

KAZUO ISHIGURO

*Come Rain or Come Shine*

Like me, Emily loved old American Broadway songs. She'd go more for the up-tempo numbers, like Irving Berlin's 'Cheek to Cheek' and Cole Porter's 'Begin the Beguine', while I'd lean towards the bitter-sweet ballads – 'Here's That Rainy Day' or 'It Never Entered My Mind'. But there was a big overlap, and anyway, back then, on a university campus in the south of England, it was a near-miracle to find anyone else who shared such passions. Today, a young person's likely to listen to any sort of music. My nephew, who starts university this autumn, is going through his Argentinian tango phase. He also likes Edith Piaf as well as any number of the latest indie bands. But in our day tastes weren't nearly so diverse. My fellow students fell into two broad camps: the hippie types with their long hair and flowing garments who liked 'progressive rock', and the neat, tweedy ones who considered anything other than classical music a horrible din. Occasionally you'd bump into someone who professed to be into jazz, but this would always turn out to be of the so-called crossover kind – endless improvisations with no respect for the beautifully crafted songs used as their starting points.

So it was a relief to discover someone else, and a girl at that, who appreciated the Great American Songbook. Like me, Emily collected LPs with sensitive, straightforward vocal interpretations of the standards – you could often find such records going cheap in junk shops, discarded by our parents' generation. She favoured Sarah Vaughan and Chet Baker. I preferred Julie London and Peggy Lee. Neither of us was big on Sinatra or Ella Fitzgerald.

In that first year, Emily lived in college, and she had in her room a portable record player, a type that was quite common then. It looked like

a large hat box, with pale-blue leatherette surfaces and a single built-in speaker. Only when you raised its lid would you see the turntable sitting inside. It gave out a pretty primitive sound by today's standards, but I remember us crouching around it happily for hours, taking off one track, carefully lowering the needle down onto another. We loved playing different versions of the same song, then arguing about the lyrics, or about the singer's interpretations. Was that line really supposed to be sung so ironically? Was it better to sing 'Georgia on My Mind' as though Georgia was a woman or the place in America? We were especially pleased when we found a recording – like Ray Charles singing 'Come Rain or Come Shine' – where the words themselves were happy, but the interpretation was pure heartbreak.

Emily's love of these records was obviously so deep that I'd be taken aback each time I stumbled on her talking to other students about some pretentious rock band or vacuous Californian singer-songwriter. At times, she'd start arguing about a 'concept' album in much the way she and I would discuss Gershwin or Harold Arlen, and then I'd have to bite my lip not to show my irritation.

Back then, Emily was slim and beautiful, and if she hadn't settled on Charlie so early in her university career, I'm sure she'd have had a whole bunch of men competing for her. But she was never flirty or tarty, so once she was with Charlie, the other suitors backed off.

'That's the only reason I keep Charlie around,' she told me once, with a dead straight face, then burst out laughing when I looked shocked. 'Just a joke, silly. Charlie is my darling, my darling, my darling.'

Charlie was my best friend at university. During that first year, we hung around together the whole time and that was how I'd come to know Emily. In the second year, Charlie and Emily got a house-share down in town, and though I was a frequent visitor, those discussions with Emily around her record player became a thing of the past. For a start, whenever I called round to the house, there were several other students sitting around, laughing and talking, and there was now a fancy stereo system churning out rock music you had to shout over.

Charlie and I have remained close friends through the years. We may not see each other as much as we once did, but that's mainly down to distances. I've spent years here in Spain, as well as in Italy and Portugal,

while Charlie's always based himself in London. Now if that makes it sound like I'm the jet-setter and he's the stay-at-home, that would be funny. Because in fact Charlie's the one who's always flying off – to Texas, Tokyo, New York – to his high-powered meetings, while I've been stuck in the same humid buildings year after year, setting spelling tests or conducting the same conversations in slowed-down English. My-name-is-Ray. What-is-your-name? Do-you-have-children?

When I first took up English teaching after university, it seemed a good enough life – much like an extension of university. Language schools were mushrooming all over Europe, and if the teaching was tedious and the hours exploitative, at that age you don't care too much. You spend a lot of time in bars, friends are easy to make, and there's a feeling you're part of a large network extending around the entire globe. You meet people fresh from their spells in Peru or Thailand, and this gets you thinking that if you wanted to, you could drift around the world indefinitely, using your contacts to get a job in any faraway corner you fancied. And always you'd be part of this cosy, extended family of itinerant teachers, swapping stories over drinks about former colleagues, psychotic school directors, eccentric British Council officers.

In the late '80s, there was talk of making a lot of money teaching in Japan, and I made serious plans to go, but it never worked out. I thought about Brazil too, even read a few books about the culture and sent off for application forms. But somehow I never got away that far. Southern Italy, Portugal for a short spell, back here to Spain. Then before you know it, you're forty-seven years old, and the people you started out with have long ago been replaced by a generation who gossip about different things, take different drugs and listen to different music.

Meanwhile, Charlie and Emily had married and settled down in London. Charlie told me once, when they had children I'd be godfather to one of them. But that never happened. What I mean is, a child never came along, and now I suppose it's too late. I have to admit, I've always felt slightly let down about this. Perhaps I always imagined that being godfather to one of their children would provide an official link, however tenuous, between their lives in England and mine out here.

Anyway, at the start of this summer, I went to London to stay with them. It had been arranged well in advance, and when I'd phoned to check

a couple of days beforehand, Charlie had said they were both 'superbly well'. That's why I'd no reason to expect anything other than pampering and relaxation after a few months that hadn't exactly been the best in my life.

In fact, as I emerged out of their local Underground that sunny day, my thoughts were on the possible refinements that might have been added to 'my' bedroom since the previous visit. Over the years, there's almost always been something or other. One time it was some gleaming electronic gadget standing in the corner; another time the whole place had been redecorated. In any case, almost as a point of principle, the room would be prepared for me the way a posh hotel would go about things: towels laid out, a bedside tin of biscuits, a selection of CDs on the dressing table. A few years ago, Charlie had led me in and with nonchalant pride started flicking switches, causing all sorts of subtly hidden lights to go on and off: behind the headboard, above the wardrobe and so on. Another switch had triggered a growling hum and blinds had begun to descend over the two windows.

'Look, Charlie, why do I need blinds?' I'd asked that time. 'I want to see out when I wake up. Just the curtains will do fine.'

'These blinds are Swiss,' he'd said, as though this were explanation enough.

But this time Charlie led me up the stairs mumbling to himself, and as we got to my room, I realized he was making excuses. And then I saw the room as I'd never seen it before. The bed was bare, the mattress on it mottled and askew. On the floor were piles of magazines and paperbacks, bundles of old clothes, a hockey stick and a loudspeaker fallen on its side. I paused at the threshold and stared at it while Charlie cleared a space to put down my bag.

'You look like you're about to demand to see the manager,' he said, bitterly.

'No, no. It's just that it's unusual to see it this way.'

'It's a mess, I know. A mess.' He sat down on the mattress and sighed. 'I thought the cleaning girls would have sorted all this. But of course they haven't. God knows why not.'

He seemed very dejected, but then he suddenly sprang to his feet again.

'Look, let's go out for some lunch. I'll leave a note for Emily. We can

have a long leisurely lunch and by the time we come back, your room – the whole flat – will be sorted out.'

'But we can't ask Emily to tidy everything.'

'Oh, she won't do it herself. She'll get on to the cleaners. She knows how to harass them. Me, I don't even have their number. Lunch, let's have lunch. Three courses, bottle of wine, everything.'

What Charlie called their flat was in fact the top two floors of a four-storey terrace in a well-to-do but busy street. We came out of the front door straight into a throng of people and traffic. I followed Charlie past shops and offices to a smart little Italian restaurant. We didn't have a reservation, but the waiters greeted Charlie like a friend and led us to a table. Looking around I saw the place was full of business types in suits and ties, and I was glad Charlie looked as scruffy as I did. He must have guessed my thoughts, because as we sat down he said:

'Oh, you're so home counties, Ray. Anyway, it's all changed now. You've been out of the country too long.' Then in an alarmingly loud voice: 'We look like the ones who've made it. Everyone else here looks like middle management.' Then he leant towards me and said more quietly: 'Look, we've got to talk. I need you to do me a favour.'

