

the Greasy Spoon



a novel by
Stephen Braiden

THE GREASY SPOON

By

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WV WIEBERS
VERLAG

Yves Steiner r.i.p

For the South London Massive

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The Greasy Spoon

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You know how it is, you always find things when you're not looking for them. I was sorting through some old books recently, in a half-hearted way, when I came across a dog-eared and greasy Indian cookbook. I leafed through it's pages wondering whether it was worth keeping, until, stuck between a recipe for onion bhaji and "what to do with Ladies fingers", I found a photograph.

It was a small picture, taken on a cheap camera. A colour photograph, but the colours were varying shades of brown and grey which gave it the quality of a sepia print. There were two people by a roadside, a man and a woman. I recognized them immediately, it was Tom and Brigid and they looked terrible. It wasn't just the quality of the photograph, they really looked rough, even Brigid. They were leaning and reaching across the road as if getting to the other side was their ultimate goal in life, which, I guess, at the time it was. Both of them were laughing kind of manically. Next to them was a hand painted sign, huge and imposing, with a big arrow pointing across the road. It said, in big, unequivocal letters;

COOKED BREAKFAST

EVERY DAY

HOME COOKING JUST LIKE YER MA'S!

It all came flooding back, what a breakfast that was! A special breakfast, a breakfast unlike any other. It wasn't just the food, although that was great. No, what made this such a breakfast to remember were the circumstances. It was what led up to it, it was the whole story. I sat down and the images came pouring into my head. A red Datsun stuffed to the roof, a unicycle, garlic, mountainsides, pints of Guinness lined up on a bar, a walking stick, a Gypsy Kings tape and a woman with hair greasier than the sausages and rashers she was serving.

That was our breakfast at the Greasy Spoon but the story starts with Cheryl.

I knew it the moment I saw her. I said to myself, 'Don't even think about it, don't let it cross your mind '.

When something like that happens, well, you're lost aren't you? You're already thinking about it, it's already crossed your mind.

Someone pointed her out to me and told me her name,

"That's Cheryl, she's going to be working with us."

She had orange hair and she was beautiful.

Was there anything I could've done? Not really. Later maybe, but you can't protect yourself from things you don't understand, things that are out of your control, things that are going to happen anyway.

Me and Emma both applied for the job at the same time. There was some debate later about who'd seen the advert first. We helped each other with the application forms. I didn't think I was all that well qualified but then again nor was she. We didn't really know what they wanted. "Support Worker", what was that supposed to mean? Emma knew someone who did it. Helping people who'd been in asylums. Loonies and that. I'd met enough of them to consider myself suitable.

"It's not exactly loonies" said Emma, as we pondered over the forms, surrounded by cups of tea and ashtrays, "I think it's more, like, people with learning disabilities"

As if I knew what that meant.

"What? Like dyslexia and that? Like not being very good at sums? They don't put you in a loony bin for that do they?"

She shrugged. Anyway it was a job and after the last year I was getting desperate. Hours in offices, hours of paper frustration. Can't do this, can't do that. Can't afford it, sorry. We sent off the forms the next day.

If only we'd known what we were doing.

We had interviews on separate days. I thought I'd messed mine up because when they asked me what my hobbies were, I said "listening to records".

"What did you say that for?" Emma asked me afterwards.

"It's true, innit?"

"I dunno if honesty is always the best policy in these cases"

"Well, you know what I mean, they can take me as they find me"

"Yeah well, anyway, what about all this 'Normalisation' stuff?"

"Yeah, what was that all about?"

"Something about making people, like, normal"

"I don't know if either of us is really in a position to do that"

"Nah, 'specially not you!" She punched me on the leg.

We both got the job. We should've smelt a rat. The first thing we had to do was to go on an induction course at Dulwich Hospital where we were taught about "Normalisation" and met some of our co-workers. They were a mixed bunch. Everyone had a different idea about what normal meant. There was an Irish bloke in a leather jacket with long straggly hair. His name was Declan,

"My idea of normal right, might be different to yours" he said pointing at a stern looking middle aged black woman.

"Yes my boy, for a start I don't find it normal to point your finger at someone, in fact I find it rude!"

"What I mean is," he continued undeterred "It's normal for me to get home at midnight and to put Led Zep on full blast like it might not be that normal for you"

"You can say that again"

I began to wonder why I'd been worried about my interview, it looked like they'd just taken everyone who'd applied.

There were six houses in a specially built close; Rowell Close. After two weeks someone with a spray can and a sense of irony had changed it to Bowel Closed. How did they know? No one lived in our house yet, they were still all in hospital. They organised a kind of party where we met all the members of 'the team'. A sandwiches and lemonade sort of affair. Everyone was standing around making conversation. Trying to suss each other out. It wasn't exactly relaxed. In fact it was quite tense. Declan ate all the sandwiches.

That was where I first met Cheryl. She was standing in a corner laughing with some other people. She had orange hair. I don't remember much else. She had orange hair and she was beautiful.

'Don't even think about it, Don't let it cross your mind' .

It wasn't really orange, of course, she was wearing extensions. It still looked great though. I mean, she stood out from the crowd. She would've stood out from any crowd though, orange hair or no orange hair.

We were introduced and she smiled at me. I made some crap joke about the sandwiches, in a kind of dream, and went to talk to Declan. Trying to act normal. Trying to pretend that nothing had happened. I made a point of ignoring her, I even stood with my back to her, as if that would do any good.

Later, she remembered it differently.

"You were dead unfriendly, just walked off and left us there"

"I was shy"

"I knew you were nice though, I could see it in your eyes"

She always knew the right thing to say.

Declan broke the spell, he was standing next to a woman with long brown curly hair and a black leather jacket. It could have been his sister.

"This is Brigid" he said.

All that happened on one afternoon.

Tom wanted to know everything when I got in.

"Have you met any weirdoes yet?"

I told him about Declan but he seemed unimpressed.

"Are there any good looking birds?"

I didn't say anything.

"Whose turn is it to cook tonight then?" asked Douglas.

Those evenings were nice and I have to admit I miss them. It was nearly always the same during the week. We'd gather in the sitting room in the early evening and watch soap operas after which someone would cook some kind of meal. Our menu was severely limited. If Douglas was cooking it was a choice of spaghetti with tinned tomatoes and uncooked carrots or coagulated rice with kidney beans, tinned tomatoes and uncooked carrots. I hate raw carrots at the best of times, but swimming in cheap brand tinned tomatoes is just too much. The thing about Douglas was that he was so hyper-sensitive you just couldn't say a thing. I always used to leave a pile of rock-hard carrots at the side of my plate, but he never seemed to notice. How can you be so sensitive and insensitive at the same time? I never worked that one out.

If Douglas' cooking was predictable, Tom's was positively one-dimensional. He had one recipe, if you could be so grand, and it was beans on toast with a fried egg on top. Sometimes, if it was someone's birthday or some other special occasion, the F.A. Cup final springs to mind, he would embellish the dish by putting grated cheese on the toast. There were two good points about Tom's cooking. One was that it actually tasted really good, all that practice at making the same simple meal had given him a sort of Zen-like skill, and the second was that he hardly ever cooked, so you really didn't get a chance to get bored of it. It would have been excruciating night after night, but every three weeks or so made it something to look forward to. My cooking was no better, but at least it was a bit more adventurous. I used to buy cook books in jumble sales and try exotic recipes from foreign lands. We usually didn't have all the ingredients so I would improvise. Sometimes it worked, but even I have to admit that my prawn cocktail with chopped hot dog sausages instead of prawns was pretty much inedible.

After dinner, we would get stoned. Someone would make a cup of tea, and one or two of the others would roll a joint. We often had visitors, three or four a night, but somehow they always managed to arrive after we'd finished eating. It was uncanny. Tom rolled very strong joints which he smoked half of before he passed them on. Sometimes the smell was so strong you'd feel out of it before you even took a drag. It used to drive Grant crazy. He'd sit next to Tom virtually foaming at the mouth. Douglas made very weedy spliffs with Marlboros which were very unpleasant to smoke. Grant took the piss out of him about it once and he stayed in his room for a day afterwards, so we were always very careful what we said. Douglas was getting weirder. I'd known him for years, we used to live in the same village and I got to know him when he came home from boarding school during the summer holidays. We played cricket for the local village team together. He was a stylish opening bat, which didn't quite fit with the general mode of play. I used to bowl as fast as I possibly could without too much thought to accuracy, which did. We listened to the Buzzcocks and the Undertones together. He'd been unemployed since he left university with not quite the right sort of degree, and he'd sunk lower and lower into the mire. He gave up on any attempt at getting a job,

rarely went out and stopped changing his clothes. He spent whole days in his room smoking roll ups and reading Beckett. He could still be funny in an ironic sort of way, but somehow the spark had gone out of him. He listened to the Smiths too much and hated all the acid house and hip hop that Tom played at full volume every moment he was home. It was weird living with those two, like sharing a house with Yin and Yang.

Then we went to Durridge Park. We had to get a train out to Dartford and then a bus. Me and Emma spent the journey trying to guess what our clients would be like. We'd been told that the people we would be working with were our 'clients' and that they had 'learning difficulties' although we still didn't really know what that meant. They showed us a film on our induction course about an old guy who was now living in his own home after having been in a hospital for thirty years. He seemed alright, just like any old geezer you might meet in the pub at lunchtime. He had his own garden which he'd planted with vegetables. We hoped our house would be full of people like that. Each of us was to be assigned a key client, today we were going to meet them for the first time. I was nervous.

"So what's yours supposed to be like?" asked Emma as we got on the bus.

"I dunno" I replied "All I know is that his name's Bill"

"Mine's called Irene, she's supposed to be nice"

"I wonder what that means"

We met Nicola, our House Manager, at the bus stop. She was a ruddy faced woman who'd been a nurse in Donegal. I had the feeling she'd never been to London before. She'd certainly never met anyone like Cheryl before, but then again nor had I.

"Where is she?" Nicola looked at her watch.

We stood around, cold and miserable, waiting for Cheryl to show up. She arrived half an hour late.

"I'm sorry, my daughter's sick, I had to find someone to look after her"

I didn't know she had a daughter.

We walked up the road a bit and through some big gates and there we were in Durridge Park. It was huge, a collection of bleak brick buildings on the side of a hill. As we walked up the path an air of gloom descended on our little group. Nicola tried to be jolly. We went into one of the buildings following her like a herd of sheep, down some dingy corridors and into ward seven.

It was full. There were people everywhere. They all seemed to be walking round aimlessly, bumping into things and each other. There were people in pyjamas, people in suits, people in wheelchairs and people wearing crash helmets. Some were shouting, some were crying and some were talking to themselves. A small group of women in nurses uniforms sat in a corner smoking. When they saw us come in they stood up. One of them came over to us while the others started trying to look busy.

"Can I help you?" the nurse asked Nicola as if she hoped the answer would be 'no'

"Yes, we've come to visit Bill and Irene" said Nicola smiling a bit too much.

"Bill who? We've got loads of Bills in here"

"Bill Edwards"

"Oh you mean Teddy. We call him Teddy 'cos he looks just like a teddy bear"

"Yes well, and, erm , Irene?"

You could see that Nicola didn't approve.

"Oh she's over there, the one in the wheelchair"

She pointed, we looked. There was a woman sitting in a wheelchair in the middle of the chaos. She was staring at the ceiling and moaning. Emma went over to say hello.

"And Bill?"

The woman craned her neck.

"Where is he now? Ah, there he is, by the chairs"

He was sitting on the floor near where the women had been.

You couldn't see his face because he was looking at the ground. He picked up something from the floor and put it in his mouth, then he took it out and pressed it between his fingers. I couldn't see the similarity with a teddy bear.

Me and Nicola went over while the others waited around awkwardly in the middle of the room. When we got near he looked up. His eyes were black with dirt from the floor and he was chewing something. Brown dribble ran down the side of his mouth.

"Hi Bill, I'm Nicola" she said cheerily.

He walked off.

"What was he eating" I asked, trying to sound professional while feeling sick.

"Cigarettes, he eats cigarette ends."

"Oh, right" I thought I better say something else so I asked, "Does he speak much?"

