His Coldest Winter

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A major new novel from the critically acclaimed author of IF THE INVADER COMES.On Boxing Day 1962 it began to snow. Over the next two months England froze. It was the coldest winter since 1740. The sea iced over. Cars could be driven across the Thames.Riding home from London in that first snowfall, on the powerful motorbike he has been given for Christmas, seventeen-year-old Alan Rae has a brush with death. Immediately he meets a girl, Cynthia, who will change his life. But someone else is equally preoccupied with her, Geoffrey, a young scientist who works with Alan's father in the race with the Americans and the Russians to develop the microchip. Alan, Geoffrey and Cynthia become linked by a web of secrets which, while the country remains in icy suspension, threatens everything they ever trusted.Derek Beaven's new novel is a moral drama. It demands that we question who our real friends are, and asks us to reconsider the scientific assumptions upon which all of modern life, and much of modern fiction, is based.

Содержание

DEREK BEAVEN
His Coldest Winter

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Dedication

For Sue with loveAnd to Laura with many thanks

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FIRST SIGHT

THE NIGHT AIR was like broken glass, a black rush that crammed his mouth, cut his cheeks. Snow from the headlight sliced up at his eyes and splintered past his ears. He was seventeen – it was his first time on a motorbike and he'd just driven straight across London. His back ached, his arms ached, his shins ached. The rest of him was numb.

He was on his way home from the family Christmas at his aunt's. At last, the capital was behind him, its High Streets ended, its festive, undrawn curtains done with. He'd struggled through Child's Hill, pressed on past Hendon Central. Apex Corner had been a snarl, a ring of trade names and used cars for sale, a jostle for inches by neon signs or tinselled star-buys. Everyone in town had seemed to be elbowing a way out of it before the weather turned. Now, with the traffic thinned almost to nothing and snow falling in earnest, he was on his own.

His bike hammered under him. Two miles passed without a waymark, three … A rise foreshadowed the Chiltern hills, and he stared up the dual carriageway, waiting for detail. None came. A chain of red dots glimmered far ahead, then vanished. Oncoming headlamps swung once through his line of vision, and were gone. Some winter conspiracy seemed to have swapped the city for a void, in which the merest extra throttle caused a gale to drag his face as though he were a rocket pilot being tested.

Then a roundabout showed at the crest. Alan braked hard, his fingers half-frozen in the glove. He could hardly feel the pedal against the tread of his left shoe; he nudged the gear change with the toe of his right, sending an icy vibration up through his knees and backbone. The big machine whined and slowed as the frame shook to the cog. Two other riders buzzed by him out of nowhere, their stop lights scoring arcs this way, now that, into the bends.

They were racing. It was the bypass already, and they'd just shown him up. Too powerful for its rig, his own Triumph made him wait for each line to straighten before he dared accelerate, and the awkward sidecar – which the law required, and which his father and uncle had helped him bolt to the frame just that Boxing Day morning – felt like a child's stabiliser. He tried to hurry, but the pair were out of sight before he was halfway round, leaving only their tyre tracks on the whitening ground.

A flurry blew without warning. Torn flock seemed to swoop across the central hummock, flying up in wads against the headlight. There was a car half-blocking the exit, the driver climbing out to clear his windscreen; Alan skirted him. But the bike hit ice and his whole rig kicked sideways. He wasn't spooked. Spurred on by the racers, he flung a challenge to the elements, bit back whatever pain he could still feel and opened up the throttle. The power was breathtaking, the flurry just turbulence left behind him as he shot like an arrow into the darkness.

The Watford Bypass gave him his bearings. He'd been along it countless times – with his parents on their visits to London, or on theatre trips with various teachers. From here, he reckoned he knew the lie of the land. The road heads exactly north-west, giving the merest flick to either side, then tilts slightly downhill. After that, it lies true as a whip in a wound for three and a half miles, tree-lined, across fields and thickets and former country lanes. It used to come into its own about nine every night: the bike boys fancied themselves creatures of darkness. They gave the strip its mythology, and its ghosts.