I couldn't remember the last time Charlie had asked my help for anything, but I managed a casual nod and waited. He played with his menu for a few seconds, then put it down.

'The truth is, Emily and I have been going through a bit of a sticky patch. In fact, just recently, we've been avoiding one another altogether. That's why she wasn't there just now to welcome you. Right now, I'm afraid, you get a choice of one or the other of us. A bit like those plays when the same actor's playing two parts. You can't get both me and Emily in the same room at the same time. Rather childish, isn't it?'

'This is obviously a bad time for me to have come. I'll go away, straight after lunch. I'll stay with my Auntie Katie in Finchley.'

'What are you talking about? You're not listening. I just told you. I want you to do me a favour.'

'I thought that was your way of saying . . .'

'No, you idiot, I'm the one who has to clear out. I've got to go to a meeting in Frankfurt, I'm flying out this afternoon. I'll be back in two days, Thursday at the latest. Meanwhile, you stay here. You bring things

round, make everything okay again. Then I come back, say a cheerful hello, kiss my darling wife like the last two months haven't happened, and we pick up again.'

At this point the waitress came to take our order, and after she'd gone Charlie seemed reluctant to take up the subject again. Instead, he fired questions at me about my life in Spain, and each time I told him anything, good or bad, he'd do this sour little smile and shake his head, like I was confirming his worst fears. At one point I was trying to tell him how much I'd improved as a cook – how I'd prepared the Christmas buffet for over forty students and teachers virtually single-handed – but he just cut me off in mid-sentence.

'Listen to me,' he said. 'Your situation's hopeless. You've got to hand in your notice. But first, you have to get your new job lined up. This Portuguese depressive, use him as a go-between. Secure the Madrid post, then ditch the apartment. Okay, here's what you do. One.'

He held up his hand and began counting off each instruction as he made it. Our food arrived when he still had a couple of fingers to go, but he ignored it and carried on till he'd finished. Then as we began to eat, he said:

'I can tell you won't do any of this.'

'No, no, everything you say is very sound.'

'You'll go back and carry on just the same. Then we'll be here again in a year's time and you'll be moaning about exactly the same things.'

'I wasn't moaning . . .'

'You know, Ray, there's only so much other people can suggest to you. After a certain point, you've got to take charge of your life.'

'Okay, I will, I promise. But you were saying earlier, something about a favour.'

'Ah yes.' He chewed his food thoughtfully. 'To be honest, this was my real motive in inviting you over. Of course, it's great to see you and all of that. But for me, the main thing, I wanted you to do something for me. After all you're my oldest friend, a life-long friend . . .'

Suddenly he began eating again, and I realized with astonishment he was sobbing quietly. I reached across the table and prodded his shoulder, but he just kept shovelling pasta into his mouth without looking up. When this had gone on for a minute or so, I reached over and gave him another

little prod, but this had no more effect than my first one. Then the waitress appeared with a cheerful smile to check on our food. We both said everything was excellent and as she went off, Charlie seemed to become more himself again.

'Okay, Ray, listen. What I'm asking you to do is dead simple. All I want is for you to hang about with Emily for the next few days, be a pleasant guest. That's all. Just until I get back.'

'That's all? You're just asking me to look after her while you're gone?'

'That's it. Or rather, let her look after you. You're the guest. I've lined up some things for you to do. Theatre tickets and so on. I'll be back Thursday at the latest. Your mission's just to get her in a good mood and keep her that way. So when I come in and say, "Hello darling," and hug her, she'll just reply, "Oh hello, darling, welcome home, how was everything," and hug me back. Then we can carry on as before. Before all this horrible stuff began. That's your mission. Quite simple really.'

'I'm happy to do anything I can,' I said. 'But look, Charlie, are you sure she's in the mood to entertain visitors? You're obviously going through some sort of crisis. She must be as upset as you are. Quite honestly, I don't understand why you asked me here right now.'

'What do you mean, you don't understand? I've asked you because you're my oldest friend. Yes, all right, I've got a lot of friends. But when it comes down to it, when I thought hard about it, I realized you're the only one who'd do.'

I have to admit I was rather moved by this. All the same, I could see there was something not quite right here, something he wasn't telling me.

'I can understand you inviting me to stay if you were both going to be here,' I said. 'I can see how that would work. You're not talking to each other, you invite a guest as a diversion, you both put on your best behaviour, things start to thaw. But it's not going to work in this case, because you're not going to be here.'

'Just do it for me, Ray. I think it might work. Emily's always cheered up by you.'

'Cheered up by me? You know, Charlie, I want to help. But it's possible you've got this a bit wrong. Because I get the impression, quite frankly,

Emily isn't cheered up by me at all, even at the best of times. The last few visits here, she was . . . well, distinctly impatient with me.'

'Look, Ray, just trust me. I know what I'm doing.'

Emily was at the flat when we returned. I have to admit, I was taken aback at how much she'd aged. It wasn't just that she'd got significantly heavier since my last visit: her face, once so effortlessly graceful, was now distinctly bulldoggy, with a displeased set to the mouth. She was sitting on the living-room sofa reading the *Financial Times*, and got up rather glumly as I came in.

'Nice to see you, Raymond,' she said, kissing me quickly on the cheek, then sitting down again. The whole way she did this made me want to blurt out a profuse apology for intruding at such a bad time. But before I could say anything, she thumped the space beside her on the sofa, saying: 'Now, Raymond, sit down here and answer my questions. I want to know all about what you've been up to.'

I sat down and she began to interrogate me, much as Charlie had done in the restaurant. Charlie, meanwhile, was packing for his journey, drifting in and out of the room in search of various items. I noticed they didn't look at each other, but neither did they seem so uncomfortable being in the same room, despite what he'd claimed. And although they never spoke directly to each other, Charlie kept joining in the conversation in an odd, once-removed manner. For instance, when I was explaining to Emily why it was so difficult to find a flat-mate to share my rent burden, Charlie shouted from the kitchen:

'The place he's in, it's just not geared up for two people! It's for one person, and one person with a bit more money than he'll ever have!'

Emily made no response to this, but must have absorbed the information, because she then went on: 'Raymond, you should never have chosen an apartment like that.'

This sort of thing continued for at least the next twenty minutes, Charlie making his contributions from the stairs or as he passed through to the kitchen, usually by shouting out some statement that referred to me in the third person. At one point, Emily suddenly said:

'Oh, honestly Raymond. You let yourself be exploited left, right

and centre by that ghastly language school, you let your landlord rip you off silly, and what do you do? Get in tow with some airhead girl with a drink problem and not even a job to support it. It's like you're deliberately trying to annoy anyone who still gives a shit about you!

'He can't expect many of that tribe to survive!' Charlie boomed from the hall. I could hear he had his suitcase out there now. 'It's all very well behaving like an adolescent ten years after you've ceased to be one. But to carry on like this when you're nearly fifty!'

'I'm only forty-seven . . .'

'What do you mean, you're *only* forty-seven?' Emily's voice was unnecessarily loud given I was sitting right next to her. '*Only* forty-seven. This "only", this is what's destroying your life, Raymond. Only, only, only. Only doing my best. Only forty-seven. Soon you'll be only *sixty*-seven and only going round in bloody circles trying to find a bloody roof to keep over your head!'

'He needs to get his bloody arse together!' Charlie yelled down the staircase. 'Fucking well pull his socks up till they're touching his fucking balls!'

'Raymond, don't you ever stop and ask yourself who you are?' Emily asked. 'When you think of all your potential, aren't you ashamed? Look at how you lead your life! It's . . . it's simply infuriating! One gets so exasperated!'

Charlie appeared in the doorway in his raincoat, and for a moment they were shouting different things at me simultaneously. Then Charlie broke off, announced he was leaving – as though in disgust at me – and vanished.

His departure brought Emily's diatribe to a halt, and I took the opportunity to get to my feet, saying: 'Excuse me, I'll just go and give Charlie a hand with his luggage.'