"No, never. He's autistic. Finds it hard to er...relate to other people"

"So what am I supposed to do then?"

She smiled.

"Try."

We wandered from ward to ward in a daze. Declan attempted to be funny. We laughed nervously. Only Cheryl kept her cool. As we were leaving she said,

"I'll see yer later, I'm getting a lift from me boyfriend"

I didn't know she had a boyfriend.

She got into a flash looking red car. I felt a strange sort of relief. Now I could relax, now it was out of the question. I could really forget it.

Of course I didn't forget it, but as late summer became autumn, I managed, at least, to concentrate on some other things. Like coming to terms with being responsible for Bill, watching Tom and Emma splitting up, and getting to know Brigid. She wasn't like the people I knew. She was from some no nonsense part of Dublin. She wasn't posing, she wasn't pretending to be anything she wasn't. Brigid told it like it was.

"This Normalisation shit's just a load of bollocks, eh?"

As we carried a client to the toilet.

"We're just skivvies, and them lot don't give a toss"

While mopping up sick.

"Let's face it, Bill's never gonna go down the shops, buy a packet of fags and smoke 'em"

Too right, but we had to act like he would. Like it was a remote possibility.

We got on, we went out drinking beer. Emma, Brigid and me. Sometimes Declan came along too, but he was a pain in the arse if truth were told. Brigid came to our flat. She asked Douglas what he did all day. He went red. She took the piss out of Tom. It was great.

Tom and Emma had been together a few months, I'm not sure how long really, a long time by our standards. She was too good for him. Everyone knew that. Everyone except Tom that is. He just told her one night. That's what she said anyway. He just said he didn't want her any more. Sam said he couldn't love because of some trauma in his childhood or something. He never said a word to me about it, but then again I never asked him. I wonder why not? It was never the right moment I suppose.

He started asking me lots of questions about Brigid though. I noticed that alright. About a month after he'd split up with Emma we all went to a party in Brixton. Tom was being especially oily around Brigid,

"Who's the plastic Irishman?" She whispered in my ear.

"That's my flatmate, Tom. His dad's Irish"

"He thinks he's God's gift don't he?"

About five minutes later they disappeared together. Emma spent the rest of the evening sobbing on my shoulder. That was always the way with Tom though, he had all the fun and I was forever picking up the pieces. He was a bastard but I couldn't help but envy him sometimes. I just wished I'd had the balls.

A few days later I went to work with Emma. We cycled together through South London in the early autumn drizzle, weaving in and out of the traffic, ignoring lights and stopping at a news agents to buy a pack of Camels and a newspaper. When we got to work there was some sort of panic as usual because an Agency worker had gone out with Bill and they weren't back yet. Cheryl was going crazy. She was good at it.

"If I have to stay late and fill in another one of those fuckin' forms I'm gonna kick her stupid head in." She snarled, a little unreasonably, I thought. "I hate these bleedin' sleep-overs and I hate these moronic Agencies, fuckin' useless, she just

sat around all morning reading the Sun, so I told her right, hang on, I love this tune...." She went over to the radio and turned it up as far as it would go...

"OPEN OUR EYES...GIVE US THE LIGHT..."

The bass boomed. Suddenly we were in an acid house party except we weren't, we were in number six Rowell Close.

"So where was I? Oh yeah." Cheryl knew how to talk over a din. "So I says to her right, I goes, look man, take Bill up to the post office willya? And while yer at it can ya get me twenty Bensons? Right? So she's gone "Oh alright then." I mean the cheek of it, I nearly smacked her one there and then."

The music pumped.

Emma gave her a cigarette and she carried on cursing the job, the house manager, all agency staff, the health authority, the residents, and even Elroy, her boyfriend, who was supposed to have come round the night before to bring her "a bit of a puff" to help her sleep. Emma talked soothingly while I made a cup of tea. I stood in the kitchen pondering on the nature of madness and normality and failed to arrive at any conclusion. The doorbell rang, it was the police with Bill and the Agency girl, she was in tears, and he had a gleam in his eyes. The girl sat in the office and between sobs and sips of tea she told Emma the story. I only caught half of it because I was busy preventing Bill from stealing everyone else's tea. It seemed that in the Post Office some bloke had been smoking a cigarette, minding his own business when Bill had made a lunge for it. This time he must have forgotten to wait until it had been stubbed out or maybe he was just desperate. Anyway, apparently she grabbed him just as he put the lit ciggy in his mouth. It's hard to say who must have been the most surprised, the poor punter who was peacefully standing in line, waiting to cash his Giro, or Bill, who had suddenly stubbed out a Rothmans's on his tongue. The story got a bit hazy after that, but it seems that all hell broke loose, the agency girl and Bill were wrestling on the ground and the geezer was going apeshit, running around screaming and trying to kick Bill but only succeeding in connecting with the girl's left knee. I wished I had been there and was bloody glad I wasn't.

Cheryl scowled and rolled her eyes to the ceiling. She asked the girl for her cigarette money back, called a cab, and left.

The rest of the shift was pretty quiet. Fred shat himself, but that was our fault for not taking him to the toilet in time. It was still bloody horrible, though. I wondered if I'd ever get used to cleaning up shit or wiping an adult's arse. It was just extremely unpleasant, no two ways about it. After we'd put everyone to bed and tidied up, Emma and me drank a cup of tea, smoked and chatted about work, Cheryl, Brigid and Tom. There was a lot to say.

Tom. Dark hair, skinny. Oh God, I suppose I have to admit it, good looking. Depends on your taste really. Seemed to be a lot of people with that kind of taste. Selfish, arrogant, funny, charming, blah blah.

RIGHT ABOUT NOW...
YOU ARE ABOUT TO BE POSSESSED...
BY THE SOUNDS OF...
MC ROB BASE...AND DJ EZ ROCK...HIT IT!

It was Saturday night and Tom was pumping...

IT TAKES TWO TO MAKE A THING GO RIGHT...
IT TAKES TWO TO MAKE IT OUT OF SIGHT

He was jumping around the sitting room, a spliff in his mouth and a manic grin on his face.

"Come on you lame fuckers, let's get out of this shit hole!"

Douglas was sitting on the sofa, reading the sports page of the Guardian.

"I don't think I'm goin' out tonight" he mumbled quietly. I was surprised Tom heard him.

"Aw come on man, it's Saturday night and we've already got two parties."

"Yeah come on, I'll buy yer a drink"

Tom's mood was catching and I'd just been paid.

"Fuckin 'ell hear that?" Tom sat on the sofa and picked up the other part of the paper. "I don't think I'm goin either."

"You can buy yer own bloody drink." I laughed. "You get more a day than I earn in a week."

"Yeah, but he only works one day a week." Douglas was laughing too by now and twenty minutes later we were all in the pub with pints in front of us and I was considerably lighter in the wallet. Grant was there and Sam, Jo was coming later. Emma was at work, she had a sleep-over. Loads of our neighbours were there as well as hundreds of faces I'd seen at parties but couldn't put a name to. Tom seemed to know them all. He would smile and nod to people all night. It was one of those things that made you like him and hate him at the same time. I'd feel this kind of pride about being his friend, about living with him, and then I'd hate myself for it.

Grant was on good form. He was telling stories about the time he and Jo and Mushroom Mike worked in Holland picking bulbs or something. He told the one about how Mushroom Mike had got so stoned one night that he'd fallen asleep with the joint still going and had burned his tent down. We'd all heard it many times before, of course, but it was still brilliant, especially the part about how he'd woken up in the morning and found himself surrounded by a circle of ash. I didn't believe a word of it, but that didn't matter one bit. It was just a great story.

Jo arrived, she had news of a party too, some sort of a rave in a railway arch.

The choice seemed clear to me but the debate wasn't so straight forward. Grant was really keen to go to some nurses' party where he thought he would 'score'. Tom had the idea that he would be able to do a bit of DJing at one of his parties and was even talking about going home to pick up a couple of records. The decider was when Jo mentioned that she knew some guy who was going to be working at the door of this railway arch party and that at least three of us could get in free. We decided that we would split the costs of whoever had to pay and so the matter was settled.

It wasn't that far to the location. We all had bikes except Douglas who had had a flat tyre for the last two months. He rode on Grant's rack, an experience which could be described as uncomfortable but never boring. We took a side road off the Walworth Road and another right. Jo ahead, as she knew where the party was, me and Grant just behind. Grant was jumping the kerb, cutting across us and "testing his brakes" as he called it, which involved heading for some stationary object, maybe a parked car, at full speed and slamming on his brakes at the last moment. Douglas was not amused but me and Jo were. Tom and Sam were a bit behind having some heavy conversation about Emma.

We came to a railway bridge and Jo stopped. We locked our bikes to some railings and walked together along the side of the railway, Douglas rubbing his arse. There were a few other people around but not a huge crowd. I started having second thoughts about this party. To get to the door you had to climb over a small wall and walk across some planks that had been put over a large puddle of water. Jo's friend was at the door, an enormous black guy who she kissed on the lips. Grant nudged me and whispered in my ear that it looked a good bet for a freebie. The geezer waved us all in and we were in a dark and dingy passageway. It was great, there's nothing better than bunking in free to a gig, it gives you a high before you even start. The passage was narrow and lit only by a U.V. light that showed up everybody's dandruff. It was full of people, some going in, others going out, and some just standing around. Tom saw a mate of his, Stewart from Glasgow. They started talking and caused an instant traffic jam.

"What's it like then?" asked Tom. Stewart shrugged.

"S'awreet."

Armed with this useful information we struggled on through a doorway and into the main room. Inside the arch somebody had built a big wooden skateboard ramp which was serving as a dance floor. At the top of the ramp were an array of slide projectors which were pointing at various angles onto the walls and onto a big piece of cloth that was hanging from the ceiling. Sometimes the slides would switch off and a strobe light would flicker across the room making the dancers look like they were in slow motion. It wasn't full yet, but quite a few people were dancing. The DJs were down at the other end. Just after we arrived they played "Moments in Love" and Tom was in heaven.

"Kickin' man, I love this tune" he disappeared onto the dance floor.

Grant nudged me,

"Got any Rizlas?"

I gave him a packet and we went to find somewhere to sit down. Jo and Sam were standing in a corner talking to some friends. Then I realised someone was missing.

"Where's Doug?"

"Dunno." Grant surveyed the room.

Just then a big cloud of smoke billowed across the dancers and Tom disappeared from view.

"Must be in here somewhere." He started to put the papers together. I scanned the crowd. There was no sign of my flat mate.

"Did you see him come in?" I asked.

"He was behind me, I dunno."

Grant's mind was on higher things, so to say.

"Not bad, is it?" I said just as a slide of clouds appeared on the far wall.

"sawright, I hate this fuckin' music though."

I loved it but I wasn't in the mood for an argument so I changed the subject.

We smoked together and watched the dancing, pointing out people we knew. Dancing had changed a lot recently along with the music. It had a new kind of fluidity about it. People pushed their hands out in front of them in strange twisting shapes. I wanted to dance myself, so I told Grant that I was going to look for Douglas and headed back towards the entrance. I asked a few people if they had seen him but nobody had, so I went over to talk to Sam and Jo. They were smoking a joint together and talking to some guy who worked on a community arts project with Sam. I couldn't exactly understand what it was he actually did. He was some kind of 'performer,' whatever that meant. I had an image of him in my mind doing backwards somersaults through burning hoops, but I knew that couldn't be right. Sam and him were talking about acrobatics and people they both knew and I could see that Jo was getting a bit bored. She took me aside.

"I've got an E if you're interested" she said.

"Sure am" says I.

"Hang on here a minute."

She rushed off into the crowd and I stood around feeling a bit dumb. Sam and her friend were really chatting, I couldn't have broken into the conversation if I'd wanted to. I took the time to look around the place and suss out how I was feeling. More people had arrived and the music was faster than before, more housey and the dancers were really going for it. A lot of them were obviously on an E. You could tell by the way they were constantly grinning and dancing so energetically and, so well. I was pretty out of it myself, having been stoned even before I came out, and then having drunk a couple of pints, but it was nothing out of the ordinary. I just felt good. I noticed a huge banner on the wall. It was a heart, painted with U.V. paint, big and red and pink, with veins running through it. I tried to decide whether it was beautiful or revolting, but I couldn't. I waited impatiently for Jo and eventually she came back. She gave me a piece of rolled up paper.