Rain or shine, this was the routine. When they'd finished at Oddhams the printers, or Metal Box, or the Rolls-Royce aero-engine factory at Leavesden, when they'd wolfed their suppers and tinkered with their bikes, they'd put on their jeans and black USAF leather jackets and ride over to the Busy Bee, the transport café in the dip, next to the Red Lion. And there, to Elvis records on the jukebox, they'd suck fizzy orangeade through straws until the summer sun went down; or, while

the winter moon scuttled family men off to their wives, they'd sit and drink cup after cup of hot, sweet tea, waiting.

Others would arrive in packs, from the Ace on the North Circular, from the Dugout, or the Cellar by the bridge at Eton. Once it was night, they'd improvise illicit races along the black main road. They'd burn it up, in twos or threes or whole packs, trying for the ton, the machines shuddering, the engines thrashing under the cold stars. The bypass was all for racing. It took, on average, one lad per week.

The straight was the lure, flawless but for an extra roundabout that lets the little Elstree Road cross down to the film studios just behind a row of trees. That one scrubby oblong leads a gradual left into a right chicane. It's a test of skill. Regulars could have reminded Alan – you need to watch out for the kink. But he was untutored that night, and if ever he'd made a note of the Elstree through the back window of his parents' car he didn't recall it. What with the bike and the weather thickening, he had no idea what was coming.

Two dim red lights glowed in front before he even reached it. He swerved, barely in time to overtake a doddering pre-war saloon, and, all at once, he couldn't make out the tarmac. No use to slap at his goggles. Only when he reached down to swipe the snow from his headlamp did he see the fugitive island, its reflective black-and-white zigzags brilliantly revealed against shadowy, onrushing vegetation. He dug into the pedal far too late and yanked once more with the fingers of his right hand.

The brakes hardly registered. He clung on blindly while the kink wooed and pocketed him, tightening all the time, racing him in until there was nothing for it – he was forced to steer right. For a second, the handlebar was muscled like a snake. Then it went limp, and he was skidding. Only just in time, the tyres gripped and the brakes bit and he felt his wheel miraculously cheat the kerb.

But a shape filled the beam, an oncoming rush of wagon-side and big wheels. He glimpsed a painted trade name, heard the blaring of a horn already past. The one chance, pulling left, was the direction that could flip him and his sidecar like a tossed coin.

He was sure he was about to die, watching the artic's rusted girder go on for ever along that terrible curve, until somehow, by another stroke of fate, the tailbolt missed him. Still everything remained cruelly drawn out, and all he could feel in one broken moment of night and ice and careering snowscape was that his father, whom he loved, was somehow waiting to gather him out there, to receive him and hide him in his coat as he'd done against the cold, years before. In a kind of dream he saw him, on a dark snowy plain, trackless under the moon – in Russia would it be, far off, or America – a figure growing ever larger under the birches, his coat warm and protective, his arms stretched to embrace his son. Half out of the saddle, Alan lunged his whole weight over to bring the sidecar down.

He found himself on the wrong side of a clear road. It was so strange. He was completely unharmed and the straight lay ahead. All that remained was a drench of fear, like the secret thawing of his bones. As though nothing had happened, he let the bike drift back across the tarmac, then screwed open the throttle. The snow thinned into shards again, and cold air jagged his lips and cheeks. At sixty-five the Triumph began a front-wheel shudder; at seventy, it calmed. He was exalted, untouchable.

SCRAWLED ON THE angled, space-age frontage, the neon spelled a challenge: *The Busy Bee.* Why not? He'd won his spurs. Enough glare came from the café's windows to shine up the row of bikes outside – choice specimens, glinting, spotless, with their clip-on handlebars and alloy tanks, their racing seats and TT silencers. He drove nearer, jolting on the rutted car park. A Norton Dominator and a BSA Gold Star with a cut-away fairing were still hot, their cylinder fins hissing in the snowfall. He let his engine die beside them, dragged off his goggles and dismounted.