'Why do I need help with my luggage?' Charlie said from the hall. 'I've only got the one bag.'

But he let me follow him down into the street and left me with the suitcase while he went to the edge of the kerb to hail a cab. There didn't seem to be any to hand, and he leaned out worriedly, an arm half-raised.

I went up to him and said: 'Charlie, I don't think it's going to work.'

'What's not going to work?'

'Emily absolutely hates me. That's her after seeing me for a few minutes. What's she going to be like after three days? Why on earth do you think you'll come back to harmony and light?'

Even as I was saying this, something was dawning on me and I fell silent. Noticing the change, Charlie turned and looked at me carefully.

'I think', I said, eventually, 'I have an idea why it had to be me and no one else.'

'Ah ha. Can it be Ray sees the light?'

'Yes, maybe I do.'

'But what does it matter? It remains the same, exactly the same, what I'm asking you to do.' Now there were tears in his eyes again. 'Do you remember, Ray, the way Emily always used to say she believed in me? She said it for years and years. I believe in you, Charlie, you can go all the way, you're really talented. Right up until three, four years ago, she was still saying it. Do you know how trying that got? I was doing all right. I *am* doing all right. Perfectly okay. But she thought I was destined for . . . God knows, president of the fucking world, God knows! I'm just an ordinary bloke who's doing all right. But she doesn't see that. That's at the heart of it, at the heart of everything that's gone wrong.'

He began to walk slowly along the pavement, very preoccupied. I hurried back to get his suitcase and began pulling it along on its rollers. The street was still fairly crowded, so it was a struggle to keep up with him without crashing the bag into other pedestrians. But Charlie kept walking at a steady pace, oblivious to my difficulties.

'She thinks I've let myself down,' he was saying. 'But I haven't. I'm doing perfectly okay. Endless horizons are all very well when you're young. But get to our age, you've got to . . . you've got to get some perspective. That's what kept going round in my head whenever she got unbearable about it. Perspective, she needs perspective. And I kept saying to myself, look, I'm doing okay. Look at loads of other people, people we know. Look at Ray. Look what a pig's arse he's making of *his* life. She needs perspective.'

'So you decided to invite me for a visit. To be Mr Perspective.'

At last, Charlie stopped and met my eye. 'Don't get me wrong, Ray. I'm not saying you're an awful failure or anything. I realize you're not a drug addict or a murderer. But beside me, let's face it, you don't look the

highest of achievers. That's why I'm asking you, asking you to do this for me. Things are on their last legs with us, I'm desperate, I need you to help. And what am I asking, for God's sake? Just that you be your usual sweet self. Nothing more, nothing less. Just do it for me, Raymond. For me and Emily. It's not over between us yet, I know it isn't. Just be yourself for a few days until I get back. That's not so much to ask, is it?

I took a deep breath and said: 'Okay, okay, if you think it'll help. But isn't Emily going to see through all this sooner or later?'

'Why should she? She knows I've got an important meeting in Frankfurt. To her the whole thing's straightforward. She's just looking after a guest, that's all. She likes to do that and she likes you. Look, a taxi.' He waved frantically and as the driver came towards us, he grasped my arm. 'Thanks, Ray. You'll swing it for us, I know you will.'

I returned to find Emily's manner had undergone a complete transformation. She welcomed me into the apartment the way she might a very aged and frail relative. There were encouraging smiles, gentle touches on the arm. When I agreed to some tea, she led me into the kitchen, sat me down at the table, then for a few seconds stood there regarding me with a concerned expression. Eventually she said, softly:

'I'm so sorry I went on at you like that earlier, Raymond. I've got no right to talk to you like that.' Then turning away to make the tea, she went on: 'It's years now since we were at university together. I always forget that. I'd never dream of talking to any other friend that way. But when it's you, well, I suppose I look at you and it's like we're back there, the way we all were then, and I just forget. You really mustn't take it to heart.'

'No, no. I haven't taken it to heart at all.' I was still thinking about the conversation I'd just had with Charlie, and probably seemed distant. I think Emily misinterpreted this, because her voice became even more gentle.

'I'm so sorry I upset you.' She was carefully laying out rows of biscuits on a plate in front of me. 'The thing is, Raymond, back in those days, we could say virtually anything to you, you'd just laugh and we'd laugh, and everything would be a big joke. It's so silly of me, thinking you could still be like that.'

'Well, actually, I *am* more or less still like that. I didn't think anything of it.'

'I didn't realize', she went on, apparently not hearing me, 'how different you are now. How close to the edge you must be.'

'Look, really Emily, I'm not so bad . . .'

'I suppose the passing years have just left you high and dry. You're like a man on the precipice. One more tiny push and you'll crack.'

'Fall, you mean.'

She'd been fiddling with the kettle, but now turned round to stare at me again. 'No, Raymond, don't talk like that. Not even in fun. I don't ever want to hear you talking like that.'

'No, you misunderstand. You said I'd crack, but if I'm on a precipice, then I'd fall, not crack.'

'Oh, you poor thing.' She still didn't seem to take in what I was saying. 'You're only a husk of the Raymond from those days.'

I decided it might be best not to respond this time, and for a few moments we waited quietly for the kettle to boil. She prepared a cup for me, though not for herself, and placed it in front of me.

'I'm so sorry, Ray, but I've got to get back to the office now. There are two meetings I absolutely can't miss. If only I'd known how you'd be, I wouldn't have deserted you. I'd have made other arrangements. But I haven't, I'm expected back. Poor Raymond. What will you do here, all by yourself?'

'I'll be terrific. Really. In fact, I was thinking. Why don't I get our dinner ready while you're gone? You probably won't believe this, but I've become a pretty good cook these days. In fact, we had this buffet just before Christmas . . .'

'That's terribly sweet of you, wanting to help. But I think it's best you rest just now. After all, an unfamiliar kitchen can be the source of so much stress. Why don't you just make yourself completely at home, have a herbal bath, listen to some music. I'll take care of dinner when I come in.'

'But you don't want to worry about food after a long day at the office.'

'No, Ray, you're just to relax.' She produced a business card and placed it on the table. 'This has got my direct line on it, my mobile too. I've got to go now, but you can call me any time you want. Now remember, don't take on anything stressful while I'm gone.'

For some time now I've been finding it hard to relax properly in my own apartment. If I'm alone at home, I get increasingly restless, bothered by the idea that I'm missing some crucial encounter out there somewhere. But if I'm left by myself in someone else's place, I often find a nice sense of peace engulfing me. I love sinking into an unfamiliar sofa with whatever book happens to be lying nearby. And that's exactly what I did this time, after Emily had left. Or at least, I managed to read a couple of chapters of *Mansfield Park* before dozing off for twenty minutes or so.

When I woke up, the afternoon sun was coming into the flat. Getting off the sofa, I began a little nose-around. Perhaps the cleaners had indeed been in during our lunch, or may be Emily had done the tidying herself; in any case, the large living room was looking pretty immaculate. Tidiness aside, it had been stylishly done up, with modern designer furniture and arty objects – though someone being unkind might have said it was all too obviously for effect. I took a browse through the books, then glanced through the CD collection. It was almost entirely rock or classical, but finally, after some searching, I found tucked away in the shadows a small section devoted to Fred Astaire, Chet Baker, Sarah Vaughan. It puzzled me that Emily hadn't replaced more of her treasured vinyl collection with their CD reincarnations, but I didn't dwell on this, and wandered off into the kitchen.

I was opening up a few cupboards in search of biscuits or a chocolate bar when I noticed what seemed to be a small notebook on the kitchen table. It had purple cushioned covers, which made it stand out amidst the sleek minimalist surfaces of the kitchen. Emily, in a big hurry just before she'd left, had been emptying and re-filling her bag on the table while I'd been drinking my tea. Obviously she'd left the notebook behind by mistake. But then in almost the next instant another idea came to me: that this purple book was some kind of intimate diary, and Emily had left it there on purpose, fully intending for me to have a peek; that for whatever reason, she'd felt unable to confide more openly, so had resorted to this way of sharing her inner turmoil.