"Fifteen" she said.

"Brilliant, nice one Jo, thanks."

She gave me a bottle of water and I put the pill on my tongue. It tasted bitter, and I swallowed it as quickly as possible. Jo was brilliant in these situations. She

was a real party person, she always knew where a good rave was to be had and she always knew some dealer or other. We got on really well because we had the same idea of a good time. We'd never fancied each other though. She seemed to be attracted exclusively to black guys and although she was good-looking, she somehow wasn't my type. This was understood between us which really made things a lot more simple. I asked her if she'd seen Douglas and she said she thought he'd been with us when we came in. We gossiped a bit about people we knew and the latest goings-on in Eastenders. I went to find the bar, a bench behind which a young Spanish girl was selling orange juice and water. It suited me fine as I didn't feel like drinking beer. I was wondering when something would happen with the E. It's always the same with those kind of drugs. You take them, then you spend half an hour waiting for something to happen, cursing the dealer, checking all your responses, wondering if each strange sensation is the beginning of the rush. Sometimes, of course, you get paranoid, like what if this is rat poison? Or oven cleaner? Or some such shit. That's why it's always good to have someone around who's on the same stuff you are. Tonight I knew it was going to be OK because Jo was next to me filling my ear with a load of drivel about world peace, the environment, and people "getting it together." She had some kind of theory, but I'm fucked if I knew what it was.

It happened quickly that night. Sam passed me a joint, and I took two drags and suddenly I was on cloud nine. Immediately I recognized the opening riff of one of my favourite songs. Only at that moment it was all-time favourite song. The greatest song ever written. The best record ever made. The kickingest tune in the whole world. I leapt onto the dance floor.

BROTHERS

SISTERS

ONE DAY WE WILL BE FREE

FROM FIGHTING, VIOLENCE, PEOPLE CRYING IN THE STREET

WHEN THE ANGELS FROM ABOVE

FALL DOWN AND SPREAD THEIR WINGS LIKE DOVES

AS WE WALK, HAND IN HAND

SISTERS BROTHERS

WE'LL MAKE IT TO THE PROMISED LAND.....

I was in the middle of the crowd. We were all shaking, grooving, exactly to the same beat, the same rhythm, the same feeling.

OH YEAH

OH YEAH

I was in the music. Completely absorbed and taken over by it. It filled every bone

in my body, every muscle, every cell. This was the place to be, not in some fancy nightclub in the West End. Nah man, this was it, here, with a hundred strangers in a railway arch somewhere off the Walworth road.

I looked up and saw Tom grinning at me like a demon

"You on one?" he asked

"Yeah."

"Fuckin wicked man"

"Yeah, beautiful."

We both laughed and danced manically next to each other.

OH YEAH

OH YEAH

I was singing along with all my heart, dancing like I was possessed. Jo and Sam were there too, and Stewart, I think. We all danced in and out and around each other and it felt like the summit of everything life had to offer. I danced on and on getting really hot and enjoying the feeling, drinking orange juice and smoking the spliffs that were being passed around the dancers. The music was fantastic, every track better than the last. Suddenly the lights went out and the music ground to a halt. A huge groan of disappointment went up from the crowd which was replaced by screams of joy as the opening piano chords of "Real Wild House" thundered out, smoke poured across the floor and the strobe came on.

I'M A REAL WILD ONE

It was bloody mental.

After a while I went and sat with Tom and we smoked a spliff together. I had no idea how long I'd been dancing, and I didn't care. We didn't talk much, we just quietly smoked and occasionally grinned at each other I looked at the heart on the wall and decided it was beautiful. It seemed to be throbbing, in time with the music, in time with my body. In fact, there was a kind of rhythm going on in the whole room. It wasn't just the booming bass drum. It was the hi-hat chikka chikka, it was the people's bodies, legs, arms, even their fingers, even the ones who weren't dancing. And it was this big day-glo heart. I started to think about what Jo had been saying earlier and decided that she was right. If only everyone could feel like this. If only all the politicians, the businessmen, the police. If they could feel what we were feeling at this moment that would be it. no more war, no more fighting. If only the whole world was "on one." It was simple really. I turned to Tom.

"Wicked innit?"

"Yeah man, it's beautiful." I wondered if he meant the heart. I guessed he was thinking and feeling the same things as me. So I said

"It should always be like this."

"Things would be a lot more bleedin' simple, that's for sure."

A look of pain crossed his face, and I realised he wasn't where I was at all. A huge wave of sympathy came over me. Here was a human being, one of my own mates. Here he was in this situation where all was as one, where everything and everyone was understood, and he was unhappy. I had to do something.

"You alright?" I asked.

"Oh man" he half groaned "You know, I can't stop thinkin' about Brigid."

So, that was it. Suddenly all was clear. It was about Brigid. I'd thought it was something really serious like not believing that the world was basically one big happy family, waiting only for the right chemicals to enter our bloodstreams before we were able to solve all our problems and walk hand in hand into the sunset. This was easy.

"Well, what's the problem?"

"She reckons she's goin' back home" he sighed.

"What yer talkin' about?"

"What I said, I saw her last week and she just says, out of the blue like, I'm thinkin' of goin' home"

"Well maybe she was tired or something"

"Nah, ya fuckin' wally, home, back to Ireland"

"What? for a visit?"

"No, for good like"

"But she's only been here a couple of months"

I wasn't that happy about the idea either.

"Yeah, I know"

"Oh no man, that's bollocks"

"Yeah"

"But why? What you been doin' to her?"

"Nothin'"

"Maybe that's why she's goin', maybe she's frustrated"

"Fuck off !"

"I'm sorry" I grinned "I just can't believe it you know, it's weird"

"Yeah well" he shrugged "That's what she says"

"Maybe it was just a spur of the moment thing, you know what I mean? Maybe she won't really go. It must be pretty difficult when you first come to London and that"

"She says she hates the job"

"I can understand that alright. She probably just had a bit of a bad shift or something. I wouldn't take it personal"

"Yeah, yer could be right"

I smiled at him full of confidence in my powers of perception.

"You know it."

He seemed a lot more cheerful.

"That fuckin heart thing's wicked innit?"

I felt an intense surge of feeling for Tom. I put my arm around him.

"You're fuckin brilliant man, did you know that?" I meant it too.

"Yeah" he said honestly.

"I mean, you can be a right pain in the arse sometimes, but you're a wicked geezer. You know that."

"Thanks man. You're alright too. Thanks for listenin'."

"Of course" says I. "What are friends for?"

We sat in silence while he rolled a hefty joint. I felt this enormous love for all my friends, for the whole of humanity. Jo and Sam came over holding hands. We all hugged and kissed each other as if this was the usual way we greeted. We discussed how wicked, wild and beautiful the party was and how nice and friendly the people all were. It was true, everyone was smiling at each other. A couple of people had just come up to me while I was dancing and had shaken my hand. "Nice one mate." One guy had said. He was a huge geezer with a tattoo of a snake curling round his neck. He was the type of guy I usually crossed the road to avoid. Sam told us that all the football hooligans had been taking Es and now they'd stopped fighting. They all went to raves together. Even Chelsea, even Millwall. That was the power of the E. We were all suitably impressed.

"Where's Grant?" I asked, suddenly I realised I hadn't seen him for ages. I wanted all my friends around.

"He went to his nurses' party." said Sam.

"Oh no!" We all groaned.

"He'd really love it." I said.

Of course he would. Anyone would.

"What about Doug?" asked Tom. Oh shit, I'd forgotten all about Douglas. I was suddenly overcome with guilt. I could feel myself starting to come down from the high cloud I'd been in until that point.

"I went outside to look for him, I think he must've gone home."

Sam always took it upon herself to look after the welfare of others, even when she wasn't on Ecstasy.

That was typical of Douglas. Come to a party and then leave before he'd even got to the door. He couldn't have afforded an E, of course, and none of us were that rich that we could have subbed him 15 quid. Maybe we could have had a whip round. It would have been good anyway. We would have all told him what a great guy he was and how much we loved him, really, and how easily all his problems could be solved if only he had the right attitude. It was only a long time after that I realised that those were probably all the reasons that he hadn't come. Bloody Douglas, I thought, he always managed to bring you down even when he wasn't there. I rolled a fat one, took two drags, and immediately felt better. I started chatting to Jo, thanking her profusely for bringing us here and discussing the whole music party drug scene. And then it happened. I heard the first two notes and screamed,

"Oh man, TEARS!"

I was on the dance floor in a flash and so were the others. I could feel the rush all over again as the bass slammed out.

I'M A REAL GOOD ACTOR
THIS IS A HEAVY ROLE
OUR LOVE'S THE SCRIPT
AND YOU CARRY TOTAL CONTROL
LIKE A CLOWN, I'VE BEEN SMILING
WHENEVER PEOPLE ARE AROUND
BUT WHEN THE CURTAIN COMES DOWN AND THE CIRCUS IS THROUGH
NO ONE IS LEFT BUT ME, YOU, AND ALL MY TEARS

I shut my eyes and thought of Cheryl. I was a real good actor alright and the chance of tears seemed very high. I wished she was there. I wished she would just suddenly appear. At that moment I knew I'd have the confidence to just take her in my arms and tell her everything I'd wanted to say ever since we'd met. She was crazy, and she was hard, but that was just because of the life she'd had, if someone were to give her some real love it would all be different. It was clear. I just

had to get her on her own and tell her how I felt. "Tears" was followed by "The Sun Rising" and I went off into a dream as I danced. Cheryl and me were in a field, it was midsummer and the sun was rising over some distant hills. We were at a party, we were dancing, and we were totally in love.

I danced on to the next couple of tracks, but somehow I didn't have the energy I'd had earlier, and when someone suggested we go I wasn't that unhappy.

We stumbled out into the daylight, rubbing our eyes. It was freezing, and I realised how sweaty I was. Sam had the idea of going round to their place to "chill out" so we got on our bikes and headed back towards Camberwell. I was amazed at how many people were out and about at that time on a Sunday morning although I had no idea what time it was. I couldn't get over how bright it was. It was a cloudy morning but somehow the sky seemed totally white. We stopped at a news agents for cigarettes and Rizlas. We piled into the shop forgetting to lock our bikes and bought juice, chocolate, papers and chewing gum. There was a bemused looking old Asian guy behind the counter, and we started chatting to him.

"What time do you start work?" asked Tom, obviously appalled that anyone had to work at such a time.

"Seven o'clock" said the man.

"Oh man! Seven o'clock on a Sunday morning!" Tom was outraged. "That's not right, you should be out raving at that time."

The shopkeeper was about sixty and probably couldn't remember the last time he went "raving," if, in fact, he'd ever been "raving" at all. He looked even more puzzled.

"Listen man" continued Tom, like he'd known the geezer all his life. "Next week get someone else to come in, or just close the shop, you deserve to have a good time." he sounded like some bloody Messiah.

"Yes, well, I'll have to see" said the man, obviously wondering what kind of weirdoes he was dealing with.

"Just do it man" said Tom and strode out of the shop without paying. Sam apologized, paid, and told the geezer that Tom was under a lot of stress. Me and Jo got the giggles and had to leave quickly. We found Tom outside, chatting with an old woman at a bus stop. We dragged him away and started cycling home. Halfway up the hill, we realised we'd forgotten to buy cigarettes. Sam said she'd go back alone, but me and Tom felt we were in this together, so Jo went home to put the kettle on while Tom and me played a game of smiling at passing car drivers and checking their reactions. Mostly they just frowned and stared straight ahead. A couple of people waved at us. It was brilliant.

Back at Jo and Sam's we drank tea, smoked joints, listened to music and watched the telly with the sound turned down. We listened to chill out classics like "Keep on moving," "Wishing on a Star," and the whole of "What's going on." No one said much except to comment on the God-like genius of Marvin Gaye. Eventually I fell asleep on some cushions on the floor and woke up a couple of hours later when Emma came home from work. She was mighty disappointed that she'd missed out on the party of the decade, especially as everyone told her about it five or six times.

