

One Hand Clapping

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Anthony Burgess



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Introduction by Andrew Biswell

When Anthony Burgess returned to England from Brunei in the autumn of 1959, he was in a bad way. Having spent five exhausting years working in the tropical heat as a schoolmaster, he had collapsed in his classroom and been stretchered off to hospital with a mysterious illness. He was flown to London where, over the course of several weeks, he underwent a series of neurological tests, which were inconclusive. Eventually he was discharged from hospital, but his consultant warned him that, for the sake of his health, he should never return to the East. It was evident from this point that his overseas teaching career was at an end.

Fortunately for Burgess and his first wife, he had already embarked on a second career as a comic novelist. The three volumes of his *Malayan Trilogy* had already appeared to favourable reviews, and his fourth novel had been delivered and was awaiting publication. Contemplating an uncertain future as a freelance writer, Burgess set himself the challenge of finding out how many novels it was possible to write in a single year. He rented a cheap flat in Hove, a fairly respectable town on the south coast of England, and set about the task of becoming a full-time writer. Within twelve months he had finished five publishable novels, including *The Doctor Is Sick*, *Inside Mr Enderby* and *One Hand Clapping*. The works he produced in this remarkable period are widely considered to be among his best. There are no signs of haste or carelessness in this series of novels, despite the speed at which they were written. It was as if the loss of his teaching job had suddenly opened the lock gates, allowing the waters of creativity to gush out. In *Urgent Copy*, a volume of his literary essays, he compares the fluency of his writing to the music of Mozart, who is said to have finished the overture to *The Magic Flute* while the audience was taking its seats in the theatre. Burgess, who once told an interviewer that he got creative blocks only from the stationer, was a firm believer in the connection between necessity and invention.

The copiousness of his productivity caused alarm among the editorial staff of William Heinemann who had been his publishers since 1956. The prospect of flooding the market with five new Burgess novels did not fill them with delight, and they were worried about not being able to get enough review coverage for each book. These novels were gradually released over a period of three years. Heinemann also proposed to invent a *nom de plume* for Burgess, and to augment the disguise by publishing two of these books under the imprint of Peter Davies, which they owned. Thus it was that the writer ‘Joseph Kell’ was born, taking his name from the *Book of Kells*, the ninth-century Irish illuminated manuscript, which had been published in facsimile for the first time in 1951. *One Hand Clapping* was marketed as Joseph Kell’s first novel, and – like many other excellent first novels before and since – seems to have been totally ignored by the national newspapers. The elaborate rebranding scheme had backfired, generating no reviews whatsoever, and Burgess cursed the incompetence of ‘William Hangman’, as he renamed his publisher in letters to his friends.

Despite his early lack of recognition and critical attention, this was not to be the end of Joseph Kell. His second novel, *Inside Mr Enderby* (1963), was favourably reviewed by Peter Green in the *Daily Telegraph*, and by David Lodge in the *Spectator*. Another review, published in the *Yorkshire Post*, was distinctly sceptical: ‘This is, in many ways, a dirty book. It is full of bowel-blasts and flatulent borborygms, emetic meals (“thin but over-savoury stews”, Enderby calls them) and halitosis. It may well make some people sick, and those of my readers with tender stomachs are advised to let it alone.’ But the author of this review was none other than Anthony Burgess, who was promptly dismissed from his job as the fiction critic of the *Yorkshire Post* when the fact of his having reviewed his own book became known.¹ When the second Enderby novel appeared in 1968, a note on the dust jacket explained: ‘Before he died, Joseph Kell bequeathed to Anthony Burgess not merely his

copyrights and royalties, but also his identity. [...] Mr Burgess's talent is revealed, on the evidence of this sequel, as not inferior to that of the late Joseph Kell.' Another unexpected twist followed when Burgess produced the first (unpublished) draft of his novel, *The Pianoplayers*, in 1977, and signed the title page with the name 'Josephine Kell', who was presumably Joseph Kell's fictional sister. This raises the intriguing possibility that Burgess was originally thinking about publishing *The Pianoplayers* under a female pseudonym. The idea of Burgess as a practical joker, or a protean impersonator, is perhaps not as familiar to readers as it deserves to be.

At the request of James Michie, Burgess's regular editor at Heinemann, the jacket copy for the first hardback edition of *One Hand Clapping* was written by the author himself:

In this story the young married couple are an ordinary decent young married couple, like what you and I are, only better-looking, perhaps. It's all about the husband having a sort of brain good at winning quizzes, so he wins The Big Money on a TV quiz and then he puts the money on horses and he becomes a rich man. And so then they have the best of everything, like a mink for her and staying at posh hotels and travelling to America and the West Indies and suchlike places, but there's always been something niggling in him all the time about the world being a rotten place and not even money can buy anything to make the world a less rotten place and so he suggests that they do themselves in.

That's her story anyway. There is also her sister and brother-in-law in the book, too, and there is this young poet called Redvers Glass that is very attractive. It's all about what it is like living today in England, with the TV and the Supermarket and the weather never too good, and how to get rich and yet not change anything really at all.

One Hand Clapping succeeds as a novel because it creates a totally plausible voice. The story is told by Janet Shirley, aged twenty-three, poorly educated, working-class, but unmistakably a force for life. Janet lives with her husband Howard in 'Bradcaster', a fictional version of Burgess's native Manchester. Their life is one of simple pleasures and their aspirations are modest, until Howard appears on a television quiz show. After this life-changing event, they begin to associate with unsavoury characters, chief among whom is Redvers Glass, an impoverished poet who benefits from Howard's patronage. Although the story itself might appear, if viewed from a distance, to be either flimsy or sensational, Janet herself is the true centre of attention, and her narration is characterful enough to bind the various elements together. Recalling her school days at the Hawthorn Road Secondary Mod, she tells us that 'Mr Thornton, who taught history, said he knew we wouldn't be interested in all those old kings and queens so he just played his guitar and sang very dull songs, so we weren't allowed to have any history'. Burgess makes it clear that Janet, though obviously intelligent and observant, is very much a product of the culture of her time. He is fascinated by her; and she is fascinated by the technological innovations of the post-war era, such as tinned food, television and advertising. This allows the novel to carry out its bigger task of making a diagnosis of contemporary culture: 'I was suddenly very hungry as soon as they brought on the commercials, what with advertising tinned Steak and Kidney Pudding and then tinned Risotto and whatnot. So I made myself very quick sandwich of a wedge of corned beef left over from the morning [...] So my heart was in my mouth, all mixed up with corned-beef sandwich.' As the novel progresses, Janet acquires a stature beyond that of a mere Pavlovian subject, salivating at food adverts on television. She becomes a vehicle for a recognisably Lancastrian style of gallows humour – also found in north-western comedians such as Caroline Aherne and Les Dawson – which Burgess had absorbed as a schoolboy in the 1920s and 1930s: 'The best first thing to do, when you've got a dead body [...] on the kitchen floor is to make yourself a good strong cup of tea.'