I stood there for a while, staring at the notebook. Then I reached forward, inserted my forefinger into the pages at the mid-way point and gingerly levered it up. The sight of Emily's closely packed handwriting inside made me pull my finger out, and I moved away from the table,

telling myself I had no business nosing in there, never mind what Emily had intended in an irrational moment.

I went back into the living room, settled into the sofa and read a few more pages of *Mansfield Park*. But now I found I couldn't concentrate. My mind kept going back to the purple notebook. What if it hadn't been an impulsive action at all? What if she'd planned this for days? What if she'd composed something carefully for me to read?

After another ten minutes, I went back into the kitchen and stared some more at the purple notebook. Then I sat down, where I'd sat before to drink my tea, slid the notebook towards me, and opened it.

One thing that became quickly apparent was that if Emily confided her innermost thoughts to a diary, then that book was elsewhere. What I had before me was at best a glorified appointments diary; under each day she'd scrawled various memos to herself, some with a distinct aspirational dimension. One entry in bold felt-tip went: 'If still not phoned Mathilda, WHY THE HELL NOT??? DO IT!!!'

Another one ran: 'Finish Philip Bloody Roth. Give back to Marion!'

Then, as I kept turning the pages, I came across: 'Raymond coming Monday. Groan, groan.'

I turned a couple more pages to find: 'Ray tomorrow. How to survive?'

Finally, written that very morning, amidst reminders for various chores: 'Buy wine for arrival of Prince of Whiners.'

Prince of Whiners? It took me some time to accept this really could be referring to me. I tried out all sorts of possibilities – a client? a plumber? – but in the end, given the date and the context, I had to accept there was no other serious candidate. Then suddenly the sheer unfairness of her giving me such a title hit me with unexpected force, and before I knew it, I'd screwed up the offending page in my hand.

It wasn't a particularly fierce action: I didn't even tear the page. I'd simply closed my fist on it in a single motion, and the next second I was in control again, but of course, by then, it was too late. I opened my hand to discover not only the page in question but also the two beneath it had fallen victim to my wrath. I tried to flatten the pages back to their original form, but they simply curled back up again, as though their deepest wish was to be transformed into a ball of rubbish.

All the same, for quite some time, I carried on performing a kind of panicked ironing motion on the damaged pages. I was just about coming to accept that my efforts were pointless – that nothing I now did could successfully conceal what I'd done – when I became aware of a phone ringing somewhere in the apartment.

I decided to ignore it, and went on trying to think through the implications of what had just happened. But then the answering machine came on and I could hear Charlie's voice leaving a message. Perhaps I sensed a lifeline, perhaps I just wanted someone to confide in, but I found myself rushing into the living room and grabbing the phone off the glass coffee table.

'Oh, you *are* there.' Charlie sounded slightly cross I'd interrupted his message.

'Charlie, listen. I've just done something rather stupid.'

'I'm at the airport,' he said. 'The flight's been delayed. I want to call the car service that's picking me up in Frankfurt, but I didn't bring their number. So I need you to read it over to me.'

He began to issue instructions about where I'd find the phone book, but I interrupted him, saying:

'Look, I've just done something stupid. I don't know what to do.'

There was quiet for a few seconds. Then he said: 'Maybe you're thinking, Ray. Maybe you're thinking there's someone else. That I'm going off now to see her. It occurred to me that might be what you were thinking. After all, it would fit with everything you've observed. The way Emily was when I left, all of that. But you're wrong.'

'Yes, I take your point. But look, there's something I have to talk to you about ...'

'Just accept it, Ray. You're wrong. There's no other woman. I'm going now to Frankfurt to attend a meeting about changing our agency in Poland. That's where I'm going right now.'

'Right, I've got you.'

'There's never been another woman in any of this. I wouldn't look at anyone else, at least not in any serious way. That's the truth. It's the bloody truth and there's nothing else to it!'

He'd started to shout, though possibly this was because of all the noise around him in the departure lounge. Now he went quiet, and I listened

hard to work out if he was crying again, but all I heard were airport noises. Suddenly he said:

'I know what you're thinking. You're thinking, all right, there's no other woman. But is there another *man*? Go on, admit it, that's what you're thinking, isn't it? Go on, say it!'

'Actually, no. It's never occurred to me you might be gay. Even that time after finals when you got really drunk and pretended to ...'

'Shut up, you fool! I meant another man, as in *Lover of Emily*! *Lover of Emily*, does this figure bloody exist? That's what I'm getting at. And the answer, in my judgement, is no, no, no. After all these years, I can read her pretty well. But the trouble is, precisely because I know her so well, I can tell something else, too. I can tell she's started to think about it. That's right, Ray, she's looking at other guys. Guys like David bloody Corey!'

'Who's that?'

'David bloody Corey is a smarmy git of a barrister who's doing well for himself. I know exactly how well, because she tells me how well, in excruciating detail.'

'You think ... they're seeing each other?'

'No, I just told you! There's nothing, not yet! Anyway, David bloody Corey wouldn't give her the time of day. He's married to a glamourpuss who works for Condé Nast.'

'Then you're okay ...'

'I'm not okay, because there's also Michael Addison. And Roger Van Den Berg who's a rising star at Merrill Lynch who gets to go to the World Economic Forum every year ...'

'Look, Charlie, please listen. I've got this problem here. Small by most standards, I admit. But a problem all the same. Please just listen.'

At last I got to tell him what had happened. I recounted everything as honestly as I could, though maybe I went easy on the bit about my thinking Emily had left a confidential message for me.

'I know it was really stupid,' I said, as I came to the end. 'But she'd left it sitting there, right there on the kitchen table.'

'Yes.' Charlie was now sounding much calmer. 'Yes. You've rather let yourself in for it there.'

Then he laughed. Encouraged by this, I laughed, too.

'I suppose I'm over-reacting,' I said. 'After all, it's not like her personal

diary or anything. It's just a memo book . . .' I trailed off because Charlie had continued to laugh, and there was something a touch hysterical in his laughter. Then he stopped and said flatly:

'If she finds out, she'll want to saw your balls off.'

There was a short pause while I listened to airport noises. Then he went on:

'About six years ago, I opened that book myself, or that year's equivalent. Just casually, when I was sitting in the kitchen, and she was doing some cooking. You know, just flicked it open absent-mindedly while I was saying something. She noticed immediately and told me she wasn't happy about it. In fact, that's when she told me she would saw my balls off. She was wielding this rolling pin at the time, so I pointed out she couldn't very well do what she was threatening with a rolling pin. That's when she said the rolling pin was for afterwards. For what she'd do to them once she'd cut them off.'

A flight announcement went off in the background.

'So what do you suggest I do?' I asked.

'What *can* you do? Just keep smoothing the pages down. Maybe she won't notice.'

'I've been trying that and it just doesn't work. There's no way she won't notice . . .'

'Look, Ray, I've got a lot on my mind. What I'm trying to tell you is that all these men Emily dreams about, they're not really potential lovers. They're just figures she thinks are wonderful because she believes they've accomplished so much. She doesn't see their warts. Their sheer . . . *brutality*. They're all out of her league anyway. The point is, and this is what's so pathetically sad and ironic about all this, the point is, at the bottom of it all, she loves *me*. She still loves me. I can tell, I can tell.'

'So, Charlie, you don't have any advice.'

'No! I don't have any fucking advice!' He was shouting full blast again. 'You figure it out! You get on your plane and I'll get on mine. And we'll see which one crashes!'

With that, Charlie was gone. I slumped down into the sofa and took a deep breath. I told myself I had to keep things in proportion, but all the while I could feel in my stomach a vaguely nauseous sensation of panic. Various ideas ran through my mind. One solution was simply to flee the

apartment, and have no contact with Charlie and Emily for several years, after which I'd send them a cautious, carefully worded letter. Even in my current state, I dismissed this plan as being a touch too desperate. A better plan was that I steadily work through the bottles in their drinks cabinet, so that when Emily arrived home, she'd find me pathetically drunk. Then I could claim to have looked through her diary and attacked the pages in an alcoholic delirium. In fact, in my drunken unreasonableness, I could even adopt the role of the injured party, shouting and pointing, telling her how bitterly hurt I'd been to read those words about me, written by someone whose love and friendship I'd always counted on, the thought of which had helped sustain me through my lousiest moments in strange and lonely countries. But while this plan had points to recommend it from a practical aspect, I could sense something there – something near the bottom of it, something I didn't care to examine too closely – that I knew would make it an impossibility for me.