In the evening, me and Tom went home, which wasn't too much hassle as it was next door. We popped into Dirk's flat and scored some blow. Dirk was a

German guy who lived in the flat under Sam's. He was very friendly, very sharp, and an excellent businessman. He charged a little bit too much sometimes, but it was just so convenient to have a dealer next door that I never complained. Tom always complained but it didn't make any difference. Dirk was surrounded by an air of mystery. There were lots of stories about him being wanted by Interpol and how he was on the run from the police in Germany, but no one knew the truth. I don't even think his name was really Dirk. His letters used to be addressed to D. Jones, Grant saw one once. Dirk Jones? I don't think so! It was intriguing, but it wasn't as if you could ask "Hey Dirk, what's this I hear about Interpol?"

We lived in a group of beautiful old Georgian houses at the top of a hill. Somehow they'd got into the hands of the local council, been too expensive to keep up and had fallen into disrepair. The original tenants had slowly moved out, and we squatters had quickly moved in. There were some beautiful flats. Dirk's was particularly palatial, with high ceilings, wooden floors, and big windows. We tested the wares, listening to some spaced out dub reggae and chatting sporadically. I left Tom there telling Dirk all about the previous night and went home. I had to get up early for work the next day. When I got home, Douglas was in his room with the door shut. I was really curious about what had happened the night before, so I knocked and went in. He was lying in bed reading and smoking a roll-up. Same as it ever was.

"Alright?" I asked, feeling a bit awkward.

"Not bad" he replied, as if that wasn't what he meant at all.

"What happened to you last night then?"

"I went for a piss before we went in, and when I came back, all you lot had disappeared, so I told this bloke on the door that I was a friend of Jo's. He told me to fuck off."

"What?!"

"Yeah, he reckoned I was the twentieth person who'd tried that one on."

I wanted to laugh but couldn't, typical Jo.

"So what d'ya do?"

"Came home, of course."

"You should have waited. We would've gotcha in."

I wanted to tell him all about the party, about what he'd missed, about how great it had been, about how we would have bought him an E, but I couldn't. He looked so down, I felt guilty about having had such a good time.

"Anyway, I met Grant on the way home, and we went to the nurses' party."

I felt a huge surge of relief. He had had a good time after all.

"Oh yeah, so how was it?"

"Hideous."

The look on his face told me not to ask any more questions about it. So, feeling like a clown at a funeral, I went to bed.

Douglas, tall, dead skinny. Fair hair, straight, lank. Nicotine stained fingers. Big old shapeless jumper, colourless. It was strange when he laughed, didn't make a sound, just sort of shook. Big toe sticking out of his sock. Played the guitar all day in his room, must've been good after all that practice, hard to say cos he always stopped when someone walked in. The tea and biscuits man.

When I think back to those times, I see those beautiful big Georgian houses shining in the sunshine. The long summer evenings sitting out on the roof looking out over London, the cold winter nights huddled around the fire. The parties, the people, the feeling. We were free, we were poor, we were innocent, we knew it all.

Our neighbours were a colourful bunch. Terry "the truth" and Cosmic Clive lived downstairs. A strange couple thrown together by fate. They lived together and hated each other. They'd come around and have arguments in our living room. One time they sat on opposite ends of the sofa not speaking.

"What's the problem?" I asked innocently.

"Ask him" Terry nodded toward his flatmate.

"He's sulking 'cos I switched the telly off, he was watching filth" said Cosmic.

"What were you watchin' Tel?"

"A nature documentary"

"What's so filthy about that?"

"It was something about ants right, and what happens to them when there's a forest fire"

"Yeah, and?"

"He was watching all these ants frying" said Cosmic "he was getting off on it"

"I wasn't getting off on it"

"You were, you were goin' "woargh, look at that!""

"It was interesting, that's all"

"Getting off man, creamin' your jeans!"

Despite this ability to make an argument out of nothing, they continued to live together, and it was hard to imagine them apart. Terry got his nickname through his amazing story telling skills. "Terry's tall tales" as Tom called them. He announced once that he was leaving London, getting away from "that prat Cosmic", going to make a new start in Lowestoft.

"It's all sorted man, got myself a little cottage by the sea, lovely. You can come and visit sometime if yer like."

"Yeah, sure, sounds nice"

A week later he was back.

"What happened?"

"It was terrible, didn't you hear about it on the news?"

"Hear about what?"

"The Typhoon man, there was this fuckin' major hurricane type thing. Ripped the roof right off my house. There was a big flood, I had to jump on a plank of wood and row to the shore. That's the end of my little cottage. I was lucky to make it out alive."

It was difficult to believe. It was high summer and we'd had nothing but good weather recently. We listened sceptically and later, after a bit of research found out that it was all lies.

"So what really happened in Lowestoft Terry?" I asked him the next time we met.

"Well, to be honest, it's a bit like, dodgy, know what I mean?"

"Not really, what d'ya mean, dodgy?"

"Well, I don't want anyone calling me a racist or whatever"

We assured him that we wouldn't call him a "racist".

"Well, you see, I wasn't livin' alone. I was sharing with this Jewish bloke. I ain't got nothin' against 'em like, don't get me wrong alright, but this geezer was, like, hard line. He wouldn't let me go shopping on Saturday and all the food had to be specially prepared like. He wouldn't even let me listen to any reggae. You know I like a bit of reggae in the evenin'"

I didn't know that, I'd never heard him talk about reggae before.

"Anyway I couldn't hack it man so I come back. Even Cosmic ain't that bad"

Cosmic Clive was pretty bad though. He'd got his name through his constant references to astrology. He'd say things like,

"I saw that Pisces woman the other day, she's havin' problems with her boyfriend, Saturn in Aries y'know"

He was really extreme. One day he was a vegetarian, the next telling us he was going shooting in Scotland. He was violently anti drugs when I first met him, wanting to clean the scum off the streets and so on. Then he became a dealer. He wanted to beat Doug up once because he'd heard him listening to The Pet Shop Boys. Conclusive proof of being a "Bum Bandit" apparently. The next year he went on a Gay Pride march wearing a dress. He'd spent some time on an island off the coast of Ireland doing "Primal Therapy" which seemed to involve beating up everyone else on the island. He claimed to have thrown one unfortunate bloke off a cliff for being "gamesy", whatever that meant.

Then there was "Little Terry". He wasn't really a neighbour. I don't know where he lived. Sometimes he stayed with Terry the Truth and Cosmic and sometimes with Loopy Lee. I don't think he really had a home as such. He was about seventeen and sniffed glue. He was a brilliant artist, he'd come round and draw these amazing psychedelic comic style pictures in our sitting room. We kept some paper and felt tips for him. He was small and skinny and always looked like he'd just woken up. He was fine unless he'd been sniffing but when he had he was useless. He'd sit on our sofa and stare at the wall for hours without saying anything. We told him to give it up. Tom even told him he couldn't come round glued up anymore but, like he said, who were we to talk.

One day he told us he'd formed a band.

"Oh yeah, what they called then?"

"The Rat People, it's from this film I seen where all these like half rat half people they're livin' in the sewers right, and they come out and attack the normal people. Y'know bite 'em and that."

"Got any songs then?"

"Yeah, we got one called "Hate thy Neighbour"

"Oh thanks, that's us ain't it? Whatcha wanna hate us for?"

"Not you lot, the others."

"Well couldn't ya just make it "Hate some of your neighbours"? Just so we don't go gettin' paranoid thinkin' it's about us"

He thought it over,

"I dunno, it don't sound so good does it?"

"Yeah well, got any more?"

"Yeah, there's "Why do Skinheads like Ska?"

"Stormin'" Tom liked it "That's brilliant Terry. When's the single out? I wanna buy it already. How's it go?"

Terry stood up and started nodding his head,

"Why, Why, Why do skinheads like ska, Why, Why, Why, do skinheads like ska, 'Cos they're fuckin' stupid man!"

There was a pause,

"Is that it?" Tom was a bit disappointed. "Yeah, well, good title anyway."

"Wanna hear another?"

"Erm..."

But there was no stopping him now.

"Thirty six B"

"What? like the bus?"

"Yeah"

He drew a big breath

"Queensparkharrowroadroyaloakpaddinton (gulp)

Edgewareroadmarblearchparklanehydeparkcorner (gulp)

Grosvenorroadvictoriavauxhallbridgeoval (gulp)

Camberwellnewroadcamberwellgreencamberwellchurchstreet..."

He paused. We sat there in open mouthed amazement. Then he let out a blood curdling scream,

"PECKHAAAAAAAAAAM!"

He sat down.

"That's fuckin' awesome" said Tom when we'd all recovered. "Doesn't it go on to Hither Green though?"

"Nah man, this is one of those ones that stops at Peckham Bus garage."

The next morning I struggled into work feeling like my brain was made of dough. I went through the motions, feeding, cleaning, lifting, talking, everything as in a dream. My limbs were heavy and my energy was gone, left behind on Saturday night's dance floor. Midway through the morning Cheryl rang.

"Can ya get an agency? I'm not coming in today."

I was disappointed.

"What's up?"

"I can't say really, well, I'm not feelin' too good, you know what I mean?"

I did know what she meant, only too well and I wanted to tell her I wasn't feeling too hot myself. Somehow it wasn't the time.

"Shall I come round?"

She only lived five minutes from work, and I had guessed by now that whatever was wrong with her wasn't contagious. She said no, she'd be alright, and I put the phone down feeling sad that I hadn't been able to do my gallant rescue of damsel in distress act. Cheryl wasn't really that fitting for the role anyway. If only I'd recognized that sooner.

We had lunch, Rice and Peas served by Rose, a very large woman from the agency who used to take nips of rum in the kitchen while she cooked. We never said anything, partly because there was a certain sort of solidarity between the workers born out of shared suffering and shared disregard for the management, and partly because her cooking was so good. After lunch, Rose watched Neighbours and Home and Away while I washed up, took Bill and Fred to the toilet and filled in the day book. On days like that it was really hard to think what to write. Sometimes I felt like making stuff up, like "Earthquake this morning, two residents slightly hurt, we need some new light bulbs" or "Fred visited by the Pope, asks if he can come round every Tuesday, told him I'd have to OK it with the House Manager" and so on. Since I'd got into trouble once for writing that Bill had "crashed out" I didn't think it would go down that well.

Cheryl rang again just as I was getting ready to go.

"I've decided I'm gonna cook you rice an' peas tonight, d'ya wanna come round?"

I couldn't tell her I'd just eaten two platefuls of the stuff.

"Yeah, sounds great."

"What time are you finishing?"

She knew the answer to that one.

"Well, I was just about to leave."

"Great, so you can come straight round."

"Yeah, sure." My heart was pounding.

"Oh, and could you be an angel and bring some rice and some Bensons?"

"No problem, anything else?"

"Erm, one minute, oh yeah, a pint of milk."

I went by the supermarket and got what she'd ordered and a box of chocolates in case she really was ill although she'd sounded perfectly healthy on the phone.

Cheryl lived in a flat on an estate on the other side of Crystal Palace hill. It wasn't that bad I suppose, it just felt like nowhere. When I got to the flat Cheryl invited me in as if I was an old friend from Australia who'd just turned up unannounced. She didn't have orange hair anymore. When she saw the chocolates she kissed me on the cheek.

"Oh man, you are really a wicked geezer, not like some I could mention."

She sat me down on the sofa. There wasn't that much room between the piles of ironing. Her six-year old daughter Natasha was lying on her tummy on the floor, watching television. There was music playing as well. Cheryl's tone changed from silk to sandpaper.

"Oi you, show some respect!"

Natasha looked shyly at me.

"Say hello then, you little brat!"

"Hello" the girl said, almost inaudibly.

"Hi Tash," said I, a little too cheerily. "How's it going?"

"Alright" she whispered and looked back at the screen. I wished I'd thought of bringing something for her. I made a mental note for my next visit.

"She's such a little bitch." said Cheryl venomously. I felt awkward and didn't know what to say.

"She knows exactly what's going on, she knows I don't need it so she does it just out of spite."

A list of questions formed in my mind. What's going on? What don't you need? What's she doing, apart from being a bit shy? I didn't feel like I could ask any of them though.