One Hand Clapping is one of a group of novels in which Burgess considers the condition of England in the early 1960s. In the earliest of these books, *The Right to An Answer*, the jaded ex-colonial narrator J.W. Denham characterises England in terms of disorder and unease: 'married women dancing to the juke-box'; 'casserole from a time-controlled electric cooker'; 'semi-detacheds with the pebble-dash all over the blind-end walls'; and 'the alphabet pasta of the television aerials –

X, Y, H, T'. Elsewhere, and less gloomily, Burgess parodies aspects of his own situation in *The Doctor is Sick*, which involves a lecturer in phonetics escaping from hospital on the eve of a serious brain operation, roaming London in search of his absent wife, keeping company with mobsters and villains (who speak a strange yet plausible slang invented by Burgess), and being reduced to petty crime in order to survive in the unforgiving underworld of Soho. As in *One Hand Clapping*, Burgess's interest lies in the language and behaviour of ordinary people.

He was well placed to observe some of the recent shifts in English culture, having returned to it in 1959 after an absence of half a decade, during which it had changed very rapidly. In *One Hand Clapping*, he articulates an anxiety about the 'deadly transatlantic influence' of American culture, which was creeping inexorably into Britain through films and popular music. An affluent new youth culture had begun to emerge, manifesting itself first in the Teddy Boys (originally known as the 'Edwardian strutters') and later in the dandified sub-cultures of the Mods and Rockers, whose conflicts on Brighton beach in the mid-1960s were anticipated by Burgess in his depiction of gang violence in *A Clockwork Orange*. Rationing of commodities such as meat and sugar had still been in force when Burgess left England in 1954. When he came back, he was astonished by the variety of goods available in the shops. In a radio interview with Patricia Brent in 1959, he spoke about his impressions of the country he had left, which he now returned to with an outsider's eye: 'I could spend my entire leave, I think, just looking at the shops, just looking at the enormous cauliflowers, which one doesn't have to pay ten shillings for, as I do in Borneo. The marvellous quality of the meat, the entertainment, the spring flowers [...] And yet all people can do, it seems, is to watch the television.'

Burgess's attitude towards television was complicated and full of contradictions. Although some of his writing about quiz shows and commercials bristles with contempt, he was one of the first literary writers to involve himself in the making of television programmes, and he took it seriously enough as an art form to spend five years writing a regular column of TV criticism for the *Listener*. This was at a time when other novelists boasted that they did not even own a television. Evelyn Waugh had to borrow a set from his servants to watch his famous *Face to Face* interview with John Freeman.

A reading of Burgess's *Listener* reviews demonstrates that he was much more excited about television than *One Hand Clapping* might lead us to believe. He was full of praise for innovative programmes such as *The Prisoner* and *Till Death Us Do Part*, though *Coronation Street* reminded him so painfully of his childhood that he could not watch it with pleasure. He acknowledged that the 1964 broadcast of Benjamin Britten's *War Requiem* from Coventry Cathedral was an event of great cultural significance, and one of his reviews provoked a formal complaint from the Soviet ambassador and a denunciation of Burgess as a Western imperialist lackey on Radio Moscow. When he ended his stint as a television critic, he acknowledged that he had learned a good deal from his regular viewing. And he went on to write scripts for a number of epic television serials, including *Moses the Lawgiver* for Lew Grade and *Jesus of Nazareth* for Franco Zeffirelli. If his response to visual culture in *One Hand Clapping* is in some respects satirical, it is clear that, like many of the best satirists, he was half in love with the object of his criticism.

One other kind of cultural discussion in *One Hand Clapping* concerns the value of poetry and the behaviour of bohemian poets. When Howard commissions Redvers Glass to write a long poem about the state of society, Burgess is able to satisfy his impulse (frequently visible elsewhere) to smuggle poetry into the text of his novel. The figure of the poet is important because he is able to articulate problems and ideas which lie beyond the limits of Howard and Janet's straightforward language. But his presence adds another element to the story, since it allows Burgess to say something about the importance of art, and to imply that lives lived without any awareness of literature and poetry are in some sense impoverished. According to Burgess's scheme of things, Redvers Glass seems to stand at

the opposite end of the cultural spectrum from the television quiz show *Over and Over*, with its moronic presenter (modelled on Hughie Green) and crowd-pleasing vulgarity. On the other hand, the novel has its doubts about the disreputable poet, and there is a strong possibility that his poem is less remarkable and original than he thinks it is. Some of the lines, and the general atmosphere of the poem, are lifted directly from T. S. Eliot's unfinished melodrama, *Sweeney Agonistes*.

If Burgess was unforgiving in his fictional treatment of bohemian poets, this was partly because his first wife had had an affair with Dylan Thomas during the Second World War. It is no coincidence that Redvers Glass bears a close physical resemblance to Thomas: 'He was a young man with a bitter sort of face, no overcoat on but a thick pullover up to his neck. His hair wasn't exactly long but he had a long straight bit in front that kept falling into his eyes. His complexion was very sallow, rather dirty-looking.' Thomas was remembered even by his friends as an accomplished sponger who would turn up unexpectedly and mess up other people's houses, and many of his less attractive qualities are given to the poet in the novel. Yet there is an element of affectionate joking in Burgess's presentation of Redvers Glass, and the memory of his wife's affair did not get in the way of his sincere admiration of Thomas as 'the greatest lyric poet of the twentieth century.'²

Despite its dark prognostications about the forces which threaten to undermine English culture, *One Hand Clapping* is a novel which invites us to respond with laughter rather than despair. If Burgess is vaguely anxious about the future, the character of Janet is a persuasive answer to many of those anxieties. Her energy and optimism, qualified by large doses of wit and cynicism, will be enough to see her through. In *One Hand Clapping* and *The Pianoplayers*, Burgess produced a remarkable pair of novels with strong female narrators. The republication of this book allows us to think again about his reputation, and to see how very good he could be as a comedian of culture.

Chapter 1

I was Janet Shirley, *née* Barnes, and my husband was Howard Shirley, and in this story he was nearly twenty-seven and I was just gone twenty-three. We lived on the Shortshawe Council Estate in North Bradcaster, Number 4 Cranmer Road off Whitgift Road which leads into town, and we paid thirty-two and six a week rent. Just up the road from us was, and is, I guess, Shoe Lane which was on the TV commercials as Shining Shoe Lane, which made all those who lived there very boastful in a silly way as if they'd done something clever. All the roads on our side were named after bishops – Ridley Road, Latimer Road, Fisher Road and Laud Road – and there was never any call to use those in TV commercials. Howard worked at the Oak Crescent Used Car Mart and I helped to fill up the shelves at the Hastings Road Supermarket, so at the time there was nothing very special about us. We had a TV, a radio with a strap like a handbag for carrying round the house, a washing-machine, a vac, but no car of our own or children. We had been married since I was nineteen. That was not young in my family, my mother was married at sixteen and my sister Myrtle (Sadler) at seventeen. My sister Myrtle, as you'll see, made a mess of her marriage, but that was nothing to do with marrying young, she would have made a mess at whatever age, marrying a man like Michael.