After a time, the phone began to ring and Charlie's voice came onto the machine again. When I picked it up he sounded considerably calmer than before.

'I'm at the gate now,' he said. 'I'm sorry if I was a little flustered earlier on. Airports always make me that way. Can't ever settle until I'm sitting right by the gate. Ray, listen, there's just one thing that occurred to me. Concerning our strategy.'

'Our strategy?'

'Yes, our overall strategy. Of course, you've realized, this isn't the time for little tweakings of the truth to show yourself in a better light. Absolutely not the time for the small self-aggrandizing white lie. No, no. You're remembering, aren't you, why you were given this job in the first place. Ray, I'm depending on you to present yourself to Emily just as you are. So long as you do that, our strategy stays on course.'

'Well, look, I'm hardly on course here to come over like Emily's greatest hero . . .'

'Yes, you appreciate the situation and I'm grateful. But something's just occurred to me. There's just one thing, one little thing in your repertoire that won't quite do here. You see, Ray, she's got this idea that you have good musical taste.'

'Ah . . .'

'Just about the only time she ever uses *you* to belittle me is in this area of musical taste. It's the one respect in which you aren't absolutely perfect for your current assignment. So Ray, you've got to promise not to talk about this topic.'

'Oh, for God's sake . . .'

'Just do it for me, Ray. It's not much to ask. Just don't start going on about that . . . that croony nostalgia music she likes. And if *she* brings it up, then you just play it dumb. That's all I'm asking. Otherwise, you just be your natural self. Ray, I can count on you about this, can't I?'

'Well, I suppose so. This is all pretty theoretical anyway. I don't see us chatting about anything this evening.'

'Good! So that's settled. Now, let's move to your little problem. You'll be glad to hear I've been giving it some thought. And I've come up with a solution. Are you listening?'

'Yes, I'm listening.'

'There's this couple who keep coming round. Angela and Solly. They're okay, but if they weren't neighbours we wouldn't have much to do with them. Anyway they often come round. You know, dropping in without warning, expecting a cup of tea. Now here's the point. They turn up at various times in the day when they've been taking Hendrix out.'

'Hendrix?'

'Hendrix is a smelly, uncontrollable, possibly homicidal Labrador. For Angela and Solly, of course, the foul creature's the child they never had. Or the one they haven't had yet, they're probably still young enough for real children. But no, they prefer darling, darling Hendrix. And when they call round, darling Hendrix routinely goes about demolishing the place as determinedly as any disaffected burglar. Down goes the standard lamp. Oh dear, never mind, darling, did you have a fright? You get the picture. Now listen. About a year ago, we had this coffee-table book, cost a fortune, full of arty pictures of young gay men posing in North African casbahs. Emily liked to keep it open at this particular page, she thought it went with the sofa. She'd go mad if you turned over the page. Anyway, about a year ago, Hendrix came in and chewed it all up. That's right, sank his teeth into all that glossy photography, went on to chew up about twenty pages in all before Mummy could persuade him to desist. You see why I'm telling you this, don't you?'

'Yes. That is, I see a hint of an escape route, but . . .'

'All right, I'll spell it out. This is what you tell Emily. The door went, you answered it, this couple are there with Hendrix tugging at the leash. They tell you they're Angela and Solly, good friends needing their cup of tea. You let them in, Hendrix runs wild, chews up the diary. It's utterly plausible. What's the matter? Why aren't you thanking me? Won't quite do for you, sir?'

'I'm very grateful, Charlie. I'm just thinking it through, that's all. Look, for one thing, what if these people really turn up? After Emily's home, I mean.'

'That's possible, I suppose. All I can say is you'd be very, very unlucky if such a thing happened. When I said they came round a lot, I meant maybe once a month at most. So stop picking holes and be grateful.'

'But Charlie, isn't it a little far-fetched that this dog would chew just the diary, and exactly those pages?'

I heard him sigh. 'I assumed you didn't need the rest of it spelt out. Naturally, you have to do the place over a bit. Knock over the standard lamp, spill sugar over the kitchen floor. You have to make it like Hendrix did this whirlwind job on the place. Look, they're calling the flight. I've got to go. I'll check in with you once I'm in Germany.'

While listening to Charlie, a feeling had come over me similar to the one I get when someone starts on about a dream they had, or the circumstances that led to the little bump on their car door. His plan was all very well – ingenious, even – but I couldn't see how it had to do with anything I was really likely to say or do when Emily got home, and I'd found myself getting more and more impatient. But once Charlie had gone, I found his call had had a kind of hypnotic effect on me. Even as my head was dismissing his idea as idiotic, my arms and legs were setting out to put his 'solution' into action.

I began by putting the standard lamp down on its side. I was careful not to bump anything with it, and I removed the shade first, putting it back on at a cocked angle only once the whole thing was arranged on the floor. Then I took down a vase from a bookshelf and laid it down on the rug, spreading around it the dried grasses that had been inside. Next I selected a good spot near the coffee table to 'knock over' the wastepaper basket. I went about my work in a strange, disembodied mode.

I didn't believe any of it would achieve anything, but I was finding the whole procedure rather soothing. Then I remembered all this vandalism was supposed to relate to the diary, and went through into the kitchen.

After a little think, I took a bowl of sugar from a cupboard, placed it on the table not far from the purple notebook, and slowly tilted it until the sugar slid out. I had a bit of a job preventing the bowl rolling off the edge of the table, but in the end got it to stay put. By this time, the gnawing panic I'd been feeling had evaporated. I wasn't tranquil, exactly, but it now seemed silly to have got myself in the state I had.

I went back to the living room, lay down on the sofa and picked up the Jane Austen book. After a few lines, I felt a huge tiredness coming over me and before I knew it, I was slipping into sleep once more.

I was woken up by the phone. When Emily's voice came on the machine, I sat up and answered it.

'Oh goody, Raymond, you *are* there. How are you, darling? How are you feeling now? Have you managed to relax?'

I assured her I had, that in fact I'd been sleeping.

'Oh what a pity! You probably haven't been sleeping properly for weeks, and now just when you finally get a moment's escape, I go and disturb you! I'm so sorry! And I'm sorry too, Ray, I'm going to have to disappoint you. There's an absolute crisis on here and I won't be able to get home quite as quickly as I'd hoped. In fact, I'm going to be another hour at least. You'll be able to hold out, won't you?'

I reiterated how relaxed and happy I was feeling.

'Yes, you do sound really stable now. I'm so sorry, Raymond, but I've got to go and sort this out. Help yourself to anything and everything. Goodbye, darling.'

I put down the phone and stretched my arms. The light was starting to fade now, so I went about the apartment switching on lights. Then I contemplated my 'wrecked' living room, and the more I looked at it, the more it seemed overwhelmingly contrived. The sense of panic began to grow once more in my stomach.

The phone went again, and this time it was Charlie. He was, he told me, beside the luggage carousel at Frankfurt airport.

'They're taking bloody ages. We haven't had a single bag come down yet. How are you making out over there? Madam not home yet?'

'No, not yet. Look, Charlie, that plan of yours. It's not going to work.'

'What do you mean, it's not going to work? Don't tell me you've been twiddling your thumbs all this time mulling it over.'

'I've done as you suggested. I've messed the place up, but it doesn't look convincing. It just doesn't look like a dog's been here. It just looks like an art exhibition.'

He was silent for a moment, perhaps concentrating on the carousel. Then he said: 'I can understand your problem. It's someone else's property. You're bound to be inhibited. So listen, I'm going to name a few items I'd dearly love to see damaged. Are you listening, Ray? I *want* the following things ruined. That stupid china ox thing. It's by the CD player. That's a present from David bloody Corey after his trip to Lagos. You can smash that up for a start. In fact, I don't care what you destroy. Destroy everything!'

'Charlie, I think you need to calm down.'