I looked at Cheryl. So beautiful. She had high cheekbones and big dark eyes. I wanted to reach out to her to take the pain away. She was like a cat. She had the same beauty, the same expression, the same claws. I decided to take a different tack.

"So are you feeling better?"

"What? Oh yeah, that. Well, to tell the truth, I wasn't really ill as such."

This was getting more and more mysterious. I remembered her boyfriend and started to panic.

"Where's Elroy?"

I tried to make the question sound as natural as possible. I failed.

"To be honest, my dear, I don't give a fuck." She lit a cigarette. "That man is history."

She pronounced each syllable as if it were a separate word.

I began to get the picture and was filled with a weird mixture of excitement and dread.

"Here." She gave me a roll of silver paper. "Skin up, I've just got to make a phone call".

She left the room and I went to work. Natasha stared silently at the TV. I finished the joint and lit it, expecting Cheryl to reappear at any minute. I stared out the window. We were on the fifth floor of a medium sized block. Lights were on in other flats across the estate. In one window I could see the flicker of a television. I wondered if I should make conversation with Natasha, but I couldn't think what to say. She was watching a cartoon. We sat in silence and I smoked the joint alone. I got extremely stoned and started to think about what I should do about Cheryl. She was obviously under a lot of stress. She'd just split up with her boyfriend. I wondered why. Was it permanent, or just one of those lover's quarrels that they seemed to have on a regular basis? How should I act? Go down on one knee and tell her all, or play it cool? I ran through the possibilities in my mind. Eventually Cheryl came back.

"What happened to that spliff?"

"Erm..." I stared guiltily at the ashtray.

"Oh well, better build another one, eh?"

She seemed more cheerful. We chatted a bit about work. When she heard that Rose had been working she said

"Oh no, man! So you've already had Rice an Peas, why didn't you say so?"

I struggled to think of an answer, none came so I told her about Saturday night instead.

"Oh wow man, that sounds blindin'! We gotta go together sometime, I know this geezer, he's got the best E in South London."

It was sounding good. I felt a thrill of anticipation at the idea of going out with Cheryl on an E. Just then the doorbell rang. It was a friend of Cheryl's called Sonya.

"We're just going into the kitchen, I'm gonna make yer dinner."

I rolled another spliff while she was out of the room. Tash had fallen asleep where she lay in front of the telly. She looked unutterably sweet. I couldn't imagine why Cheryl said all those things about her. I watched the News and some programme about South American Indians. I was starting to feel sleepy myself. The women were still in the kitchen. Sometimes I heard their voices and the chink of glasses. Eventually I decided to go. I went into the kitchen. There was no sign of cooking. Cheryl was holding a glass of brandy. She looked as if she's been crying.

"Erm, I think I'd better get going." I said.

"Oh no man, I haven't started cooking yet."

Cheryl put her glass down. Sonya smiled at me. I felt a bit foolish.

"Well, I've got to get back to Camberwell, and I'm a bit knackered to be honest."

"Oh shit."

I could see tears in Cheryl's eyes.

"I'm sorry. Look, I'll see you at work on Friday and we'll get something together for next weekend, yeah?"

"Yeah alright" she said. "Thanks for the chocolates."

Sonya smiled at me again.

"He's a blindin' geezer this one Sonya" said Cheryl.

As I cycled home, I wondered what on earth I was getting myself into. I felt this strange frightened excitement in the pit of my stomach. It was exhilarating and terrifying.

When I got home, Grant and Emma were around. They were watching a wildlife documentary with my flatmates. Everyone was stoned.

"This is just what I need" said Grant "A bit of mindless education."

Emma asked me where I'd been, and I told her I'd been at Cheryl's and that she'd split up with Elroy.

"Really? She must be dead upset."

"That's putting it mildly."

"Poor woman, maybe I should go and see her tomorrow." Tom was unusually quiet. Just before I went to bed, I asked Grant about Saturday night. Douglas winced, so did Grant.

"It was hideous."

He didn't elaborate.

I left them all watching a fly laying its eggs under the skin of some poor unsuspecting buffalo, and hoped I wasn't going to have bad dreams.

It wasn't really a problem, of course. I was too stoned to dream. That's a weird side effect of smoking blow. I guess you do dream really, it's just that you don't remember them when you wake up. What does that mean? If your dreams are trying to tell you things about yourself and your life, what happens when you just block off that information for months, years at a time? Douglas said it caused personality disorders. Tom said you could receive all that information anyway subconsciously as it were. Grant said but you're subconscious anyway, so Tom said it was kind of sub-subconscious. Douglas looked sceptical. Grant said it was all bollocks anyway because dreaming was just a form of entertainment for your brain like going to the movies and was about as relevant. Then Tom and Douglas started listing all the movies which were relevant to everyday life. It was a long list which reached it's end only when Tom started to deconstruct "The Wizard of Oz." I thought he was doing quite well until Grant said,

"What about Roger Rabbit, then?"

That's another side effect of smoking too much blow. You can spend dangerously large portions of your life sitting around talking bullshit.

I started seeing more and more of Cheryl. She'd often invite me round after work and we would smoke blow and watch TV together. I didn't really watch TV. I was watching Cheryl. Even if I wasn't looking at her I was watching her. I was observing her, trying to understand her. Trying to feel what she was feeling, trying to fit into that feeling, trying to be what she wanted me to be. Tash didn't seem to mind, she quickly got used to me being around. Sometimes I read stories to her, sometimes she fell asleep leaning on my shoulder. One day she looked me in the eye.

"I'm stupid"

"No you're not, Tash" I was shocked.

"Yes I am. All the black kids is stupid"

"Rubbish"

"It's not rubbish"

"Whatcha talkin' about?"

"At school right, there's black kids and white kids and Paki kids"

"Not Paki kids"

"Yeah" she smiled sweetly "There is some Paki kids. Faroukh and Mina and..."

"No," I interrupted "I mean They ain't called Pakis"

"Yeah," she nodded, still smiling "They are"

"They're Asians"

"No they ain't, they're Pakis"

"Oh well, whatever," I gave up "Who told you that all black kids are stupid?"

"Someone said it to me"

"Who said it to you?"

"My Mum".

With my second wage cheque I bought a car, a scrapper Renault that Grant had found and done up. Actually done up is a bit of an overstatement, but it went. I was proud to show it to my friends but ashamed to show it to Cheryl. She was OK about it though.

"Aah, it's sweet" She smiled

"Yeah, well it's a load of crap really"

"It goes don't it? Anyway it wouldn't suit you to have some flash BMW"

I remembered Elroy's car and wondered how to take that remark. I'd never be Elroy number two though. I had to try to appeal in a different way. By being the good guy. By being nice.

I started doing little errands on my way home from work, a bit of shopping, picking Tash up from school. I'd arrive in the middle of a crisis.

"Can yer run down the chemist? Me sister's got a migraine"

"Yeah sure"

"Thanks man, you're a diamond"

Yes Cheryl, whatever you say Cheryl. Anything to be called a diamond. Anything to be wanted, to be needed. Anything to hear her tell her friends "I don't know what I'd do without him". That was nice, I'd do anything for that. Anyway, I didn't really mind. Tash was great and it was a brilliant feeling to hang out with Cheryl and her mates. My world seemed so drab in comparison. Cheryl was an event. Everything was either completely good or completely bad. It was like having all the controls turned up full; colour, volume, brightness, contrast. Nothing in between, no shades of grey. I stopped thinking about anything else. I started to see everything through her eyes. What would she think about this, what would she say about that. When I looked at my life through her eyes It didn't look too good. I avoided any possibility that she might see how I lived, that she might meet my friends. I became ashamed of who I was.

On a cold day in November something really strange happened. I got a letter from the bank containing a credit card. I hadn't been that serious when I'd applied for it, I just thought I'd give it a try. Anyway, it seemed that my lack of a proper permanent address wasn't a problem, as long as I was in full-time employment, which I suppose I was, although I wasn't sure how long I'd remain that way. I pulled it out of the special wrapping and held it in my hand. It was a weird feeling. I was used to seeing myself as an outcast, a dirty squatter, a dope smoking reject, and here I was holding the very symbol of the get rich quick capitalist society I despised and which I thought I'd long ago rejected. It felt good. I thought about all the things I could do. All the things I could buy. Tapes, records, clothes, a new ghetto blaster, maybe a new bike. For a while I went crazy imagining all the things that were suddenly in my reach. It's a good thing we didn't live near any shops, or I would have just gone out there and then and gone on a wild shopping spree. I was the only person I knew who had such a thing, apart from Jo. I wondered how I would tell the others. I felt a strange distance had suddenly appeared between me and them. Douglas lived on the thirty-five pounds a week he got from the dole, unimaginably. Grant did the occasional bit of mechanical work, usually undercharging for his services, and Tom worked now and then as a dispatcher, usually making about thirty or forty quid a day. It was all illegal cash in hand type stuff. Here I was suddenly part of the establishment. They were going to call me a yuppie, there was no doubt about that.

The first thing I actually did was go to Safeway and buy a week's supply of groceries including toffee yoghurts all around. I knew that would put them in a good mood, even Doug. I bought all kinds of things we couldn't usually afford like some real fish instead of fish fingers. Some Mcvities Chocolate homewheat biscuits instead of the Safeway ones we usually had. Some Crunchy Nut corn flakes and some exotic juice which was a mixture of eight different fruit juices including mango, passion fruit, kiwi, and banana. I was shocked when I saw the bill, but it was a special treat, a celebration. It wouldn't be like this every time, I told myself. From now on, I would shop in the same way as before. Sometimes I'm amazed at how easily I can fool myself. This event put me in a good mood all day. I cooked a big curry in the evening which was followed by the toffee yoghurts. It was great.

Brigid really was leaving. She was going to work until Christmas and then go back to Dublin.

"But what ya gonna do there?" I asked her one day at the hand-over.

"Oh, I dunno, sign on I suppose, live with me mum for a bit"

"Doncha like London then?"

"It's alright, ya know, but it's so, like, impersonal. It's so unfriendly. Anyway that's not the main reason. The fact is I can't stand this fuckin' place. I didn't come here to change fuckin' nappies ya know."

"Well, it ain't all bad, I mean, we have a laugh don't we?"

"Yeah, it ain't youse lot. I mean, that's the best thing. It's just the rest of it."

I plucked up courage to ask what what was on my mind,

"And what about Tom? What's happening there?"

"Well, there ain't really much future in that is there?"

I could tell that there wasn't anything else to be said.

Cheryl arrived for the late shift and Brigid went home. It was exciting to work with Cheryl although, to be honest she, didn't really do that much work. Today she was on form. Smiling and happy, jumping around the sitting room singing along to Todd Terry's version of Weekend.

...ONE THING I CAN'T TAKE IS TO SIT HOME ALL ALONE
DO WHAT YOU LIKE MY DEAR, BUT I'M NOT STAYING HOME
NIGHT AND DAY, I WAS PATIENT
BUT I'VE HAD ALL I CAN TAKE
TONIGHT'S THE NIGHT THE TIME IS RIGHT
MAYBE I'LL FIND A FRIEND TO SPEND THE WEEKEND
TONIGHT IS PARTY TIME IT'S PARTY TIME TONIGHT....

She sang it with a gleam in her eye. She sang it like she meant it, like she knew what effect it would have on me. She was brilliant with everybody, caring, patient, she didn't even get upset when Jane dribbled her dinner on her new jeans. It was Friday evening and she was going out after work. We washed everyone and put them to bed. Bill got up immediately and wandered around the sitting room looking for cigarettes. We drank a cup of coffee together. It was strange in the house after everyone had gone to bed, well, nearly everyone. It was really quiet after all the noises of the day. Most of the residents in the house made some sort of noise, although none of them could speak. The day was filled with grunts and squeaks, moans and groans, expressions of satisfaction and pain. You got used to it, and when it wasn't there, you kind of missed it. Cheryl made a phone call. She came back into the room.

"Blindin' man, Annette's takin' me to an Acid house."

"Oh yeah?"

My attempts at nonchalance were getting a bit strained.

"Yeah man, she's got some E too."

"Brilliant."