The cold sleeve he wiped across his forehead undid his elation. Trying to shrug off the pain in his back and get the blood moving in his fingers, he was checked by a flash of the fate he'd so narrowly avoided. It left him momentarily gauche, a jumped-up kid who ought not to have stopped at all, should rather have pressed on home and put himself to bed. The Bee, of all places … He searched

his pockets for a comb, imagining the stares as he walked in; though merely slicking his soaked hair into a Teddy-boy quiff would hardly do the trick, hardly make him one of the lads.

Yet he'd done it, hadn't he, that whole journey through the capital, his first time on a bike, in the dark and in a snowstorm? The family had tried to talk him out of it, but he'd been determined, and if this didn't vindicate him he'd like to know what would. Once he'd passed his test and got rid of the sidecar, he'd pull some cash together, do his own modifications.

The wind seemed altogether different now. A snowflake melted on the newly exposed skin under his eye. Two truck drivers approached from the other side of the car park, and one of them nodded to him. As they filed through the slamming doorway, a snatch of rock-and-roll music leaked from the Bee's interior. Alan thrust back his fears and followed them.

Scratched plywood tables set in ranks, tube-framed chairs bolted to a scuffed, grimy floor, steam under paper chains mingling with the strains of Eddie Cochrane – the legend had never laid claim to smartness, but the inside was a let-down. It was cavernous, yellow-tiled, strip-lit, and for all the cowboy hats beside the Christmas tree, for all the automobile posters dreaming of sunshine freeways, there was a very English air of fag-ends and fly papers. A kicked panel disfigured the serving counter. Behind it, a man in a vest tapped boiling water from a huge tin urn. The woman next to him chatted to the truckers, elbows raised, pinning up her hair. Her cigarette wagged between her lips as she flicked a glance in Alan's direction.

The bike boys were almost lost in the emptiness. About a dozen of them sat at the far side, marked out by their leather jackets and winkle-picker shoes. One lad had his feet up on the table; another's shoulders still glistened with melted snow. There were a few girls with them. Alan looked down at his own fake suede windcheater, baggy and snow-stained, with only a thin, synthetic sheepskin showing at the lapel. The silk college scarf he'd commandeered from his father was ridiculous with maroon stripes. His ruined black shoes were chiselled, not pointed. In his oil-stained sweater, he might just pass for a down-on-his-luck grease monkey. All the tube lights seemed to sting the damp folds in his jeans.

He bought tea and sat at a table near one of the front windows, but the agonised curve of his near miss began instantly replaying in his head. He'd nearly been smashed to pieces. If he hadn't lurched himself over to slam the wheel back on the tar … Suddenly, his legs were trembling so much he half-wondered how he was ever going to climb back on the bike. Shivering despite the fug of the café, sipping his tea and cradling the heat in his hands, he tried to think of home. His house was only another half-hour away. But there was the lorry again, racing into his mind's eye. It came on and on. He clutched hard at the white china mug, recalled that dazed vision of his dad, like God, like Father Christmas, waiting to take him. For Christ's sake, he'd looked death in the face and it had been almost soothing! He forced his arms against the edge of the table, feeling faint, rickety, remembering a dark pool he'd seen once under the water mill at Gaddesden. A girl went over to the jukebox. 'Teenangel' played to the smell of frying bacon.

His tea was nearly cold before he got a grip on himself. Then he saw how foolish he'd been, how puffed up and vainglorious. He'd persuaded his parents he could handle the bike and manage the long drive. He'd assured them he'd be fine on his own in the empty house for a day or so. Now he wished he'd never set out. He thought of the dinner the day before, the lighted fires, the reflections in the Christmas tree baubles. He smelled the smells of his aunt's terraced house, pictured the cramped conviviality, and tried to nestle back into the family atmosphere.