'Okay, okay. But that apartment's full of junk. Just like our marriage right now. Full of tired junk. That spongy red sofa, you know the one I mean, Ray?'

'Yes. Actually I fell asleep on it just now.'

'That should have been in a skip ages ago. Why don't you rip open the covering and throw the stuffing around.'

'Charlie, you have to get a grip. In fact, it occurs to me you're not trying to help me at all. You're just using me as a tool to express your rage and frustration . . .'

'Oh shut up with that bollocks! Of course I'm trying to help you. And of course my plan's a good one. I guarantee it'll work. Emily hates that dog, she hates Angela and Solly, so she'll seize any opportunity to hate them even more. Listen.' His voice suddenly dropped to a near-whisper. 'I'll give you the big tip. The secret ingredient that'll ensure she's convinced. I should have thought of this before. How much time do you have left?'

'Another hour or so . . .'

'Good. Listen carefully. Smell. That's right. You make that place smell of dog. From the moment she walks in, she'll register it, even if it's only

subliminally. Then she steps into the room, notices darling David's china ox smashed up on the floor, the stuffing from that foul red sofa all over . . .

'Now look, I didn't say I'd . . .'

'Just listen! She sees all the wreckage, and immediately, consciously or unconsciously, she'll make the connection with the dog smell. The whole scene with Hendrix will flash vividly through her head, even before you've said a word to her. That's the beauty of it!'

'You're hawering, Charlie. Okay, so how do I make your home pong of dog?'

'I know exactly how you create a dog smell.' His voice was still an excited whisper. 'I know exactly how you do it, because me and Tony Barton used to do it in the Lower Sixth. He had a recipe, but I refined it.'

'But why?'

'Why? Because it stank more like cabbage than dog, that's why.'

'No, I meant why would you . . . Look, never mind. You might as well tell me, so long as it doesn't involve going out and buying a chemistry set.'

'Good. You're coming round to it. Get a pen, Ray. Write this down. Ah, here it comes at last.' He must have put the phone in his pocket, because for the next few moments I listened to womb noises. Then he came back and said:

'I have to go now. So write this down. Are you ready? The middle-sized saucepan. It's probably on the stove already. Put about a pint of water in it. Add two beef stock cubes, one dessertspoon of cumin, one tablespoon of paprika, two tablespoons of vinegar, a generous lot of bay leaves. Got that? Now you put in there a leather shoe or boot, upside down, so the sole's not actually immersed in the liquid. That's so you don't get any hint of burning rubber. Then you turn on the gas, bring the concoction to the boil, let it sit there simmering. Pretty soon, you'll notice the smell. It's not an awful smell. Tony Barton's original recipe involved garden slugs, but this one's much more subtle. Just like a smelly dog. I know, you're going to ask me where to find the ingredients. All the herbs and stuff are in the kitchen cupboards. If you go to the understairs cupboard, you'll find a discarded pair of boots in there. Not the wellingtons. I mean the battered-up pair, they're more like built-up shoes. I used to wear them all the time on the common. They've had it and they're waiting for the heave. Take one of those. What's the matter? Look, Ray, you just do this, okay?'

Save yourself. Because I'm telling you, an angry Emily is no joke. I've got to go now. Oh, and remember. No showing off your wonderful musical knowledge.'

Perhaps it was simply the effect of receiving a clear set of instructions, however dubious: when I put the phone down, a detached, business-like mood had come over me. I could see clearly just what I needed to do. I went into the kitchen and switched on the lights. Sure enough, the 'middle-sized' saucepan was sitting on the cooker, awaiting its next task. I filled it to halfway with water, and put it back on the hob. Even as I was doing this, I realized there was something else I had to establish before proceeding any further: namely, the precise amount of time I had to complete my work. I went into the living room, picked up the phone, and called Emily's work number.

I got her assistant, who told me Emily was in a meeting. I insisted, in a tone that balanced geniality with resolution, that she bring Emily out of her meeting, 'if indeed she is in one at all'. The next moment, Emily was on the line.

'What is it, Raymond? What's happened?'

'Nothing's happened. I'm just calling to find out how you are.'

'Ray, you sound odd. What is it?'

'What do you mean, I sound odd? I just called to establish when to expect you back. I know you regard me as a layabout, but I still appreciate a timetable of sorts.'

'Raymond, there's no need to get cross like that. Now let me see. It's going to be another hour . . . Maybe an hour and a half. I'm awfully sorry, but there's a real crisis on here . . .'

'One hour to ninety minutes. That's fine. That's all I need to know. Okay, I'll see you soon. You can get back to your business now.'

She might have been about to say something else, but I hung up and strode back into the kitchen, determined not to let my decisive mood evaporate. In fact, I was beginning to feel distinctly exhilarated, and I couldn't understand at all how I'd allowed myself to get into such a state of despondency earlier on. I went through the cupboards and lined up, in a neat row beside the hob, all the herbs and spices I needed. Then I measured them out into the water, gave a quick stir, and went off to find the boot.

The understairs cupboard was hiding a whole heap of sorry-looking footwear. After a few moments of rummaging, I discovered what was certainly one of the boots Charlie had prescribed – a particularly exhausted specimen with ancient mud encrusted along the rim of its heel. Holding it with fingertips, I took it back to the kitchen and placed it carefully in the water with the sole facing up to the ceiling. Then I lit a medium flame under the pan, sat down at the table and waited for the water to heat. When the phone rang again, I felt reluctant to abandon the saucepan, but then I heard Charlie on the machine going on and on. So I eventually turned the flame down low and went to answer him.

'What were you saying?' I asked. 'It sounded particularly self-pitying, but I was busy so I missed it.'

'I'm at the hotel. It's only a three-star. Can you believe the cheek! A big company like them! And it's a poxy little room too!'

'But you're only there for a couple of nights ...'

'Listen, Ray, there's something I wasn't entirely honest about earlier. It's not fair on you. After all, you're doing me a favour, you're doing your best for me, trying to heal things with Emily, and here I am, being less than frank with you.'

'If you're talking about the recipe for the dog smell, it's too late. I've got it all going. I suppose I might be able to add an extra herb or something ...'

'If I wasn't straight with you before, that's because I wasn't being straight with myself. But now I've come away, I've been able to think more clearly. Ray, I told you there wasn't anyone else, but that's not strictly true. There's this girl. Yes, she *is* a girl, early thirties at most. She's very concerned about education in the developing world, and fairer global trade. It wasn't really a sexual attraction thing, that was just a kind of by-product. It was her untarnished idealism. It reminded me of how we all were once. You remember that, Ray?'

'I'm sorry, Charlie, but I don't remember you ever being especially idealistic. In fact, you were always utterly selfish and hedonistic ...'

'Okay, maybe we were all decadent slobs back then, the lot of us. But there's always been this other person, somewhere inside of me, wanting to come out. That's what drew me to her ...'

'Charlie, when was this? When did this happen?'

'When did what happen?'

'This affair.'

'There was no affair! I didn't have sex with her, nothing. I didn't even have lunch with her. I just ... I just made sure I kept seeing her.'

'What do you mean, kept seeing her?' I'd drifted back into the kitchen by this time and was gazing at my concoction.

'Well, I kept seeing her,' he said. 'I kept making appointments to see her.'

'You mean, she's a call girl.'

'No, no, I told you, we've never had sex. No, she's a dentist. I kept going back, kept making things up about a pain here, discomfort of the gums there. You know, I spun it out. And of course, in the end, Emily guessed.' For a second, Charlie seemed to be choking back a sob. Then the dam burst. 'She found out ... she found out ... because I was flossing so much!' He was now half-shrieking. 'She said, you *never, ever* floss your teeth that much!'

'But that doesn't make sense. If you look after your teeth more, you've less reason to go back to her ...'

'Who cares if it makes sense? I just wanted to please her!'

'Look, Charlie, you didn't go out with her, you didn't have sex with her, what's the issue?'

'The issue is, I so wanted someone like that, someone who'd bring out this other me, the one that's been trapped inside ...'

'Charlie, listen to me. Since the last time you called, I've pulled myself together considerably. And quite frankly, I think you should pull yourself together too. We can discuss all of this when you get back. But Emily will be here in an hour or so, and I've got to have everything ready. I'm on top of things here now, Charlie. I suppose you can tell that from my voice.'