Howard and I met when I was still at the Hawthorn Road Secondary Modern School, only fifteen, and he had been out of the Grammar School three years. I looked older than I was, like most of the girls did, and as there wasn't a lot to learn in school we used to spend a lot of time on our appearance. I will say, though, that Miss Spenser took us twice a week for Make-up, Deportment and Dress Sense but the poor old thing did not know much about it. Besides, it always seemed wrong to us girls to have something like that in a school, and that the tax-payer's money should be spent better. There was also Ballroom Dancing and what was called Homecraft. None of the teachers knew very much about what they taught and it was pathetic, sometimes, the way they tried to make our schooldays happy. There was young Mr Slessor with the beard who said he was a beatnik and called us cats and chicks. He was supposed to teach English but said like he didn't dig the king's jive. Crazy, man, real cool. It was pathetic. Mr Thornton, who taught history, said he knew we wouldn't be interested in all those old kings and queens so he just played his guitar and sang very dull songs, so we weren't allowed to have any history and I was good at that at the primary. Then there was old puffing and blowing Mr Portman, a portly man you could say, who took us for General Science, but he was a bit too fond of asking us girls to go round and help him in the little apparatus room, breathing hard on us. I hit him once but he never did anything about that. I came out of Hawthorn Road Secondary Mod knowing nothing, but they always say that if you're a girl, and pretty like I was, you didn't need to know all that much. I could look smashing, though I say it myself, and I got whistled at, and I could do snappy back-answers, like when some boy said at a dance, 'What's cooking, good-looking?' you had to reply 'Nothing spectacular, Dracula.' But sometimes they were so ignorant they didn't know what Dracula was, so you had to think of something else.

Howard wasn't like that, he was a serious boy and good at athletics. He was modest, really, despite being smashing-looking in a very dark way, and he used to say he hadn't the brains for the better class of jobs (which are not well-paid, anyway) and was better at practical things like car-engines than books and figures and the rest of the things that boys go in for when they've got G.C.E. Ordinary Level. Howard did very well in his G.C.E., but there was some trouble about his papers, because the examiners said he'd cribbed, just copying word for word from the books. But it was explained by his headmaster that Howard had one of those very unusual brains like a camera, it could sort of photograph things. It was really uncanny sometimes, the way his brain worked. You could give Howard anything to look at, as it might be a song or a page of a book or a list of names or anything

like that, and he'd look at it then close his eyes and then speak out without making any mistakes what he'd read. He should really have been on the TV with it, which he was in a way later, as you'll see, but he always said it didn't mean cleverness or anything like that. It was only a photographic brain, he called it, and he said that a lot of people had it and it meant nothing at all.

We met because we were both keen on dancing, doing rock 'n' roll in a very athletic way, Howard throwing me over his shoulder and me doing the splits to loud applause, and all that sort of thing, so that we won one or two prizes and even went in for some of the big competitions, though at those we always seemed to get beaten by couples on holiday from Denmark or Sweden, very blonde and slim and sunburned all over. I was very blonde and slim too, but not in that sort of way, more in an English way, if you see what I mean, like some of the models on the TV commercials. I've always looked older than my years, and I never seemed to go through a real teenage stage, with pop-singer clubs and screaming and all that. I think that's what appealed to Howard, not that I've ever been really *serious*, but I had a bit more sense than the others.

Howard didn't say he loved me till about six months after we first met, and even then I used to go out with other boys – the local talent, I used to call it, but there wasn't much of it really – but none of them was quite like Howard. Howard would look up at the moon and the stars and say, 'Think of them being all those millions of miles away,' and sometimes he'd give you the exact figures which his brain had taken a snapshot of. Howard had a deep voice and he could make it sound like Michael Denison. He could have been very good at selling things, that voice being a big help, but he never had much ambition. It was me who mentioned marriage first – I was sixteen at the time – but he said we'd have to wait. I said to Howard that he'd have to do better than just working at the Elm Street Garage, getting all oily and greasy, but he said the money was all right. We quarrelled on and off about him having no ambition and we parted for a whole three months, me going round with one boy after another, and none of them much good with their off-beat finger-snapping to the music and their talk about getting the message and man, that sends me. It was like Mr Slessor at school all over again. I used to see Howard glooming about the town, all on his own, and when he started drinking (which I heard about) we had to make it up. Then, just after my seventeenth birthday, we got engaged. After that, we got down to seriously making plans and saving up, and Howard got this better job at the Oak Crescent Used Car Mart. We started making love more seriously than before, but I wouldn't let it get too serious, though time and again I was on the point of giving myself to him in the park, what we call the Clough, among the trees. Anyway, to cut a long story short, we got married when I was nineteen. It was a nice little white wedding at St Olave's with a reception afterwards at Horrocks's, port and sherry and a three-tiered cake from Renshaw's, and there we were kissing everybody and being kissed. This reception set my father back a bit, but he was earning good money at Baxendale's (foreman) and when his two daughters first came into the world he must have known he'd have all that expense sooner or later. Anyway, there we were, Howard and me, man and wife, let no man put asunder.

We had our name down for a council house, living in the meantime with my mother and father (Howard was a blitz orphan but brought up by his aunt in Tinmarsh). We didn't care for this sharing very much and the walls were very thin. We were lucky, though, because there wasn't too big a waiting-list in Bradcaster, and it was a real thrill to get into our very own home with our own few sticks of furniture which we kept adding to. That's always a real pleasure, buying things for the home and our presents to each other for a long time were coal-scuttles and kitchen-sets and things like that. We had a lot of things on the H.P., like most people, but Howard had a good clean job with basic wage and commission, and there I was helping to fill up the shelves at the Hastings Road Supermarket with baked beans and soapflakes. Whether we wanted children or not we couldn't make up our minds about, and Howard was always talking very seriously about the Threat of Another War and the

Hydrogen Bomb and it not being fair to any child to bring it into the world these days. He got more and more serious when we were married and talked a lot about what he called his Responsibilities. I didn't take too much notice of what Howard said, but I couldn't make up my mind whether I wanted to be a mother or not. Sometimes in the evening when we sat looking at the TV, Howard in the fireside chair and me on the rug beside him, the feeling would come over me that it would be nice to have a little child upstairs calling down, 'Mummy.' This was especially during the commercials, showing a mother and daughter both protected by the same soap, or the mother loving her children so much that she washed all their clothes in Blink or whatever it was (they're all the same, really) or the mother and father and little children sitting down to a good nourishing dinner of Somebody-or-other's Fish Fingers. But Howard and I had a good time together, dancing in the evenings or going to the flicks (which is only like a bigger kind of more uncomfortable TV which you have to pay for), even though it wasn't what you would call an exciting sort of life. At week-ends sometimes Howard would borrow one of the cars from the Car Mart and we would go off into the country and have tea somewhere. Once or twice he borrowed a really big car – a Bentley, or Cadillac, or something, I don't know much about cars – and then we'd go to dinner at one of these hotels in one of the country towns miles away from Bradcaster, one of those places all low ceilings and brass on the walls and a smell of Oxo gravy everywhere, and for all anybody knew, me glamorous and Howard with his BBC voice and the big car outside, we could be somebody really big. We played it real cool, as poor Mr Slessor would say. That was nice now and again.

I could see that Howard fretted sometimes. As I said, he wasn't ambitious, but he said, once or twice, especially after some film or TV programme or something he'd read in the *Daily Window*, 'Oh, what will we ever see of the world?' or 'You ought to be dripping with real diamonds and be all wrapped up in mink.'

'Well,' I'd say, 'why don't you do something about it?' – not meaning that really, of course, because we really had a lot to be thankful for, what with a home and a TV and a bottle of port in the cupboard and bitter lemons in the pantry and able to go out now and again and live it up in a modest sort of way.