He tried and failed. To his surprise, what *wouldn't* hold now was the idea that his family quite belonged to him at all. How disorientated he felt, as though the night had already changed him and lent a cold regard he'd never known. The feeling stole over him that he could travel neither back, nor forward, and he wondered exactly what it was that had just happened, precisely what kind of experience his almost-accident had been.

There they'd all gathered – as so often on Christmas Day – in the house on Wickham Lane, just over Shooters Hill, where London fringed into Kent. There they'd all met, the ten of them at the festive table, his aunt with drops of perspiration on her brow, his uncle, the mechanic, sucking at his new false teeth as he carved the bird, his grandfather sitting stoical with that Edwardian watch-chain stretched across his best brown waistcoat, his nan, his cousins, their gran. He and his parents were the unwelcome guests.

Unwelcome, that was it. He wondered how on earth he'd always failed to notice such tension under the pleasant surface of things. Had he been blind? Why, if ever he'd stopped to think, it was obvious. Feelings simply bristled between the two sides of the family; they barely tolerated each other. To tell the truth, it was as clear as daylight: he and his mother and father weren't liked, they didn't fit in, never had done.

He knew the cause of it immediately. That stood out a mile. It was his father, of course. But he'd never have guessed it in the normal run of events, never in a million years got such a dispassionate angle on his own kith and kin. He was seventeen, sacrificial, entranced – only something like the crisis at the Elstree roundabout could have shaken the awkward truth out of him. It was his dad.

LIONEL. ALAN HAD watched him, between the gravy-boat and the tureen of sprouts. Lionel – he savoured the slight unfamiliarity of his father's Christian name … Lionel had worn the yellow paper crown out of his cracker in a spirit of pure misrule. The slim, Nordic face of the wedding photograph, that innocent face, not so much handsome as candid, the face which at home in the brown album tied up with fine cord once used to remind Alan of royalty, had grown ill-defined. And what suddenly showed through wasn't the loved father at all, but some aspect of clown, jester, agent provocateur. Lionel's hair contrived to stick up in odd spikes through the paper hat. His clothes! Shrunk and over-ironed by Alan's mother, his striped pullover hung round him like a smock. The tie, the shirt-sleeves … Lionel was *bizarre.*

It wasn't just the squeamishness of youth. Alan's vision was immaculate. A kind of hypnosis had genuinely ended, an illusion peeled off, for his legs no longer shook and he felt calm and focused – on his father. Lionel was a spectacle of contradictions. He lacked any authentic shape. He was plump and he was puny, he was muscular and he was effete. Like some gigantic baby, he told his subversive jokes to himself, ate his turkey with a strange expression of exaggerated innocence. Catching Alan's eye, as he *would* do, he made a pretence at being drunk, even though the one bottle of Sauternes between ten was regarded as daring, and quite celebratory enough. His behaviour was a local chaos, masked with abstruse, science-couched observations. It was a flagrant *naughtiness* that subtly, yet emphatically, disrupted the good intentions of the dinner. And all the while grandparents, aunt, uncle and cousins conspired to pass no comment at all.

The single-sash window framed the winter grey. The pink glass bowl chained overhead supplied the little dining room with an electric glow. A blazing coal fire scorched the back of Alan's uncle's mother, who would always deny discomfort. The party took their meal and put up with Lionel, the problematic star in their midst, the clever working-class child made so prodigiously good. In turn, Lionel, who'd travelled the world, who'd flown first class in Boeing Stratocruisers and had seen so many things that everyday folk never would, seemed to insist on remaining that child.

He *was* a star – government work. But the family never asked Lionel Rae about it, nor responded to his permanent, self-absorbed pantomime. They tolerated his dogmatic outbursts. Warily, they observed the formalities, praised the aunt's labour and the uncle's skill with the knife. They avoided any subject that smacked of politics, let alone of religion, lest the fault that ran through the little clan should widen and engulf them.