'Fucking fantastic! You're on top of things. Great! Some fucking friend ...'

'Charlie, I think you're upset because you don't like your hotel. But you should pull yourself together. Get things in perspective. And take heart. I'm on top of things here. I'll sort out the dog business, then I'll play my part up to the hilt for you. Emily, I'll say. Emily, just look at me, just look how pathetic I am. The truth is, most people are just as pathetic. But Charlie, he's different. Charlie is in a different league.'

'You can't say that. That sounds completely unnatural.'

'Of course I won't put it literally like that, idiot. Look, just leave it to me. I've got the whole situation under control. So calm down. Now I've got to go.'

I put the phone down and examined the pot. The liquid had now come to the boil and there was a lot of steam about, but as yet no real smell of any sort. I adjusted the flame until everything was bubbling nicely. It was around this point I was overcome by a craving for some fresh air, and since I hadn't yet investigated their roof terrace, I opened the kitchen door and stepped out.

It was surprisingly balmy for an English evening in early June. Only a little bite in the breeze told me I wasn't back in Spain. The sky wasn't fully dark yet, but was already filling with stars. Beyond the wall that marked the end of the terrace, I could see for miles around the windows and back yards of the neighbouring properties. A lot of the windows were lit, and the ones in the distance, if you narrowed your eyes, looked almost like an extension of the stars. This roof terrace wasn't large, but there was definitely something romantic about it. You could imagine a couple, in the midst of busy city lives, coming out here on a warm evening and strolling around the potted shrubs, in each other's arms, swapping stories about their day.

I could have stayed out there a lot longer, but I was afraid of losing my momentum. I went back into the kitchen, and walking past the bubbling pot, paused at the threshold of the living room to survey my earlier work. The big mistake, it struck me, lay in my complete failure to consider the task from the perspective of a creature like Hendrix. The key, I now realized, was to immerse myself within Hendrix's spirit and vision.

Once I'd started on this tack, I saw not only the inadequacy of my previous efforts, but how hopeless most of Charlie's suggestions had been. Why would an over-lively dog extract a little ox ornament from the midst of hi-fi equipment and smash it? And the idea of cutting open the sofa and throwing around the stuffing was idiotic. Hendrix would need razor teeth to achieve an effect like that. The capsized sugar bowl in the kitchen was fine, but the living room, I realized, would have to be re-conceptualized from scratch.

I went into the room in a crouched posture, so as to see it from

something like Hendrix's eyeline. Immediately, the glossy magazines piled up on the coffee table revealed themselves as an obvious target, and so I pushed them off the surface along a trajectory consistent with a shove from a rampant muzzle. The way the magazines landed on the floor looked satisfyingly authentic. Encouraged, I knelt down, opened one of the magazines and scrunched up a page in a manner, I hoped, would find an echo when eventually Emily came across the diary. But this time the result was disappointing: too obviously the work of a human hand rather than canine teeth. I'd fallen into my earlier error again: I'd not merged sufficiently with Hendrix.

So I got down on all fours, and lowering my head towards the same magazine, sank my teeth into the pages. The taste was perfumy, and not at all unpleasant. I opened a second fallen magazine near its centre and began to repeat the procedure. The ideal technique, I began to gather, was not unlike the one needed in those fairground games where you try to bite apples bobbing in water without using your hands. What worked best was a light, chewing motion, the jaws moving flexibly all the time: this would cause the pages to ruffle up and crease nicely. Too focused a bite, on the other hand, simply 'stapled' pages together to no great effect.

I think it was because I'd become so absorbed in these finer points that I didn't become aware sooner of Emily standing out in the hall, watching me from just beyond the doorway. Once I did realize she was there, my first feeling wasn't one of panic or embarrassment, but of hurt that she should be standing there like that without having announced her arrival in some way. In fact, when I remembered how I'd gone to the trouble of calling her office only several minutes earlier precisely to pre-empt the sort of situation now engulfing me, I felt the victim of a deliberate deception. Perhaps that was why my first visible response was simply to give a weary sigh without making any attempt to abandon my all-fours posture. My sigh brought Emily into the room, and she laid a hand very gently on my back. I'm not sure if she actually knelt down, but her face seemed close to mine as she said:

'Raymond, I'm back. So let's just sit down, shall we?'

She was easing me up onto my feet, and I had to resist the urge to shake her off.

'You know, it's odd,' I said. 'No more than a few minutes ago, you were about to go into a meeting.'

'I was, yes. But after your phone call, I realized the priority was to come back.'

'What do you mean, priority? Emily, please, you don't have to keep holding my arm like that, I'm not about to topple over. What do you mean, a priority to come back?'

'Your phone call. I recognized it for what it was. A cry for help.'

'It was nothing of the sort. I was just trying to . . .' I trailed off, because I noticed Emily was looking around the room with an expression of wonder.

'Oh, Raymond,' she muttered, almost to herself.

'I suppose I was being a little clumsy earlier on. I would have tidied up, except you came back early.'

I reached down to the fallen standard lamp, but Emily restrained me.

'It doesn't matter, Ray. It really doesn't matter at all. We can sort it all out together later. You just sit down now and relax.'

'Look, Emily, I realize it's your own home and all that. But why did you creep in so quietly?'

'I didn't creep in, darling. I called when I came in, but you didn't seem to be here. So I just popped into the loo and when I came out, well, there you were after all. But why go over it? None of it matters. I'm here now, and we can have a relaxing evening together. Please do sit down, Raymond. I'll make some tea.'

She was already going towards the kitchen as she said this. I was fiddling with the shade of the standard lamp and so it took me a moment to remember what was in there – by which time it was too late. I listened for her reaction, but there was only silence. Eventually I put down the lampshade and made my way to the kitchen doorway.

The saucepan was still bubbling away nicely, the steam rising around the upheld sole of the boot. The smell, which I'd barely registered until this point, was much more obvious in the kitchen itself. It was pungent, sure enough, and vaguely curryish. More than anything else, it conjured up those times you yank your foot out of a boot after a long sweaty hike.

Emily was standing a few paces back from the cooker, craning her neck to get as good a view of the pot as possible from a safe distance. She seemed absorbed by the sight of it, and when I gave a small laugh to announce my presence, she didn't shift her gaze, let alone turn around.

I squeezed past her and sat down at the kitchen table. Eventually, she turned to me with a kindly smile. 'It was a terribly sweet thought, Raymond.'

Then, as though against her will, her gaze was pulled back to the cooker.

I could see in front of me the tipped-up sugar bowl – and the diary – and a huge feeling of weariness came over me. Everything felt suddenly overwhelming, and I decided the only way forward was to stop all the games and come clean. Taking a deep breath, I said:

'Look, Emily. Things might look a little odd here. But it was all because of this diary of yours. This one here.' I opened it to the damaged page and showed her. 'It was really very wrong of me, and I'm truly sorry. But I happened to open it, and then, well, I happened to scrunch up the page. Like this . . .' I mimicked a less venomous version of my earlier action, then looked at her.

To my astonishment, she gave the diary no more than a cursory glance before turning back to the pot, saying: 'Oh, that's just a jotter. Nothing private. Don't you worry about it, Ray.' Then she moved a step closer to the saucepan to study it all the better.

'What do you mean? What do you mean, don't worry about it? How can you say that?'

'What's the matter, Raymond? It's just something to jot down stuff I might forget.'

'But Charlie told me you'd go ballistic!' My sense of outrage was now being added to by the fact that Emily had obviously forgotten what she'd been writing about me.

'Really? Charlie told you I'd be angry?'

'Yes! In fact, he said you'd once told him you'd saw his balls off if he ever peeked inside this little book!'

I wasn't sure if Emily's puzzled look was due to what I was saying, or still left over from gazing at the saucepan. She sat down next to me and thought for a moment.

'No,' she said, eventually. 'That was about something else. I remember it clearly now. About this time last year, Charlie got despondent about something and asked what I'd do if he committed suicide. He was just testing me, he's far too chicken to try anything like that. But he asked,

so I told him if he did anything like that I'd saw his balls off. That's the only time I've said that to him. I mean, it's not like a refrain on my part.'