Only it wasn't bloody brilliant, I was on a sleep-over. I would be lying in the office on a sofa bed trying to sleep while Cheryl was out having a wicked time. I felt glum.

"Listen man, why don't you come along?"

Twisting the knife or what?

"I got a bleedin' sleep-in, ain't I?"

"Don't worry about that, man. You can phone in sick, and they'll send an agency."

Before I had time to protest, or even really think about it, she was in the office and on the phone to the on-call manager. My mind was racing. What if they found out? that was probably a sacking offence. This was it, the thing I'd been hoping for for months. What would it be like? I was taking a step into a world I didn't know. It was exciting and scary. Cheryl came back.

"No problem mate, I told them you'd got food poisoning or something so you had to go home, they're sending that Jenny woman."

"Wicked!"

"Annette's comin' at eleven."

I spent the last half hour on cloud nine. Walking about the house trying to find things to do to keep myself busy. I washed up every last cup in the place and even folded the tea towels. At quarter past eleven we were in Annette's flat. She was Cheryl's best friend. Very beautiful, very glamorous. Her flat was immaculately tidy. What I remember were the deep pile rugs and gold mirror tiles in the bathroom. Annette was wearing a fur coat, was it real? I asked myself. Sam would've had a fit. I sat on the sofa, confused. I didn't know what was going on. Cheryl kept telling Annette about what a great geezer I was. That was nice. They talked a lot about some bloke called Barry. Seemed he had been heavily involved in decorating the flat. I wondered if he was some kind of builder. Then it turned out that he'd got something to do with the car too. We smoked a monster spliff. A tape of The Garage Sound of Deepest New York boomed out of the hi-fi stack. Cheryl sang along to every word of "You're gonna miss me when I'm gone." I got a bit impatient while they were talking about clothes, and embarrassed when they started to give me advice about how my wardrobe could be improved.

"A nice shirt, you know what I mean, jeans are alright, but those shoes... I reckon a big baggy T-shirt...Nah girl, something elegant you know, something,er, tasteful..."

I was glad when we finally left. We got into Annette's Golf and headed off into the night. It was brilliant. Speeding through the dark streets, music pumping. Cheryl in the front slagging off Elroy, Annette rapping rudely over "Break for love." We crossed the river and headed out East. Down the Mile End Road, onto some

backstreets, and into a dark desolate warehouse zone. We started to see other cars obviously heading in the same direction. We were stared at by men at traffic lights. Their expressions changed when they saw me in the back. I imagined them thinking, hmm two beautiful black chicks in a tasty motor, hang on, what's that scruffy git doing in the back? Lucky bastard! We arrived, parked, and walked up to a large warehouse building. There was a long queue of people in baggy jeans and big Day-glo T-shirts waiting at the door. Annette strode straight past them and up to the door.

"We're friends of Gary." she said. I stood behind nervously, feeling the resentful stares of the people in the queue.

"Alright" said the bouncer "Just you two."

"And him." Annette pointed at me. The bouncer looked doubtful. I felt like an idiot. She pouted at him.

"Go on" she said "He's my brother."

It was brilliant. The doorman laughed, totally disarmed, and waved us in. Inside Cheryl and Annette were laughing.

"Hey girl, you know you still got it."

"And you know that!"

"We've got to use what we've got to get what we want." They chorused.

We found Gary, he was standing in a corner surrounded by a small posse who were twitching to the beat. Greetings and hand slaps all round. I felt strange. Gary was a big geezer with a scar on his cheek which was visible even in this light. Cheryl whispered in his ear. We got the tabs, swallowed them straight away with a coke.

"C'mon, let's look around" said Cheryl. "Maybe there's some tasty blokes here." I hoped not.

The building was some kind of photographic studios by day and was a huge warren of corridors and small rooms. There were two big rooms with crowds of people getting down. We dived into a crowd and started to dance. "That's How I'm Livin'" came on and we went crazy. After a couple of songs the women disappeared to get a drink and I was left alone on the dance floor. I danced on, I could feel the drug in my veins. It was a really nice sensation, like being tickled from inside. Someone handed me a spliff, the music went weird, and great. There were some strange female vocals, like a sort of middle eastern chant and, underneath, what sounded like a plumbing system being dismantled. A smiling boy next to me shouted "Voodoo Ray, Voodoo, Voodoo, Voodoo Ray." Where was Cheryl? I wanted to thank her for bringing me here, for arranging the E. I wanted to share it with her. I thought about my friends. I wished they had been there. I felt a peculiar mixture of sadness and happiness. I danced on. It was all too complicated. The whole situation with Cheryl, I was out of my depth and I suddenly knew it. I felt an intense yearning for simplicity, for straightforwardness. I thought of Brigid. Then I realised that I needed a drink. There was a bar selling water, coke, and orange juice. I had a juice with ice, it was fantastic. The world was suddenly a different place. I went to look for Cheryl. I found Gary and his posse in the same corner. Annette was there. No one knew where Cheryl was. I danced with Annette for half a song and was passed a killer spliff. Feeling better I went off again and danced on my own. It was alright, who cared? What would happen would happen. I felt the E

take hold once again and there I was, lost in the music.

How long had I been dancing? Two hours? three? more? I've no idea. I just remember that at some point, just as I heard the first notes of "Reachin'," there was Cheryl in front of me grinning and dancing.

"Blindin' man."

"Wicked!"

"Better than a sleep-over, eh?"

"You ain't kiddin'"

Then it was over. Annette wanted to go. Gary had finished his business for the night and he stood next to Cheryl with his arm around her waist. I suppressed my jealousy and told myself quickly that they were old friends. On the way back I sat in the front with Annette, Cheryl slept on Gary's shoulder behind. Half way down the Mile End Road we hit a pigeon. I felt sad.

"Oh shit man, we killed it."

"Never mind." said Annette.

"Who gives a fuck" mumbled Gary.

I felt stupid and weak.

"I think it's sweet, caring about God's creatures" said Annette.

"I bite they fuckin' heads off" said Gary.

Cheryl and Annette laughed and I joined in, I had to really. I wished I'd kept my bloody mouth shut.

Crossing the river we were stopped by the police.

"Fuckin' bastards, every bleedin' time." Cheryl was livid.

Gary was quiet. I wondered what he had on him, a load of blow for sure. Any E left over? Where was it all? Shit, this was it, big time.

I really wasn't worried about myself. I was clean. Cheryl was calling them all the names under the sun. If she talked to them we were done for. I was shaking. Gary stared out of the window like we were in a normal traffic jam. Annette got out of the car. I could see the copper look her up and down.

"Dirty fuckin' old Bill bastard." Cheryl hissed.

We waited in the car for what seemed like an eternity. Suddenly the policeman smiled at Annette in a slimy kind of way. She sauntered back to the car and he watched her leerily from behind.

"No fuckin' problem." She smirked as she got back into the drivers seat.

"What happened?" asked Cheryl.

"I just asked him if he's heard of Barry Rivers, that's all."

"Cool man."

"Nice one." Gary murmured.

The copper watched us drive away.

I wondered what the hell kind of a scene I had got into. We went back to Cheryl's flat and smoked spliffs. We talked about the club, how great it was and what wicked music they'd played, then about the incident with the police and they began to reminisce about similar brushes with the law in the past. Cheryl told a story about an argument with some store detectives in Croydon.

"I mean, I hadn't even touched a thing."

"You was goin' to though weren't ya?"

"Alright, maybe I was going to, but the point was, I hadn't you can't trouble someone about what they're gonna do, can ya?"

Gary told a story about jumping over a fence and landing on an Alsatian. We laughed.

"They never fuckin' got me though. When I seen the look in that dog's eye, man, I ran like the devil was after me."

They laughed long and hard. Cheryl wiped her eyes.

"Oh man, I'd have given anything to see that, you with this monster beast bitin' the bum out of your trousers!"

I laughed along, but somehow I couldn't find it as funny as they did.

"You know something" said Gary "We may not have much money now, but if we had all the money we've spent we'd be fuckin' millionaires."

"Innit though" Annette agreed.

They left, and I was finally alone with Cheryl. We watched kid's TV and she told me about Barry Rivers. He was a builder, of sorts. He owned some building firm and lived in Bromley. He was a family man who'd met Annette on the street. I wasn't quite sure what that expression meant. Anyway, he paid for everything, flat, car, clothes, the lot.

"I mean, what's she gonna do? Say no? tell him to fuck off?"

I couldn't think of anything to say. It was all totally beyond my experience. I began to feel I'd led a sheltered life, something I'd never felt before. Then Cheryl started to reminisce.

"I've known Annette and Gary for ages, since we was kids. We was in an 'ome together. It was fuckin' horrible I'll tell ya." She paused, and lit a joint. "I was lucky 'cos I got into this family, but Gary was there for years, nobody wanted him, see. Poor little bastard. Annette couldn't get out either 'cos the boss of the place, well, he had his eye on her if you know what I mean."

Cheryl had shut the curtains, but I could see it was light outside. We watched the TV with the sound turned down and listened to tapes, house music of course, "House music all night long."

Cheryl seemed sad.

"You don't know what it's like, sometimes it's like...sometimes I just wish...sometimes I just hate being black."

I looked at her. There were tears in her eyes. I felt all of her sadness descend on me like a weight. I wanted to be positive, to expound on the glories of black people, to invoke the names of Marcus Garvey, Malcolm X, Rosa Parks, Bob Marley, Smokey Robinson, Maya Angelou and on and on. I realised it would be ridiculous, me, a dumb-assed white boy, what did I know about it? What could I know? I would never know. I felt, instead, an overpowering empathy towards her. Nothing to do with black, white, skin politics. Nothing to do with past experiences. Nothing to do with anything other than the feeling of being with another human being in need. I did what I would have done with anyone in the same situation. I went over to her and took her in my arms. For a moment it was exactly the right thing. She sobbed quietly on my shoulder and we shared her sadness like sadness should be shared. It didn't last. I felt her stiffen and push me away. Gently, but enough. She sat on the edge of the sofa and re-lit the spliff which had gone out. I felt it was now or never, I had to tell her what was on my mind.

"Cheryl" I began

"Please don't"

She turned her back to me.

"I've got to tell yer something."

"Don't say it."

She sounded desperate.

I was so stupid, I couldn't stop. It was like being on a roller coaster.

"I'm falling in love with you."

Silence. then she muttered

"Oh Fuck."

"I'm sorry."

No, that wasn't right. You don't tell someone that you're falling in love with them and then apologise. That was crap but it was too late. It was out of control. I had no idea where this ride was going, but it seemed that we were going to crash. There was a long silence while Cheryl finished the joint and I tried out various lines in my head that might somehow retrieve the situation. I rejected them all, whatever I thought of just wasn't right. Stupid, dumb, naive, I wished I could go back in time and just cancel out the last ten minutes. I opened my mouth to speak for the ten or twelfth time, but before I could make matters worse, Cheryl spoke.

"Why does it always have to be this way?"

It wasn't a question for me, she was asking herself.

"You meet some geezer, everything's cool, he's a real nice bloke, you get on really well. Everything's fuckin' hunky dory and then he has to go and fall in love. Every fuckin' time."

I wanted to say something but she carried on, like she was making a speech she'd made a hundred times before.

"You're a really nice geezer, fuckin' blindin', one of the best, but what do you think it means bein' with me? It ain't that easy, you know. I can be a difficult bitch, you don't know the half of it. You think that Elroy didn't try? You think that guy gives

up easy? I've had him in tears. I've had him wantin' to break my neck. You just don't 'have a clue."

"Well, let me find out."

She smiled at me in a way that made me want to crawl over hot coals for her.

"There's another thing. I've just split up with Elroy. We was together for three years off and on. I just ain't ready for more right now. I need a bit of time, you know what I mean?"

There was a light at the end of the tunnel.

"I don't mind waiting."

She smiled, sighed, and shook her head all at the same time.

"What about Tash? "She stared at me. "I want the best for her, something different from what I had, y'know? I don't want her havin' to say "Mornin' Uncle So and So" to a different bloke every day. She needs a dad. You've seen how she is, but what she don't need is twenty different dads."