One night Howard said, very seriously, 'I'd never steal money, not because it's not right to steal, which it's not, but because it makes everything too easy. I mean, we're a bit old-fashioned where I work, and we just stuff cash into this very old-fashioned till, and sometimes it's quite big sums. I could nick a couple of hundred just like that, then the two of us on the train to London or somewhere, and they'd never catch us. But it's not worth it. If we're to get money we're to get it honestly. If we ever get it at all we'll get it by luck, not by what you or I could do. Because what are we, really?'

'Thanks very much,' I said in my sarky tone.

'No, no,' he said, frowning. 'You know what I mean. We don't have much to give to the world, talent or anything like that, I mean. We haven't got very much of anything that the world would fall over itself to want to buy. Besides, what I'd want for you is the real big money, the money so big you'd be able to light cigarettes with it.'

'You push on with the pools, my lad,' I said. 'Somebody's got to win.' We were doing Number 42 Litplan at the time.

'Oh, s—t on the pools,' Howard said, cross, and I was cross back, not liking that kind of language. The man at school who'd taught maths had gone in for that sort of language, thinking it made him popular with the boys. Mr Lithgow. 'What I mean is,' said Howard, 'is I'd like to live like a millionaire for, say, one month.'

'And then come back to the Used Car Mart?'

‘No,’ said Howard. He was always full of surprises. ‘Then to snuff it, having tasted a bit of life. Because, when all’s said and done, there’s not all that much to live for, is there?’

‘Thanks very much,’ I said again.

‘Yes, yes, I’ve got you to live for, and if I went off I’d want to have the two of us going off together, one flesh like it said in the marriage vows. Sometimes,’ he said dreamily, ‘when I’m at work and waiting for customers I think about the two of us living like kings and not bothering about the future. Because there may not be any future to bother about, you know. Not for anybody, one of these days. And it’s a wicked world.’

‘It’s not the world that’s wicked,’ I said. ‘It’s the people that’s in it.’ I had on the floor a 1s. 7d. box of Toffs, and I bulged out my cheek with one of these in it. Then, for some reason, and I’ll never understand men, he smiled and was down on the rug hugging and kissing me, saying, ‘Oh, you’re marvellous.’

After a bit he said, ‘It was just a thought, that’s all. It’s a question of your mood, I suppose, and how you’re feeling.’ I frowned at that, not understanding how that fitted in with anything, and then I said, looking at the ormolu clock we had bought very cheap, it being on the mantelpiece:

‘It’s time for *Over and Over*. Nearly, anyway.’

‘What’s that?’ he said, getting up from the floor.

‘Oh, I’d forgotten.’ This was the first Thursday evening that Howard had been home for a long time, him having been in the habit of going to see his auntie at Tinmarsh, her living alone now with him married, and also not very well. But she was now in hospital at Rosscourt and that was much too far away for visiting. ‘Oh,’ I said, ‘it’s this quiz-show and it’s this boy who’s up for the thousand-pound question. On horse-racing it is.’

‘That’s a queer sort of thing for a boy to know anything about. Is he a stable-boy?’

‘No, secondary mod like I was. The way I look at it, a young lad’s got to fill his mind with something these days. That stands to reason, there not being much taught at school if my school was anything to go by.’

Howard switched on and then the set warmed up and then you could hear the voices whispering and then booming and then you could see the picture. It’s always a bit of a thrill, that, when the voices start coming up, and it’s always a bit of a shock and a surprise when you can see the picture. Like a miracle. This picture showed a very plump blonde singer and a very silly comedian. ‘Oh, Christ,’ said Howard, ‘look at that. The wonders of modern science and the pleasures of bloody civilisation. God help the blasted lot of us.’ He was in a real swearing mood this evening but I didn’t say anything more because he was sweet as well.

‘That’ll be over in five minutes,’ I said. The singer and the comedian were doing a kind of final number in night clothes, with a big cardboard moon up above, and she was wearing a toreador jama, very snazzy. Then they finished with a closeup of their back teeth on the last note, and we had the commercials. Fivepence off fish-cakes and threepence off Giant Size Splazz. Wait a bit longer and they’ll give them away. And *our* washing-machine, two pound ten cheaper than when we bought it. Cheek. Then this quiz-show started. Howard watched it with interest. The quizmaster was a sort of American or Irishman, you couldn’t be sure which, with a very pointy sort of face. A lot of rather ugly and silly people came on and were asked easy questions about things, the quiz-master being very good at helping them, a bit too much so, I thought. The studio audience went mad clapping when one stupid middle-aged couple got the right answer when the quiz-master said, ‘Fill in the blank here. Salt, mustard, vinegar——’ The couple looked at him, blank, so he said it again. ‘Salt, mustard, vinegar——’ Then the man of the couple said, ‘H.P. Sauce.’ ‘No advertising, please,’ said the quizmaster,

which was silly, because the whole of ITV is advertising. Then he said, 'If I gave you pen, ink and pepper, perhaps you could write it down.' And the woman of the couple said, 'I thought as how we go to say it.' Then the quiz-master said, 'It's in a pot, see. In the cruet. Ah-choo. Ah-choo. AH-CHOO.' Then they got it and were so pleased at getting it, and so was the studio audience, that you'd think it was some really big deal. So they got eight pounds but wouldn't risk going on to sixteen, and I couldn't say that I blamed them. 'Dead stupid,' said Howard. 'Where do they get these people from?'

'They get put on a waiting-list,' I said, 'like for council houses.'

'Well,' said Howard, 'I never did.' That's just an expression. After the interval and more advertisements, this little boy came on for the thousand-pound question, a round-faced young lad with no tie on, though it was the depths of autumn. He spoke in a gobbly sort of voice, very nervous, just like any young lad will speak, and the quiz-master told him not to be like that. So then they put him in a box with a clock with a big second-hand right behind him, and the quiz-master was shaking more nervously than the lad as he got the paper with the questions on. This lad put on his earphones and said he was ready, and the quiz-master said:

'There are three parts to this question. You've got to give the names of the winner, owner, trainer and jockey for each of three races in particular years. Have you got that?' The lad had got it. You could see the quiz-master was very anxious for the lad to win, because he knew they'd all shout 'Shame' if he didn't and make out it was all his, the quiz-master's, fault. So then he said, 'Number one. Think carefully before you answer. You have thirty seconds. The Two Thousand Guineas, 1935.' Quick as a flash the lad said:

'Bahrain. The Aga Khan. F. Butters and F. Fox.' And then he said, which wasn't asked for, 'Seven to two.'

The quiz-master went mad and the audience went mad about that being the right answer. Then he asked, 'The Oaks, 1957.' The lad said:

'Easy. Carrozza. Her Majesty the Queen. Murlett. Lester Piggott up. I think it was a hundred to eight.' More going mad because it was right and then there was a terrible deathly hush, because if the lad got this last one wrong, even a bit of it, all his knowing about the odds in the other races wouldn't do him one little scrap of good. So here came the last one, and even Howard was leaning forward with his mouth open. 'Winner, owner, trainer, jockey. The Derby, 1899.' And this lad, with no trouble at all, blurted it straight out:

'Flying Fox. Duke of Westminster, J. Porter, M. Cannon.' But he said he couldn't remember the odds.