'I don't get this. If he committed suicide, you'd do that to him? Afterwards?'

'It was just a figure of speech, Raymond. I was just trying to express how much I'd dislike him topping himself. I was making him feel valued.'

'You're missing my point. If you do it afterwards, it's not really a disincentive, is it? Or maybe you're right, it would be . . .'

'Raymond, let's forget it. Let's forget all of this. There's a lamb casserole from yesterday, there's over half of it left. It was pretty good last night, and it'll be even better tonight. And we can open a nice bottle of Bordeaux. It was awfully sweet of you to start preparing something for us. But the casserole's probably the thing for tonight, don't you think?'

All attempts to explain now seemed beyond me. 'Okay, okay. Lamb casserole. Terrific. Yes, yes.'

'So . . . we can put *this* away for now?'

'Yes, yes. Please do. Please put it away.'

I got up and went into the living room – which of course was still a mess, but I no longer had the energy to start tidying. Instead, I lay down on the sofa and stared at the ceiling. At one point, I was aware of Emily coming into the room, and I thought she'd gone through to the hall, but then I realized she was crouched in the far corner, fiddling with the hi-fi. The next thing, the room filled with lush strings, bluesy horns, and Sarah Vaughan singing 'Lover Man'.

A sense of relief and comfort washed over me. Nodding to the slow beat, I closed my eyes, remembering how all those years ago, in her college room, she and I had argued for over an hour about whether Billie Holiday always sang this song better than Sarah Vaughan.

Emily touched my shoulder and handed me a glass of red wine. She had a frilly apron on over her business suit, and was holding a glass for herself. She sat down at the far end of the sofa, next to my feet, and took a sip. Then she turned down the volume a little with her remote.

'It's been an awful day,' she said. 'I don't mean just work, which is a total mess. I mean Charlie going, everything. Don't imagine it doesn't hurt me, to have him go off abroad like that when we haven't made up.

Then to cap it all, you finally go and tip over the edge.' She gave a long sigh.

'No, really, Emily, it's not as bad as that. For a start, Charlie thinks the world of you. And as for me, I'm fine. I'm really fine.'

'Bollocks.'

'No, really. I feel fine . . .'

'I meant about Charlie thinking the world of me.'

'Oh, I see. Well, if you think that's bollocks, you couldn't be more wrong. In fact, I know Charlie loves you more than ever.'

'How can you know that, Raymond?'

'I know because . . . well, for a start he more or less told me so, when we were having lunch. And even if he didn't spell it out, I can tell. Look, Emily, I know things are a bit tough right now. But you've got to hang onto the most important thing. Which is that he still loves you very much.'

She did another sigh. 'You know, I haven't listened to this record for ages. It's because of Charlie. If I put this sort of music on, he immediately starts groaning.'

We didn't speak for a few moments, but just listened to Sarah Vaughan. Then as an instrumental break started, Emily said: 'I suppose, Raymond, you prefer her other version of this. The one she did with just piano and bass.'

I didn't reply, but just propped myself up a little more so as to sip my wine better.

'I bet you do,' she said. 'You prefer that other version. Don't you, Raymond?'

'Well,' I said, 'I really don't know. To tell you the truth, I don't remember the other version.'

I could feel Emily shift at the end of the sofa. 'You're kidding, Raymond.'

'It's funny, but I don't listen to this kind of stuff much these days. In fact, I've forgotten almost everything about it. I'm not even sure what song this is right now.' I did a little laugh, which perhaps didn't come out very well.

'What are you talking about?' She sounded suddenly cross. 'That's ridiculous. Short of having had a lobotomy, there's no way you could have forgotten.'

'Well. A lot of years have gone by. Things change.'

'What are you talking about?' There was now a hint of panic in her voice. 'Things can't change that much.'

I was pretty desperate to get off the subject. So I said: 'Pity things are such a mess at your work.'

Emily completely ignored this. 'So what are you saying? You're saying you don't like *this*? You want me to turn it off, is that it?'

'No, no, Emily, please, it's lovely. It . . . it brings back memories. Please, let's just get back to being quiet and relaxed, the way we were a minute ago.'

She did another sigh, and when she next spoke her voice was gentle again.

'I'm sorry, darling. I'd forgotten. That's the last thing you need, me yelling at you. I'm so sorry.'

'No, no, it's okay.' I heaved myself up to a sitting position. 'You know, Emily, Charlie's a decent guy. A very decent guy. And he loves you. You won't do better, you know.'

Emily shrugged and drank some more wine. 'You're probably right. And we're hardly young any more. We're as bad as one another. We should count ourselves lucky. But we never seem to be contented. I don't know why. Because when I stop and think about it, I realize I don't really want anyone else.'

For the next minute or so, she kept sipping her wine and listening to the music. Then she said: 'You know, Raymond, when you're at a party, at a dance. And it's maybe a slow dance, and you're with the person you really want to be with, and the rest of the room's supposed to vanish. But somehow it doesn't. It just doesn't. You know there's no one half as nice as the guy in your arms. And yet . . . well, there are all these people everywhere else in the room. They don't leave you alone. They keep shouting and waving and doing daft things just to attract your attention. "Oi! How can you be satisfied with that? You can do much better! Look over here!" It's like they're shouting things like that all the time. And so it gets hopeless, you can't just dance quietly with your guy. Do you know what I mean, Raymond?'

I thought about it for a while, then said: 'Well, I'm not as lucky as you and Charlie. I don't have anyone special like you do. But yes, in some

ways, I know just what you mean. It's hard to know where to settle. What to settle to.'

'Bloody right. I wish they'd just lay off, all these gatecrashers. I wish they'd just lay off and let us get on with it.'

'You know, Emily, I wasn't kidding just now. Charlie thinks the world of you. He's so upset things haven't been going well between you.'

Her back was more or less turned to me, and she didn't say anything for a long time. Then Sarah Vaughan began her beautiful, perhaps excessively slow version of 'April in Paris', and Emily started up like Sarah had called her name. Then she turned to me and shook her head.

'I can't get over it, Ray. I can't get over how you don't listen to this kind of music any more. We used to play all these records back then. On that little record player Mum bought me before I came to university. How could you just forget?'

I got to my feet and walked over to the french doors, still holding my glass. When I looked out to the terrace, I realized my eyes had filled with tears. I opened the door and stepped outside so I could wipe them without Emily noticing, but then she was following right behind me, so maybe she noticed, I don't know.

The evening was pleasantly warm, and Sarah Vaughan and her band came drifting out onto the terrace. The stars were brighter than before, and the lights of the neighbourhood were still twinkling like an extension of the night sky.

'I love this song,' Emily said. 'I suppose you've forgotten this one too. But even if you've forgotten it, you can dance to it, can't you?'

'Yes. I suppose I can.'

'We could be like Fred Astaire and Ginger Rogers.'

'Yes, we could.'

We placed our wine glasses on the stone table and began to dance. We didn't dance especially well – we kept bumping our knees – but I held Emily close to me, and my senses filled with the texture of her clothes, her hair, her skin. Holding her like this, it occurred to me again how much weight she'd put on.

'You're right, Raymond,' she said, quietly in my ear. 'Charlie's all right. We should sort ourselves out.'

'Yes. You should.'

'You're a good friend, Raymond. What would we do without you?'

'If I'm a good friend, I'm glad. Because I'm not much good at anything else. In fact, I'm pretty useless, really.'

I felt a sharp tug on my shoulder.

'Don't say that,' she whispered. 'Don't talk like that.' Then a moment later, she said again: 'You're such a good friend, Raymond.'

This was Sarah Vaughan's 1954 version of 'April in Paris', with Clifford Brown on trumpet. So I knew it was a long track, at least eight minutes. I felt pleased about that, because I knew after the song ended, we wouldn't dance any more, but go in and eat the casserole. And for all I knew, Emily would re-consider what I'd done to her diary, and decide this time it wasn't such a trivial offence. What did I know? But for another few minutes at least, we were safe, and we kept dancing under the starlit sky.