Lionel *was* clever. His was a frightening, almost artificial intelligence. He'd lightly remark to Alan that he was a soft, bloody machine for designing bloody hard ones. And Alan loved the complicated wit he shared with his father. All these years Lionel's creature, his sense of *possession* left him bucked, even exalted. A couple of winters before, Lionel had been De Havilland's senior

telemetry engineer, when the big aerospace firm had been developing Blue Streak. Had the missile ever come to fruition, each warhead would have been targeted on Moscow, Leningrad, Novosibirsk. It *was* rocket science.

But his genius was of the cankered kind, as Lionel himself wryly acknowledged. Fate had targeted *him*, he said, because he refused to believe in her. Rockets had sent him on his travels, and Alan had the postcards to prove it: incredible images of tropical beaches with sand and palm trees, Californian scenes with fin-tail Cadillacs in sundrenched streets, the lush greens and impossibly quaint temples of the Far East. In Alan's sock drawer at home there were still pairs of pale blue-and-white chaussettes, issued by PanAm Airlines against the cold of altitude and brought back by his dad as trophies. Somewhere in his long-untouched toy box, he kept the miniature plastic cruets made by Americans for air meals simply to throw away. Lionel had been in Nevada, he'd been at Cape Canaveral. He'd seen the Yanks put their man in orbit. When others in the family had never risen twenty feet above the ground, the magician Lionel had placed a foot on the threshold of space. Then the Ministry axed Blue Streak, and suddenly rockets had let him down, they'd jilted him. Now, he sat here at the Christmas dinner, claiming only half in jest to be a Martian.

He wasn't drunk. Lionel hardly touched alcohol, never smoked. He didn't sing or dance, read novels, listen to music. He had no time for art, less for films. He hated churches, the sun in summer, the rain in winter. He hated vicissitude, the Victorians, God, history, the city, the country, winding lanes, other drivers. He loathed the class system, the Tories, Labour, nature. But Alan had never minded these foibles of malediction so long as he could bask in their astringent, apparent comedy.

At the previous dinner, Lionel had invoked the death of Schrödinger – whom he'd actually met, but no one else had heard of – with the story of the cat that was alive and dead at the same time. Until you opened the box! It was the bones of a joke. As for his own death, he suggested, nothing would do but a perfectly controlled space capsule, a warhead womb stamped 'Made in England' and primed to fall right back on London. Neither would he stay in one job long enough to put down roots. Nor could he touch anything, he grinned, darkly, without it either going wrong or going down – including, so it seemed, the British Independent Nuclear Deterrent. And he was proud that no one had ever come up with a name for what might be the matter with him. He was too clever to be anything so ordinary as insane.

They lived in extraordinary times. Alan had no idea of it; then again he knew it well enough. Lionel had done no more than carry on the family tradition, hadn't he, preparing to bandy shell fire? His own dad had been an artilleryman, and *his* father before him. The uncle had been in the Engineers. Lionel hadn't. What better way to outdo them than with these intercontinental ballistics? His hubris had left the family little profit, though: Alan's parents were hardly well enough off to lord it – they'd shifted ground too often to accumulate capital. Now Lionel was a mere circuit designer with a company called Lidlock.

Alan bit his lip. Something else filled his thoughts. No, it was outrageous, though there was dazzle in it, perfection. It seemed, for a fleeting second, to explain everything. But it was shocking, out of the question – the very notion of treachery and spying far too melodramatic, and Lionel wasn't a melodramatic man. Steam hissed in the urn. A burst of laughter came from the bike boys. Lionel had no time for drama of any kind, and besides, Alan was the tainted one, the depressive, blotched soul of the family. But for the luck of old Harry, he should have died back there. And spies in the news were far too sensational, such very public curiosities: George Blake, Greville Wynne, William Vassall. It was far too *convenient*, in a way, to attach the notion of 'working for the enemy' to Lionel's real life.