'Never mind the odds, boy,' shouted the quiz-master. 'You've won yourself a thousand pounds.' And then this young lad was dragged out of the box and everybody was yelling and screaming and the girl came on to give him his cheque and kissed him and the lad blushed and you could see he didn't like being given a cheque, he'd expected to have it all in real money. Howard switched off and all the yelling and cheering went out like a light. 'Well,' he said, 'it still seems all wrong that a young boy like that should have his head stuffed full of horse-racing while he's still at school. A lot of useless rubbish, that's what it is.'

'Not so useless,' I chipped in. 'He got a thousand quid out of it, didn't he?'

'Yes, he did, I suppose, but it isn't right for a young boy. An adult's different, of course. An adult doesn't have homework and so on. A thousand quid,' said Howard.

'You could have a go if you wanted to,' I said. 'You've always said that you've got just that kind of brain.'

'I'd never get near it,' said Howard. 'It stands to reason it must be a fiddle.'

‘Why does it?’

‘It just does, that’s all.’ There were times when Howard could be very unreasonable. Once he’d got an idea in his skull you couldn’t get it out, even though it must have been obvious to him that he was being unreasonable. So I went to get the supper, which was baked beans on toast tonight. You’d think I’d be fed up with baked beans, seeing them all day long in the Supermarket. But they’re an easy dish to put, and there’s a fair amount of nourishment in them. I liked to keep Howard well fed. He could be very sweet at times.

Chapter 2

That that I've already written and you've read is not really part of the story. The story begins about now, so now I'm gone twenty-three and Howard's nearly twenty-seven in this story, and you can imagine us both being a bit older than in that last bit where we were on the rug. We didn't change much really and our life went on much the same, except that Howard liked to read more and sometimes swore at the *Daily Window*, which he said was a rag. But we still went on taking it. And we still went on watching the TV. And we had the same jobs as we had before.

One morning, and it was a miserable autumn morning outside in the street, I was in the Hastings Road Supermarket filling up the shelves as usual, singing to myself. It was cosy being there with the other girls, wearing the RAF blue overalls and doing this nice easy work while the shoppers went round with their wire baskets and the reckoning machines on the tills went rattling away, and the place was brightly coloured with the packets and tins of things. And there was a smell of cheese and bacon, very faint, mixed with the stuff they sprayed all round the place to keep it sweet. But Howard, who had some awful expressions, said it smelled like a whore's bedroom. Not that he really knew what such a smell smelled like, him having been a pretty good boy all round, even on his national service. And he didn't come into the Supermarket all that much, either, usually preferring to meet me outside to take me home at the end of the day.

Now, who should come in this morning but my sister Myrtle, looking for me. She was in a terrible state. She was three years older than me and she had this sherry-coloured hair, copied from the heiress Bobo Sigrist, done in a bingle. Manzanilla was the colour the hairdresser called the sherry-colour Myrtle had. But she looked ill and terrible. She said:

'Oh, there you are. Look, I can't stand it any longer. I won't stay in that house one day more with him. Please let me come and stay with you for a bit.'

'It's Michael, is it?' I said. 'What's he been up to now?'

'Oh,' she said, 'it's not the drinking I mind, nor his swearing either. Last night he tried to beat me up. And this morning he tried to have a crack at me before he went out.' Her husband, Michael Sadler, worked in some shop where they sold typewriters and what were called office accessories. A very moody sort of a man, but handsome and knowing it.

'What does he want to beat you for?'

'He says he can't stand the sight of me nor the sound of my voice.' Now Myrtle was a pretty girl, though less perhaps than me, though of course her marriage had worn her down and made her mouth droopy and given her bags under the eyes. But I could understand that about the voice. Myrtle had one of these scratchy high voices, always going nya nya nya nya nya, and I could see that anybody might get fed up living with that, but it seemed no excuse for beating her up.

'Where did he beat you? Show me.'

We were in a sort of bay, all tins of soup, mostly cut-price mulligatawny, and there was nobody about, but Myrtle looked prim both ways, as if she was going to cross the road, then she turned round and lifted the bottom of her jumper and showed me her back. You could see the marks of fingers there in a kind of fingery bruise, all blue and brown.

'That's a beauty,' I said. But I wasn't satisfied with her reasons. I felt sure there was something more in it than just her face and her voice. I said, 'I don't think you're telling me the truth. Not the whole truth.' That was like a court scene on the TV. I knew Myrtle, you see. I knew that Myrtle must have been up to something. Not that I altogether blamed her, knowing Michael. Michael had as good

as driven her more than once into the arms of another man. It was a terrible marriage they had.

Myrtle pouted a bit. She had on this Golden Frost lipstick. ‘Well,’ she said, ‘he reckoned I’d been carrying on with Charlie Evans.’

‘And you have been, haven’t you?’

‘Well, there was nothing in it. And, anyway, there was Michael carrying on himself, wasn’t there? And getting drunk on top of it. *And* swearing.’ She sniffed in a sort of ladylike way. We never liked swearing much in our family.

‘Well, what do you want to do?’ I asked.

‘Teach him a lesson,’ said Myrtle. ‘Let him fetch and carry for himself for a bit. And I’m not getting a wink of sleep neither. Let him try getting rid of his nasty temper on the kitchen stove, say. I want to come and stay in your spare room for a bit. But he mustn’t know, see. Get him worried. Besides, I’m not going to let myself be bashed about like that.’

‘You could go and stay with Mum and Pop for a bit, couldn’t you?’

‘Do me a favour. With her going on about I told you so and all that jazz?’ Myrtle had some of these expressions, having been to our school also. ‘Gloating about me making a mess of things and she never liked Michael anyway and all that jazz.’ She repeated herself a lot. ‘Bring him to his senses, that’s all. Get him worried. Besides—’ Then she was on again about not letting herself get bashed. Poor Myrtle. She never did have much sense. I think she really thought she was so attractive and Michael loved her so much really that he’d break his heart with her being away and would go mad like a quiz audience when she came back to him again. Anyway, I said:

‘All right, bring your things along at dinner-time.’ What we did at dinner-time was to go home and have a cooked dinner, something I’d left in the oven like a casserole or a bacon-and-egg pie. I knocked off at twelve-thirty and Howard at one o’clock, so the table was laid when he got in at ten-past and as his boss used to let him drive himself home in one of the used cars with an advertisement on it he was able to drive me back to the Supermarket at about twenty to two, this being a bit late but nobody saying anything about it. Then Howard would go back to our house and do the washing-up, then be ready to go back to the Used Car Mart at two o’clock. In the evening we’d have tea – pie and cake and jam – and later on, as you’ve seen, we’d have something fried like bacon and egg or sausages or something like baked beans on toast. At least, you’ve seen me getting supper ready and it was baked beans. At the end of the day for both of us, both places closing at six, Howard would walk round fairly quickly to the Supermarket and I’d have time to have made up and put my coat on before we walked back, if it was a fine evening, or else took the bus. It wasn’t very far. Oak Crescent was off Yew Tree Road and that was off Whitgift Road, at the other side of Whitgift Road were all these roads with the names of historic battles, of which Hastings Road was one. Then you passed Waterloo Street with Naseby Crescent leading off it, then the bishops started and we were the third of these bishops. Anyway, I said:

‘All right, bring your things along at dinner-time.’

‘Bless you, kid,’ she said. ‘Just for a few days. And I’ve not been sleeping very well, either.’