I stared at the telly. I wanted to go home. I was exhausted. It was mid-morning and I hadn't slept for at least twenty-four hours. I wanted time to think about it all. At the moment it was all just a huge mess in my brain.

"Here" She handed me her hash. "Build us a nice one, I'm gonna crash out on the sofa if you don't mind. You can take those cushions from the chairs if you want."

She went and got a blanket and spread out on the sofa. I skinned up and lay on the floor on the cushions and watched the Chart Show. Everything was nice again, we laughed at Kylie together, and I felt good. I could wait. I'd show her what a brilliant person I could be. These good times were worth any amount of bad ones. I'm gonna make you love me.

Cheryl fell asleep before the end of the Chart Show. She looked like an angel. I couldn't sleep, try as I might, and after a while, I decided to go home. I got my things together as quietly as I could and tiptoed towards the door, but just as I turned the handle, I heard a whisper from the couch.

"See ya later mate."

I walked up the hill to Crystal Palace. My car was still at Rowell close. It was cold and grey, London in March. There were loads of people waiting at the bus stops. Women with kids, gangs of thirteen year olds, old men and women in grey coats. I felt strange, detached from it all, like a visitor from another planet, planet E. I thought about how different my Friday night had been from any of theirs. I wondered if the old ones had experienced something like that in their youths, falling in love with French girls after being shot in some field in Normandy. The kids had it all before them, they were getting ready, flirting and posing and mucking about. I wondered if any of them could've understood the highs and lows I'd experienced since they went to bed last night. When I got home, Tom was up and about, fixing his bike in the hall while listening to Public Enemy. He was in a good mood.

"Alright?"

"Not bad."

"Where you been then, ya dirty stop out?"

"Went to "Labyrinth" with Cheryl and her posse."

Like that it sounded dead cool. I wasn't gonna tell him everything, just the good bits.

"That's that woman from work, innit?" He tightened a wheel nut. "That's it; finished. I'm gonna fuckin' fly. I think I'm gonna go to work on Monday."

He was really in a good mood. I didn't have the energy to find out why though.

"Listen man, I'm crashin' out for a bit, if anyone comes by I ain't in, alright?"

"That's a roger, big man."

"Roger yer fuckin' self." We laughed.

I liked Tom when he was in a good mood. Well, not too much of a good mood actually, cos then he could be a right arrogant arsehole, but a bit of a good mood was okay. I went to bed, smoked a "Good Nighter" and fell asleep to Aretha Franklin.

When I woke up, it was dark. I went into the sitting room. Douglas was there watching "Blind Date."

Same as it ever was, letting the days go by.

"Now then." He greeted me.

I liked that, it was one of our old Lincolnshire expressions. When he said "Now then" to me, it was like a recognition of our shared past, an acknowledgement of something special between us.

"We've been invited next door for dinner."

"Who by?" I asked warily.

Emma's invitations weren't worth the paper they weren't written on. I didn't feel that much like waiting all night for a cheese sandwich.

"Don't worry, we've been invited by the whole flat. Sam's cooking."

"Tom comin' too?"

"Yeah, all of us, they're getting a video."

"Stormin'!"

That was just what I fancied after last night's excursion, slobbin' out in front of a video.

We watched the rest of Blind Date. It was brilliant as ever. Some tall skinny bloke in glasses chose this huge fat funny black woman who offered to reach the parts the other girls don't reach. When the screen went back, the look on his face was something to see. He gave her a really big hug and the audience wet themselves. So did me and Doug. It was fantastic when Douglas laughed, maybe because it didn't happen that often.

"What do ya reckon?"

"No chance, she's too much of a handful for him."

"You can say that again."

When we got next door, Tom was already there, smoking blow with Emma and Jo. They were listening to one of Emma's tapes. Sam was in the kitchen doing something with some lentils. I thought of offering to help but decided against it. Being a new man was all very well, but being bossed around in someone else's kitchen just didn't appeal on this particular occasion. We joined the others in the sitting room. Emma's musical tastes were eclectic, to say the least, and the tape we listened to that evening was no exception. The Last Poets "It's a Trip," Prince "If I was Your Girlfriend," "Do you know the way to San Jose," Joni Mitchell, Salt-n-Pepa. I liked nearly all of it although I have to admit that I've never been that keen on Donovan who suddenly came on singing a song about witches or something. Jo winced, Tom laughed, but Doug said it was alright and we should be more open-minded. Emma said thank you and we sat through it. It didn't matter that much anyway because Tom was busy telling some gory tale about a crash he'd seen up town. I decided to change the subject,

"What's the video then?"

"Chinese Ghost Story" said Tom, like we'd know what he was talking about.

"Chinese what?" asked Doug as if Tom had just mentioned some particularly unpleasant skin disease.

"Stewart told me about it, supposed to be wicked."

"Yeah" said Emma, "I read about it in City Limits."

"It's not a Kung Fu film, is it?" Douglas wasn't that keen.

I could understand his reservations. Tom's taste in movies couldn't be described as impeccable and a recommendation from Stewart wouldn't have had me running to the video shop. Not that it was far to run. Big Ron's Video Emporium was across the road in a ground floor flat. He used to be a council tenant but had given up paying rent when all the squatters moved in. Now his flat was a video shop. He was a genuine South London villain, not big time, but big enough for our community. There was a story that one of our neighbours, Loopy Lee, overslept one day and forgot to take a video back on time. Ron kicked his door in and set fire to his guitar. I reckon it was true, because I saw this half burnt out guitar lying on a

skip a few days later. Emma wanted to make a sculpture out of it, Tom wanted to nail it to the door of the video shop as a warning. He thought Big Ron would approve, but before we had a chance to test his theory, some kids got hold of it and finished the job. Sam took a wicked photo of it burning away on the pavement.

It was dinner time, we all trooped into the kitchen and helped ourselves. It was something called "Lentil Bake" which Sam had got out of an organic cookbook I'd given her for her birthday. That made me feel sort of involved. There were also enormous amounts of wholemeal rice which somehow managed to be both glutinous and hard at the same time. The lentil thing was a bit dry, but luckily there were layers of tomatoes in it which helped. The whole thing was extremely tasteless and I couldn't help but notice that everyone was putting large amounts of salt and pepper on it. Emma, Doug, and Jo were very polite, asking Sam what spices she'd used, saying how great vegetarian food was, and how you really don't need meat to make a meal interesting. The spell was broken by Tom, of course, when he asked if he could have some tomato ketchup. Doug called him a philistine, Emma said it was bloody typical and I noticed that Sam was a bit upset. I could see his point, and if he'd got some, I probably would have had some too. At the same time, though, I was pissed off with him. Why couldn't he just eat it up like the rest of us? It was obvious that it would upset Sam, was it really such a big sacrifice to make to make someone else happy? That was Tom, though, if he's cooked, he wouldn't care a bit if you poured curry powder all over it, so he couldn't understand why Sam was upset now. He didn't get his ketchup though, and we all ate as much as we could, politely refusing offers of second helpings on grounds of being "so full," and "I couldn't possibly eat any more" and so on. Only Douglas had another plateful, but he probably hadn't eaten a full meal for days. Of course, this gave him a distinct moral advantage over Tom as well, but I'm not sure if that advantage, normally so easily won, was worth the effort of ploughing through that rice again. I don't know why I felt sorry for Sam though, she was such a hardliner over food. Everything had to be free-range vegetarian biodegradable. She even called me a fascist once for preferring smooth peanut butter to crunchy. It was a bit strange because her dad had made his fortune in the frozen poultry business.

I made a cup of tea, which wasn't as easy as it sounds, because Emma and Sam both wanted different types of herbal tea, Douglas wanted Earl Grey, and Jo insisted on P.G. tips "so strong you can stand your spoon up in it." Me and Tom fancied a coffee but they only had some sort of de-caffeinated Kaffee Hag type thing. Luckily Emma remembered she had some Nicaraguan coffee she'd bought in an effort to make the world a better place. At this moment, by a circuitous route, and not at all in the way she'd intended, she'd succeeded.

We got comfortable. Jo and Tom skinned up, and we watched the film. It was wonderful. A weird mixture of horror, romance, and comedy. Lots of scenes stolen from Western films and moments of pure originality like a Taoist rap scene and an underwater kiss. It was kitsch and stupid and scary and funny, beautiful and revolting and unlike anything I'd ever seen before. The audience was pretty quiet most of the time apart from Sam who kept asking what was going on just at crucial points when you didn't feel like going into a long explanation, or when you weren't supposed to know. It's pretty hard to explain why a thousand year old ghost, now residing in a tree, is attacking a bearded Taoist swordsman at the best of times, let alone when you are trying to figure it out for yourself.

After the movie, Jo went out and Doug went home to bed. The rest of us sat around and chatted. Sam told us all about her current community arts project. It was pretty hard to follow. Apparently some artists from Sheffield had come down

and were organising an event in Deptford on a council estate. It was something involving a giant spider which was being made by kids from a local primary school. It would be paraded through the streets to represent "Women's Energy."

"I've got to run all these workshops at the community centre" Sam told us. I wondered what that meant but was scared to ask in case I sounded ignorant.

"Whose idea was the spider?" asked Tom.

"This woman, Ros McKay, from Sheffield, she's brilliant, a really powerful woman, she studied puppet making in Switzerland."

I thought about powerful women, what would Cheryl say to Ros McKay I wondered. "Bollocks mate," probably. I wanted to laugh but I couldn't, so I went to the toilet to be on my own and I sat in there and tried to imagine what Cheryl was doing at that moment. Sleeping? Raving? Drinking Brandy and Babycham? I was glad that the subject had changed when I got back to the sitting room. Now they were talking about feminism and Tom was making an almost plausible case for men being the new victims since the rise of the women's movement.

"It's obvious innit?" he was saying. "All those adverts for jobs in City Limits. I couldn't go for one of them."

"Course you can" said Sam.

"No man, 'cos I just ain't a one legged black vegetarian lesbian, am I? Don't matter which way you look at it."

"Come on" said Emma "It's not as if you want any of those jobs anyway."

"No, but if I did."

"And what about all those jobs in the city, in banks and in the civil service and all that?"

"I don't want one of them either."

"Well, what do you want?"

"I want to have a good time, and I want to be rich."

"I don't want to be rich."

"Me neither."

"Why not?" I had to say something. "What's wrong with being rich?"

"I don't think it makes you happy, that's all."

"Not like being poor, eh?"

We all laughed.

"Look at Sam's dad, he's rich, inne? And he's dead unhappy."

"It's not quite that bad" said Sam. "Anyway, the point is that women are oppressed on this planet and a couple of adverts in the City Limits don't change that."

"Yeah, OK," conceded Tom, "but what about you two?"

"What about us?"

"Are you gonna tell me that you're any more oppressed than us? We're living in a concrete situation too, you know."

Tom always quoted reggae records when he was trying to be political. He'd usually start going on about "Babylon," "I and I," and "Unity of jah people" and so on. It really got on my nerves.

"Come on, there's women being beaten, raped, forced to go on the streets, you know all this stuff. I don't need to say it." Emma had a way of getting to the point.

"Yeah" added Sam. "We get oppressed every time we go out of the house, whistled at, condescended to, put down. You're a man, you just can't imagine what it's like.

"So what are we supposed to do?"

"Stop whining about City Limits and give us some support."

"It is difficult for us too, you know." I tried to formulate my thoughts. "You've got your all-women meetings and parties. You've got a shared purpose, a shared enemy if you like. What have we got? The last place I'd want to be is at an all-men meeting."

"Yeah right," said Tom. "All we've got is a load of guilt."

"Some people should feel guilty" Emma looked at Tom.

"Well," said Sam, "It's up to you to organise. there are all-men's groups too."

"Imagine it" Tom winced. "A load of sociology lecturers sitting around drinking chamomile tea and learning to knit."

We laughed at the idea of Tom knitting.

"Anyway," he continued "You know what Marley said eh? No woman, no cry."

"I used to think that meant if there weren't any women there wouldn't be any crying." said Emma.

"What does it mean actually?" asked Sam.

I tried to explain,

"It means don't worry darlin', we'll make it."

"How patronising!"

"Not really."

"Well," asked Emma "what's all that stuff about her cooking porridge?"