The café owner shouted to his wife. Alan let go his breath through his nostrils; he was losing his grasp, couldn't trust himself. Some thrust of cold had always been inside him, whose tip he could only just feel. He'd been wretched the last couple of months, since the girl in the school choir had turned him down, since the world had been just hours from wiping itself out. Kruschev had backed down and ordered the ships around. But hadn't the way his dad looked at him then made him complicit,

somehow, in the whole performance? Once more, he shoved the thought away. No, and he still loved him. Though when his mother was around he hated him for her sake, loathed him both for his looks and his manners.

He licked his lips guiltily, and stole a glance to either side, because he'd put on Lionel's brainy nonsense, and been taken up as if into a flying saucer. Father and son were bound together, partners in brilliance, hero and villain, doctor and patient, hurtling round a planet that couldn't touch them, peering down every so often at his aunt's simple family in the house on Wickham Lane, who gawped back and admired. He licked his lips again. That had been the sci-fi story of his life. No rival version had occurred, until, on the Watford Bypass, in the Busy Bee café, when his hand shook as he tried to hold his tea and his feet burned as they thawed back to life, some scale fell from his eyes. The rest of the family couldn't stand Lionel, and, by extension, they couldn't stand him.

There was an exhaust roar outside. Another. He looked up, startled. Headlights flashed through the window and sparked the dribs of tinsel hanging down. Bikes were arriving, maybe twenty of them, revving and thundering in the car park. They wove in and out of each other, accelerating and braking, turning this way, now that, in an intricate dance. The din was shattering.

SHOUTS AND IRONIC Christmas greetings came from the door. Young men were unknotting scarves from their faces, combing quiffs, primping their damp leather, brushing at snow. They laughed, jeered, lit up fags. They strutted in tight jeans and tight shoes, catcalled at the owner behind the counter, punched buttons on the jukebox. Alan kept his head down over his tea, but a group of four or five were heading straight towards him, shouting their orders to friends in the queue.

'Mind if we join you?'

He fixed his attention on a smear in the rim of his cup.

'Oi! Got a tongue in your head?' Immediately, they clustered round.

'What? Sorry. Sure.' He gestured. 'Take a seat.'

Three lads sat down at his table. 'All right, mate? How you doing, then?'

Involuntarily, Alan glanced at his watch. It was too early for trouble, tonight of all nights when everyone was still supposed to be at home pulling crackers. 'Fine, thanks.'

'Nice watch. What time is it?'

'Half seven.' 'Hound Dog' came banging out of the record machine.

'Not thinking of going, were you?'

'No. No, I wasn't.'

The young man opposite him grinned knowingly. He had a narrow face beneath his blond, fifties, Teddy-boy wave, the skin pale, except where cold had turned the spots under his cheekbones a raw red. He shot a glance at Alan's goggles and gloves on the table. 'What bike you got, mate?'

"59 Bonnie.'

'Fuck off. How old are you, then?'

'Seventeen.'

'Yeah? Santa come down the chimney, did he?'

'My uncle's a mechanic. Works with bikes down in Kent. He knew I was looking and sorted me one out.'

The newcomer sniffed and eyed him. 'Not Watford, then, you?' he enquired, as though idly.

'Me? No. Stopped off for a cup of tea. I've got a few miles to go yet. Mate.'

'Got a few miles to go, have you?' The lad mimicked Alan's speech and grinned at the other two. 'That's lucky for you, son. See …,' he spread his hands like the crooked charmer in a cowboy film, 'we've come looking for Watford boys. Got a bone to pick with Watford. Haven't we, men?'

The others laughed. Alan felt his own cheeks crease. 'Where are you lot from, then?' he said.

The rider beside him spoke for the first time. 'Fucking Stanmore, ain't we.' Then he laughed again, and swore, breathing out his cigarette smoke. His teeth were irregular. They showed like points beneath his top lip. 'Yours that sidecar rig out there?' he said.