I didn’t see how she thought she’d be able to sleep any better at our house than in her own flat, which was the other side of town, because Howard could be very noisy at night and very likely to be heard all over the house, not so much snoring as groaning in his sleep and shouting things out. Sometimes also he would walk in his sleep and I did not dare to wake him up, that being dangerous. Anyway, she’d see for herself, wouldn’t she? Not that Howard really disturbed me all that much, as I was used to him.

Well, anyway, Myrtle came along with her things and I’d fixed up the spare bedroom (what we

called, in joke of course, the Nursery) for her and we'd set the table and Myrtle had made herself look very smart with more of this Golden Frost lipstick by the time Howard got in. He looked a bit surprised to see Myrtle there, but she simpered at him and made a bit with the eyelashes, so he just grunted. Myrtle would not have minded making a bit of a dead set at my Howard, but Howard was still very serious and I, though I say it myself, was the only woman for him. Myrtle tried to make it very clear to both of us, but to Howard especially, that if her husband Michael came round looking for her we were to say she was not there and that we didn't have any idea of her whereabouts. Howard said:

'Lies, you see. Life's all telling lies nowadays. All cheating and being a stranger to the truth. It's what those horses of Dean Swift say, that you've got a tongue in your head in order to tell people things to their advantage and not to deceive them. That what language is for is communication.' And he went on a bit longer about these talking horses, so that Myrtle looked at him as if he was a nut-case. I could see myself that Howard was thinking of some cowboy programme or other for kids. Dean Swift perhaps being in it. He liked to watch these kids' films in a kind of gloomy sort of way on Thursday afternoons while I was getting ready our special half-day-off tea, Thursday being early closing day in Bradcaster. Myrtle said:

'I don't call it really lies, saying that I'm not in when Michael calls. *If* he calls, that is, though I think he's bound to. If it is lies it's only what they call white lies.'

'Look,' said Howard, looking very smashing and fierce and putting down his knife and fork, for we were eating cheese-and-onion pie, plenty for three. 'I don't like lies and I don't like cheating, no matter how small it is. Now I've had a row this morning with old Watts who's my boss about cheating. Now I come home for my dinner and I find proposals for cheating put forward in my house by my own sister-in-law.'

'Oh,' said Myrtle, and you could see she was ready to do the old serviette-throwing-down act and get up and run upstairs snivelling. So I said to Howard:

'Why, what was it all about, Howard?' Howard said:

'Oh, it was with a Yankee car, about mixing oil and sawdust into the crankcase so that you can't hear the sound of the gears being worn. He's been talking to somebody somewhere, you could see that.' And then Howard went on about dirty tricks being played in the used car business. Old Watts his boss had talked about painting the tyres to make the treads look a lot better than they were, and then Howard had insisted that some customer or other should try out the second-hand car he thought of buying on a good stretch of road, anything under ten miles, according to Howard, being no good. Moreover, Howard said that you should drive also on a rough stretch because that tested the steering and you could hear the rattles and squeaks better that way. And he said it was up to a customer to check the oil pressure, because if the oil pressure got low when the car heated up to normal that meant something had to be done about the rings and the valves or something, and if there was smoke that meant the car was using oil. And if there was too much oil on the outside that meant a cracked block, and it also meant a cracked block if the stick came out with a lot of gravy in the oil, because there was water in there. And the customer ought to check the transmission and the rear end for grease leaks and cracks, and so he went on and on, so that Myrtle just stared at him. Then Myrtle said:

'But I thought you sold cars, not bought them.'

'Buy them and sell them,' said Howard, 'and try to be fair to the buyers and the sellers. I hate cheating, as I've said, and I won't cheat for old Watts or anybody like him, and if old Watts doesn't care for that approach to the bloody work, well, he knows what he can do with his job.'

Anyway, he said no more about letting on to Michael that his wife was staying in our house, so the rest of our dinner was fairly peaceful. Myrtle said she'd do the washing-up and have a bit of tea ready

for us when we came in if we liked. So I said it was a smashing idea and I'd leave it to her. I envied her really, ~~having the nice cosy house all to herself all afternoon, a nice read by the fire of my—~~ woman's paper and then Music While You Work at 3.45 and then Mrs Dale at 4.30. A nice life for a woman, and one that Myrtle had had ever since she got married and didn't really appreciate. There's nothing like a winter's afternoon when you're all dozy and have got nothing to do, just sitting by the fire and dreaming a bit, romancing about who you might have married instead of the one you did, seeing yourself in dark glasses and a playsuit in Bermuda or somewhere and a handsome rogue with white teeth and a bronzed Tarzan torso leaning over you with a cigarette-lighter and you giving him a sort of mysterious look as you take the light, though of course you've got your sunglasses on and he can't see the look. The dream's better than the real thing, though. You take it from me.

Chapter 3

Howard celebrated Myrtle coming to stay with us for a bit by putting on a really big sort of midnight matinée which scared the daylight out of Myrtle and made her take sleeping tablets. At about five past twelve by the luminous alarm-clock Howard woke me up by laughing very loud and nudging me hard as though we were watching something which he thought very funny at the pictures. Then he started burbling a lot of nonsense words, then he seemed to settle down again to sleep and I said 'Thank God' to myself. But I said it a lot too soon, because almost right away Howard was at it again but this time not laughing, just the opposite, howling out loud, though it wasn't real crying. From her room next door Myrtle called in a frightened voice:

'Is he all right?' I replied, kind of soothing: 'Yes, yes, take no notice, he's often like this. You get back to sleep.'

'Oh,' she went, a bit worried. Then Howard cried out, in a very clear voice, 'If you can't clean the window, then smash it.' And then he laughed in a nasty kind of way, as it might be in a horror film. I wondered what he meant by that, because it seemed to mean something, but I found out soon enough, of course, what it meant. Then he groaned and then he bawled out more nonsense and then he started to get up. Now I knew it was no good stopping him doing that, and I knew that it was really dangerous if I tried to pull him back into bed, because that might wake him up and the shock might kill him, but what I was frightened of was Howard going next door and getting into Myrtle's bed, without meaning to of course, and that causing a lot of trouble one way or another. So I thought the best thing to do was to follow him. Anyway, Howard, sort of humming to himself, tottered all round the room in the dark, but not banging himself too much against anything, more like a bat really, and put the light on. It was amazing how he could do that, with far less fumbling than he would have done it with when he was awake. When the light was on I could see him standing by the door in his pyjamas, kind of smiling and humming away still, with his eyes open but glazed, sort of. Then Myrtle called again:

'Are you sure everything's all right there?'

'Yes,' I called back. Then I thought. I called, 'That door of yours won't lock, but you'd better put a chair behind it or something just in case he takes it into his head to pay you a visit.' Then you could hear her dashing out of bed going 'Oh oh oh' and padding in her bare feet to do what I said.

