it was easy to see where the party was. There were bicycles standing around outside number 20 and even from here