"And WE shall cook only porridge" sang Tom "Of which I'll share with you."

"That's very nice of him I must say."

"It sounds a bit like living with Doug."

When we stopped laughing, Sam said

"Seriously, though, how's it going with old Dougie boy?"

"He seems alright at the moment." said I.

"You didn't see him last week though." said Tom. "He's OK at the moment, but Monday and Tuesday he just stayed in bed all day."

I realized with a pang of guilt that I hadn't noticed at all. True, I'd been at work and I'd been so immersed in Cheryl that I hadn't had much time to think about the comings and goings of my flat mates.

"Well," said Emma, "It was raining all day on Monday, I felt like staying in bed myself."

"Yeah, but the difference is, you didn't, did you?"

"He really needs some professional counselling" said Sam.

"He really needs a kick up the arse" said Tom.

"If he could just get some kind of job, maybe it'd help him get a bit of self confidence." I tried to think positively. "It's such downer to be so poor all the time."

"Remember his last job though."

"What was that?"

"On a building site about six months ago, he lasted about a week, hated it, something happened to his leg."

"What?"

"The same old thing that always happens when he has to do something, the old Doug leg problem, the old war wound. He even got it when he had that interview at the Job Centre." said Tom.

"Poor sod" said Emma.

"I've got some phone numbers of some really good therapists, maybe I'll give them to him." said Sam.

"I keep wanting to mend that coat of his" added Emma.

"What about those socks?"

"Rather you than me."

"The thing is," I wanted to really tackle the problem somehow, "It doesn't matter what you say or do. you can fix his socks, give him phone numbers, kick him up the arse, none of it will make the slightest difference cos only one person can help Douglas and that's Douglas himself."

Tom and Sam agreed, but Emma said

"That just sounds like an excuse for not doing anything."

"Yeah, maybe" I was exasperated. "But what exactly do you suggest?"

"I don't know" she answered. "But there's got to be something we can do".

That was it, back to square one, the way it always was when we talked about Doug. Nobody had the answer, but we all wanted to do something in our own particular way. I wondered if he knew we discussed him like this. What would he have thought? It was a bit weird, but you couldn't just ignore someone who seemed to be cracking up right in front of your face, especially when that person was an old

friend.

Christmas approached in it's usual promising threatening way. This year I would actually have some money to buy presents. That would be novel. I was sad about Brigid going, but not as sad as Tom, who just moped around the house moaning about being dictated to by a bunch of Christian do-gooders.

"Why can't I celebrate when I want to? I just don't feel like celebrating right now. I reckon I'm gonna fuck off to Morocco or somewhere where they don't have Christmas"

"Yeah, yeah Tom, tell me about it"

"It's bollocks"

"You're just pissed off because Brigid's going away aren't ya?"

"Well, it hasn't improved my mood"

"You can always visit her can't ya? it ain't that far to Dublin"

"I dunno, maybe"

"Why not?"

"I'm thinkin' about it, alright?"

I suppose the seed was sown.

Sometimes I'd imagine how it would be. I'd wake up in the morning and there she would be, lying beside me, sleeping in that sweet way she had. I'd get up and make us a coffee, then I'd take Tash to school. I'd come back to find her still in bed, waiting for me. We'd spend the day in bed. Then what? Same again the next day, and the next. I'd live there. We'd live together. We'd do everything together. I could look at her face all day. Nothing to stop me. If she was upset, I'd comfort her. I'd walk down the street knowing she was mine. We'd go on holiday together, I'd show her things, take her places. She'd smile at me, she'd appreciate me. I'd be different. Better. Everything would be different. Better. We'd spend all day in bed together. One day.

We had a kind of Christmas and farewell party at Rowell close. It was in the Day Centre. Not exactly my idea of a party location. Not exactly my idea of a party. Nicola presented Brigid with some chocolates and Declan made a sort of speech and that was it. Afterwards we went to the pub. I sat between Brigid and Emma. There wasn't any problem. Emma put all the blame on Tom. Cheryl was there drinking rum and coke.

"I think it's completely out of order Brigid, you pissin' off and leavin' us alone" She said.

"Innit though" I agreed

"I reckon she's got some geezer waitin' over there"

I felt tension on both sides.

"Maybe she's tryin' to get away from someone here" diplomatic Declan.

"Yeah, I am actually" Brigid looked at him seriously.

"Oh yeah, very interesting, who is it then? Anyone we know?"

"Someone we all know very well"

Emma squirmed.

"Go on then, spill the beans, who's to blame?"

Declan leant across the table. Brigid grinned, looked him in the eye and said,

"You"

We all laughed, and I felt Emma relax next to me. We got drunk and Cheryl sat on my knee which was nice but strange. Emma gave me a funny look. Brigid announced that we would all be welcome any time we wanted to visit Dublin. She gave us all her address and phone number. I wondered if anyone would ever use them.

I worked over Christmas because we got paid double. We did just the same things, ate turkey, watched telly, drank wine. We weren't supposed to, but Nicola was back in Donegal. The only difference was that we had to cut up the Christmas dinner and feed it to the people who couldn't feed themselves. Maybe that happens in a lot of households, I don't know.

New year was crap. Tom made us go all the way to Camden for some party that was a total flop. We stood on an empty dancefloor drinking cans of Tennents wishing we were anywhere else but there. I wondered why I hadn't done something with Cheryl. I would've but I was trying to be cool.

"If you have a shit New year it means you're gonna have a good year" grinned Tom

"Bollocks!"

"Nah, really. We should've gone over to Dublin though. I bet that's good crack"

"Well, anywhere other than this shithole" I said gloomily.

It was cold and boring in January. We didn't have any heating in our flat of course but there was free electricity because me and Tom had jammed a nail

across where the main fuse was supposed to be. Work wasn't the same without Brigid, nor was Tom. Douglas stopped going out at all.

I gave up trying to be cool and spent a lot of time at Cheryl's. There was always something to be done, someone to be taken somewhere, something to be picked up from somewhere else. I did it all gladly. I was waiting, I was being good.

One day Cheryl was on the phone . She was in a state.

"Oh fuck, so what happened?yeah, and then?.....Oh no man, I don't believe it..... fuckin' typical.....Where is he now then?"

I sat and waited for her to finish, wondering what was going on. Eventually she put the phone down.

"Give us a smoke" she was nervous.

"What's up then?"

"It's Paul, you know Tash's Dad"

"What's wrong?"

"Oh I can't tell yer. He's like..... coke you know what I mean?"

I did and I didn't.

"He's really fuckin' strung out" she continued " I've gotta go and see him as soon as possible"

So I took her. It was late afternoon and getting dark. We didn't talk much. I wanted to know about what was happening but I didn't think I should ask. Cheryl was not forthcoming. We went an unfriendly estate in Streatham and I parked the car.

"I'll only be a while" she said as she got out of the car. "I've just got to give him something"

"Alright" I smiled.

"Thanks mate" she shut the door.

I had two tapes in the car. Two C90s. I had listened to both of them all the way through by the time she got back.

Was I angry? Was I hurt? Was I confused? I was all of them but most of all I was good. When she came back I acted as if it was totally normal for me to sit in my car waiting for someone for three hours. She was apologetic though.

"Oh shit man, I'm sorry"

"Is everything OK?"

"Yeah, it's OK now. I sorted him out"

I didn't know what that meant and she didn't tell me.

Sometimes we went to visit Cheryl's mum. She wasn't her real mum but she did more for her daughter than most mothers I knew. Whenever Cheryl wanted to go out she'd take Tash round and leave her there, sometimes for a whole weekend. Me and Cheryl's mum got on well, I think she thought I was a good influence. It's hard to say really because I couldn't understand a word she said. She had a thick Jamaican accent and spoke very quietly. Her house was always full of children, grandchildren, cousins, neighbours, music and food. It didn't matter what time we arrived, she'd always have a pot of curry lamb on the stove. Cheryl would translate,

"She says do you want some plantain with that?"

"Oh, er, it's OK thanks" I'd mumble

"Don't say that, you'll upset 'er"

"Oh, I just didn't wanna be any trouble"

"It ain't no trouble, it's already on the cooker. She reckons you need fattening up. Mum, he says yes. Oi Tash! what you playin' at?"

I'd sit there surrounded by screaming kids. Eating, feeling guilty, confused and proud.

There was this bar called "El Sombrero" down on Church street. It was supposed to be a Mexican restaurant but it was really only popular because it stayed open until two in the morning. Grant had a phase of going there every weekend. That was before he got banned for skinning up on the bar. I was in there one night with Grant and Mushroom Mike who'd just arrived back from Brittany. It was snowing outside and the place was packed, we were squashed against the bar, sweating in our coats and shouting above the din, when Grant saw some people leaving.

"Quick, let's grab a seat"

We pushed our way over, and, after a bit of an argument with someone else who'd had the same idea, sat down. I was just taking a sip of my beer when Grant nudged me in the ribs.

"What ya doin'?"

"Look what's on our table" he whispered in my ear.

There was nothing on the table apart from a thousand beer bottles and a big overflowing ashtray but I saw what he meant. We were sharing it with three women. They were all pretty, sort of foreign looking, dark hair and eyes. It seemed very unlikely to me that they would have the slightest interest in us but Grant was slavering like a dog. I hated it when he got like that. We carried on drinking and bullshitting, Grant continually eyeing up the women. I was surprised when I got back from the toilet and found Grant sitting on his own and Mushroom deep in conversation with the girls. I grinned at Grant.

"What happened?"

"I dunno, they just started talking to him. Fuckin' unbelievable"

We waited for a couple of minutes and then Grant tapped Mushroom on the shoulder.

"Aren't ya gonna introduce us then?"

"Oh er, right, well I don't know their names" Mushroom looked flustered.

"Good evening, I'm Grant" He leant across the table.

The women smiled politely and said their names.

"And where are you from?"

"Espain" said the boldest of the three. I wanted to escape but couldn't. I still had half my beer and I'd just been to the toilet.

"Oh yeah, I know it well. Which part?"

"Pardon?"

"Which city?"

"I'm from Madrid, and they're from Sevilla"

"Oh yeah, I got pissed in Seville once, fuckin' ratarsed"

The woman smiled sweetly at this fascinating piece of information and carried on talking to Mushroom. The other two were deep in conversation. Grant looked at

me and rolled his eyes. I pretended not to notice.

"He's a sly one that Mushroom" Grant shook his head.

I grinned.

"Leave it out, why don't you just let him get on with it?"

Mushroom Mike was anything but sly. He was completely harmless. If he had a fault it was that he was too good natured. That and the fact that his brain was somewhat addled by years of psychedelic abuse. He didn't get his name for nothing. Grant leant across the table again.

"Is he boring you?" he asked aggressively.

"No he isn't" said the bold one from Madrid. Mushroom looked embarrassed, the other two looked nervous.

"I was just wondering, 'cos he can be a right boring arsehole sometimes"

"There's only one boring arsehole around here" said the woman.

Grant sat back and looked at me for encouragement. I didn't give him any. Then, without warning, he picked up the ashtray and poured the contents on to Mushroom Mikes head. There was a shocked silence. The women looked at each other in amazement. Mushroom stood up and tried to brush the dog end out of his hair. Other people in the bar looked over. Grant giggled manically.

"You wanker!" said Mushroom and he fled for the toilet. The girls started gibbering in Spanish and I was left alone with Grant.

"What the fuck did you do that for?"

"Just a joke, you lot got no sense of humour that's all"

"Jesus, that guy's supposed to be your friend. You don't do that to your friends"

"Don't be so boring"

Mushroom came back with his hair wet, he'd tried to wash it in the toilet sink. The girls were sympathetic to him for a couple of minutes and then left. Not before calling Grant some things in Spanish which didn't sound too complimentary. We sat around in silence for a while before going home. When we parted Mushroom gave Grant half his hash. I never understood why.

We'd be somewhere. Cheryl and me. Anywhere, supermarket, club, on the street. People would look, they'd stare. You could see them. Double take. What? I loved it. Standing next to her, being with her. On top of the world. She told everyone how nice I was, how good I was, how she didn't know what she'd do without me. Deeper and deeper, in love with you I'm falling. Falling.