By this time Howard was on the landing, switching all the lights on he could find, as though it was a party. Then he was going downstairs, singing away this time, a sort of long song with no words and no real tune to it, it would have got nowhere near the top ten, but that's being a bit silly, really, and cruel. Poor old Howard. I followed him downstairs, having put my dressing-gown on, and he switched on all the lights downstairs, doing it so properly that you'd have sworn he was awake. Having got all the lights on, he decided he'd go into the living-room, that is, the room where we used to sit most of the time and eat and watch the TV and so on, only using the best room on special occasions like Christmas or if anybody called. I followed him into the living-room and there he went to the sideboard, opened the cupboard part of it and took out the bottle of port we had there and put this on the dining-table, also two glasses. Then, you can believe this or believe it not, just as you please, it makes no difference to what actually happened anyway, he opened the top drawer and took out the packet of playing cards, opened it, sat down at the table, still sort of singing to himself and with the smile on his face, and dealt out, believe it or not, four hands for a game of cards. He took one of these hands himself and seemed to look at it in a glazed sort of way. Then he seemed to look at the other people who he was supposed to be playing cards with, then he waited. When nobody else seemed to play a card Howard threw down his cards on the table and began to cry like a little child. Then he went

over to the fireside chair he used to sit on and picked up the *Daily Window* and looked as if he was reading it, though his eyes were all screwed up with crying. But you couldn't see any tears. He was holding the paper in both hands, sort of stretching it out, so that the back page was in his left hand and the front page was in his right, so you could see both the front page and the back page at the same time. On the back page you could see where it said about eighty-nine people being killed in an air crash, an air-liner having come down somewhere in America, and on the front page you could see just the picture of this film-star Rayne Waters showing a lot of bosom and holding up the baby she'd just had (her second one, and the whole world was supposed to know about it, it was so important) and the headline was MY ITSY BITSY BOOFUL. And there was Howard crying away. It seemed funny, somehow, if he was crying away at what was on the front page and back page of the *Daily Window*, because I suppose there was really nothing to cry about there, the two pages seeming to say that even though eighty-nine people get killed, still that's put right by a little child being born, and it was right to have the child being born on the front page and the people dying on the back page. I could see nothing wrong with that. But of course Howard couldn't either, being asleep and not being able to see a thing but crying away with a really loud boo hoo noise as he held the paper in front of him.

Then all of a sudden Howard gave a kind of sigh, put the paper down, got up sighing and walked straight out of the room, not putting anything away or turning the light off. I followed him and saw him going straight upstairs, not touching any of the lights, leaving them there to burn away all night for all he cared, but I put them off as I followed him. He went into our bedroom peaceful as a lamb and got into bed and was soon breathing away quite peaceful, leaving it to me to turn all the lights off. He made no more trouble that night, but it must have scared our Myrtle silly, what he'd done already or rather the noises he'd made. Anyway, Myrtle seemed to have taken a tablet or something, because she was breathing quite peacefully now and there was only me left awake, which in a way wasn't fair as I had my work to go to the next day and Myrtle could lie in bed like a lady if she wanted to.

But in the morning Myrtle was up with the two of us, coming down to breakfast in a very snazzy housecoat, quilted turquoise, with her sherry-coloured hair done up in a ribbon, while Howard and I were fully dressed for going out to work. Howard, of course, didn't remember a thing about the night before and he looked quite bright-eyed and rested. We used to get up at seven to give us plenty of time. I'd always got the dinner for the oven ready the night before, and this time it was a sort of hot pot, chops and onions and sliced potatoes in layers, and I put this in the oven, with the timer fixed properly, so as not to forget it, before I did the breakfast. Howard always believed in what he called a good breakfast – egg and bacon or sausages, just the same as it might be supper, breakfast and supper calling for the same sort of thing to eat, which is funny when you come to think of it and needs thinking out. I did two slices of gammon and a fried egg for Howard and for me cornflakes was good enough. Myrtle had ideas of her own and had brought with her a bottle of PLJ and she had a glass of this and then made herself some very thin toast and she lowered herself enough to drink some of the tea I'd made for Howard and me, but without milk or sugar. When we'd sat down to breakfast the postman came and there was a letter for Howard. He frowned over the envelope a long time, letting his egg and gammon get cold, neither opening the letter nor eating his breakfast. 'Come on,' I said, 'let's know who it's from.'

'It's from the television people,' Howard said. He showed us the envelope with the name of the television company in posh lettering in the top left-hand corner. 'They've been long enough about it,' he said.

'Oh, Howard,' I said angrily, and I stamped my foot under the table, 'do open it and see what it's about.' So then he opened it and he read it very slowly, eating his breakfast with his fork in his right hand, in the Yank way of eating. Then he passed it to me without saying anything, and I read it and I

saw what he meant by saying they'd been long enough about it. For Howard had been very sly, and he'd written in to be on the *Over and Over* quiz programme, oh, nearly a year before, and now at last here they were saying he was to be on it in just a fortnight's time and that they'd pay his fare to London and they wished him every success in the show. 'Well,' I said, gasping, 'that's marvellous, isn't it? Isn't that marvellous, Howard? That's wonderful, isn't it, Myrtle?' But of course Myrtle didn't know what I was so excited about till I handed the letter over to her. She read the letter but she didn't get excited at all. She gave Howard a sort of sour look as if to show that he'd no right to put on the sort of frightening midnight performance he did and then come down not to a punishment but to a reward, for reward it was in a way, Howard being a good man all the time and deserving some such little break for having worked hard for his wife and his home, and he must have suffered too, somewhere deep inside him, otherwise we wouldn't have this walking and talking in the still watches of the night. I said, pretending to scold, but very very pleased really, of course:

'Why didn't you say, Howard? Why did you never breathe a word of it to your own wife? Just writing off slyly like that and not saying a thing about it.'

'Well,' said Howard, 'I didn't want you to think me a fool, which you might have done, the odds against a chance to appear on such a show being very long. And I was a bit ashamed myself, really, writing off. I'd never done such a thing before.'

Myrtle sort of sniffed and said, 'Books it says here. It says you'll be answering questions about books and their authors.'

'That's right. That's my idea.'

'Well, what do you know about books?' That was nasty, really, but Myrtle had the idea that books were all right for a man like Michael, her husband, who worked in a typewriter shop, but were all wrong for somebody who sold used cars. And it was true we didn't have many books in our house, while Myrtle and her husband belonged to some Book Club which sent you books you might or might not want to read every month or something. But Howard went to the local library sometimes, but I never knew what books he read, because I was never encouraged at school to be very interested in books. And you could see that Myrtle was jealous as anything at Howard being on the TV when she herself could have shown off her glamour and her low-cut bosom, flapping her eyelashes, but that sherry-coloured hair, of course, would not be able to be seen, TV being only black and white so far. Anyway, it was up to her, wasn't it, to write off to the TV people like Howard had done, but she didn't have the brains for a quiz show (no, that's silly to say that, when you see what people you get on those shows). No, she was lazy, that was it, too lazy to do anything, quite ready to believe that somebody might stop her in the street and say, 'My God, that face, that figure. You *must* be on TV right away,' and then shout 'Taxi, taxi.' Everything must be done for her, she do nothing herself. Howard said:

'Enough. I've read a bit. What I read I remember. Besides, I look a lot at those big books in the library, books full of facts. With any luck at all,' and he said this more gloomily than pleased, 'I shall get through to the thousand pounds.'

'Oh, Howard,' I cried, leaving my cornflakes untouched, 'won't that be marvellous?' Myrtle said:

'Perhaps you'll be able to pay some big doctor or other to cure you of carrying on in your sleep, such not being covered by the National Health.' That was a nasty thing to say. Howard looked a bit bewildered, not quite understanding. He said:

'I don't quite get that. What do you mean by that?'

'Hardly got a wink of sleep with your talking all night,' said Myrtle. 'I had to take *three* of these tablets.' Then she pulled out of her housecoat pocket a really huge bottle of brown tablets, there must have been about a hundred of them. I said:

‘Now stop it, Myrtle. We don’t want any of that, not first thing in the morning we don’t.’

‘If you don’t like me talking in my sleep,’ said Howard, in the very tough way he could have at times, ‘you know what you can do about it. It’s my house, this is, and I’ll do what I like in it, waking or sleeping.’

‘It’s not your house,’ said Myrtle, stupid and bold as brass. ‘You pay rent to the Council for it, same as we do for our flat. You’re lucky in your neighbours, that’s all I can say.’ She said no more, and a good thing too. You could see that this TV letter and Howard going to answer quiz-questions about books had riled her properly. She’d gone too far, I thought, without her saying any more, so I said, not wanting a row:

‘Enough, enough. Let’s get these dishes in the sink, I’ve got to be at work at half-past eight.’ I hated to come home to unwashed dishes but I wasn’t going to ask Myrtle to earn her bit of keep by doing them. In a way you had to feel very sorry for Myrtle. I think Howard saw too that she had a lot to be unhappy about while we two were as happy as pigs, for he said nothing more, he just smiled in a faint sort of way and buckled to with the dishes.

Well, this was an eventful day, or anyway the front and back ends of the day were exciting. The middle chunk, which was most of the day, was just work. But when Howard and I came home for our dinner we found that Myrtle had gone out but had not left a note to say where she’d gone or when she’d be back, which was rude. In the evening when we came home we found that Myrtle had come back in the meantime (she had Howard’s key) and was sitting sobbing by the fire. I asked her what was the matter and Howard was very kind and gentle too, but we couldn’t get a word out of her for quite a time. So I got the tea ready and Myrtle consented to have a cup, crying into it. And then bit by bit we managed to drag the story out of her, which was that she’d gone back to their flat to get her bottle of after-bath freshener, at least that was her story, and when she got there she found a big piece of paper written on by her husband Michael, saying IF YOU THINK YOU CAN JUST COME BACK WHEN YOU FEEL LIKE IT YOU’RE MISTAKEN FOR IF I NEVER SEE YOU AGAIN THAT WILL BE TOO SOON. Well that seemed to have got her good and mad for she went straight round to the shop where Michael worked and raised all hell in the shop before the customers too, which was a silly thing to do but understandable.

Anyhow, according to her it was all over now between them, but you could see that wasn’t really so or she wouldn’t have been in such a state. Howard and I tried to comfort her, but she wouldn’t have any of that, she just wanted to be left alone with her grief, as she put it, but later on she had another cup of tea and even one quarter of a Harris’s Pork Pie. We got her calmed down a lot and then we had the TV on, thinking it might distract her mind a bit, but it was unlucky that all the programmes that evening were the same sort of thing. There was the series COPPER’S NARK, and in it this week a woman tried to do herself in because her husband had gone off and left her, and that started poor old Myrt off again. Then there was a bit of a variety show which Howard said was really depressing, though I thought it was rather pretty and funny really, then we had this play and it was the same sort of thing as the COPPER’S NARK thing we’d just had, with a husband and wife quarrelling like mad and throwing the milk jug and then the husband took a knife to her and she ran away from him screaming and then she fell through the banister-rails which were broken. This time Myrtle watched very calmly and her face looked very pale and all washed-out in the light that was coming out of the TV. And then she said she’d like to go to bed and try to sleep a bit, so we said that was perhaps the best thing for her to do so we said good-night to her and I started to get supper for just Howard and me. And then Howard said:

‘Funny girl, isn’t she? A real suffering soul I’d call her, the sort of girl that’s never been happy in her life.’

‘Oh, we were both happy together,’ I said, ‘when we were kids. A real tomboy she was then. Happy as the day is long.’ But, as I was making the toast, I couldn’t help feeling that it seemed very queer

Myrtle just going up quietly to bed like that and lying quietly upstairs, as if there was nobody upstairs at all. At least, that's what it felt like. But then I found I was letting the toast burn so I got on with making the supper and left Myrtle to her own devices, as they say. So Howard and I had our supper which was spaghetti romana tonight on toast, and then I went to the kitchen to bring in some chocolate biscuits of a new kind I'd brought home that day (chocolate one side and like icing sugar on the other). But I couldn't help feeling that something might be a bit wrong with poor Myrt, so I went upstairs and found Myrtle lying in bed with the full light on, though she herself was out like a light and snoring in a very peculiar way. By the side of the bed was this bottle of brown tablets that had been nearly full that morning and now a fair number of tablets had gone out of it. It wasn't hard to put two and two together and I didn't like the look of this at all, nor the sound of this very peculiar snoring either. 'Howard, Howard,' I called downstairs, leaning over the banisters, 'come up here quick.' He could tell there was something wrong, because he came leaping up, shaking the whole house. He came into Myrtle's bedroom and sort of nodded as he saw her there, snoring away in this quiet way, lying on her back with her best nightdress on. He said:

'I see what she's done. Poor girl. She looks really peaceful now.' He put his thumb in her eye to lift up the eyelid and see what was going on underneath, and the eye looked very blank towards the head of the bed. He sort of nodded again. 'Just look at her face,' he said. 'All the worries and the anxieties ironed away. All her cantankerousness and jealousies and dissatisfactions with her mode of life. She looks sort of beautiful now, at peace if you see what I mean.'

I looked at Howard astonished. 'Aren't you going to do anything about it?' I said. 'She might be dying for all we know. Oughtn't we to force something down her throat to make her bring them all up or something? I don't like this at all.'

'We can't do anything now,' said Howard. 'She's too far gone. Whatever she's got down there in her stomach – which, of course, as you can see, is those tablets – won't come up without using a stomach pump on her.'

'Well, then,' I said, dancing up and down, 'ring up the doctor or, get an ambulance, do something. She's my sister.' Without thinking I got down on the bed and started to shake poor Myrtle as though that might bring her awake, saying, 'Wake up, love. Come on, love, Janet's here.' Howard said:

'Who are we to interfere with people's decisions? She'd made up her mind to put an end to it all, and that's what she *has* done. No more trouble for her. No more worry about her husband or her looks or her clothes or the cost of fish. No more dirt and tripe and corruption from the TV and the *Daily Window*. She's well out of it all now. She's been a very brave girl and she's made the right decision.'

Howard was just standing there, swaying a bit, looking a bit as he looked in those sleep-walking acts of his, a bit glazed round the eyes. There was also something a bit like a hypnotist's look about him so that I stood there for it might have been a whole minute looking at him with my mouth open. Then I snapped out of it. I said, 'Aren't you going to do anything? Aren't you going to ring anybody up? Or are you going to leave it all to me?'

'She won't thank you for disturbing her rest,' said Howard. 'Quiet sleep and a sweet dream when the long trick's over. A right trick it is, too. More of a joke than a trick, but a trick it is, too, a dirty trick of somebody or other.' And he just stood there, sort of fascinated, looking down on poor Myrtle.

'Oh, you—' I said, and I dashed out and downstairs and got my coat and my handbag and went out the telephone box only being at the corner of the street. I'd never done this sort of thing before, but I'd seen enough TV to know that I had to dial 999, which I did, and I asked for the ambulance service and please hurry, and I gave our address. Then I found I had no coppers to ring up our own doctor, who was Doc Kilmartin, only sixpences and other bits of silver. But coming down the street were a couple

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