The crease stuck in Alan's face. He forced a chuckle. 'Bloody thing just nearly killed me.'

His neighbour leaned towards him. 'Why don't you tell us your name?'

'Alan.' He could smell the breath. It was heavy, slightly tarry. 'What's yours?'

'I'm Mac. Mr Macbride to you.' His friends laughed. 'See Nobby there?' Mac pointed behind him to a tall figure standing at the counter. 'Nob got banned, didn't he. Doing eighty down fucking Clamp Hill. Oi! Nob! Has to ride up behind ever since. Or in a sidecar. Don't you, Nob!'

Alan looked. A tall figure was staring back at them. He was older, grimmer than the rest, seeming to stoop slightly in his black, fringed jacket, the black hair straggling on the collar at either side. But the face … Nob's pock-marked skin had been slashed. The scars ran in meaty weals on both cheeks, as though someone had played noughts and crosses on him.

'Over here, Nob. This kid says he'll give you a lift in his chair if you want one.' Mac turned back extravagantly to Alan. 'Where was it you said you was going?'

'Over past Hemel.' Alan pulled his gaze from the scars.

'Hemel, Nob. Any use?'

Nob was just coming over, a bottle of Pepsi in his huge dirty hand, when a ruckus started in the far corner. It was with the boys who'd been there all the time. They were the locals, Watford. Alan swung round again, but his view was screened by the rows of leather backs. He heard threats and counter-threats, then a short, winded scream, a boy's – or maybe a girl's. For when a torrent of swearing rose over the jukebox guitars, and the crowd seemed to sigh, it was a girl who answered back, her voice spirited, her words unexpectedly eloquent. Someone shouted her name, Cynthia, and the scuffle began again, because she was the fucking cause of it all. A cup smashed against a wall.

Presley's last chords clanged on the hush. Then the lads round Alan were on their feet, half-sneering, half-cheering, and he stood, too, relieved. He let himself be swept up in the action, even became part of it, shouting with the rest. Only the two lorry drivers remained unconcerned, their sports pages propped in front of their fry-ups. A round-faced Ted from the far side of the room stood on a table: Fight! Fight! Fight!'

The man in the vest called from behind the counter, 'If you bloody lot want a bloody punch-up you can bloody do it outside. Go on! Get out of it! All of you!' With his cleaning cloth over his shoulder, he stood unmoved at his urn. The mood hung for a second, steamy, and Alan felt his neck prickle. One instant could ruin another face. He clutched his goggles and gloves, alert for the click of the first knife. Then, as if at a signal, everyone crowded for the door. And Alan Rae went with them, thrust by the night into the thick of things.

VIOLENCE WAS A chimera – no one quite believed in it. That was a quirk left by the war: Alan's mother had walked to work over broken glass, his uncle had seen a Normandy hedge trimmed by machine-gun bullets, the A-bomb had blown the Japs out of the fight. Violence lacked shape. Teds and bike boys seemed its only ministers. Wisecracking, fire-cracking, they were ambiguous as devils in an old pageant.

Light flared from the café windows. The car park was white where the bikes made a natural arena. They seemed to herd the rival gangs together, closing in with their welded angles and shimmering chrome. A ring had already formed, and Alan glanced to where his Triumph was parked, fifty yards from the exit. He heard the wind sough, felt the snow fall as cars passed by in the road, their engines muffled, the swish of their tyres powdery. The flecked gust, slicing through the trees at the far side, began to sting his cheek.

Two figures stood primed in the bleak little space, champions of Cynthia – whoever she was. They were identically clad, both the same height, but the Watford boy was thinner, and his face looked desperate in the harsh light. People were calling out his name. 'Go, Pete!' 'You can get him, Pete!' Pete's eyes were hooded, his shoulders hunched too soon, defensive. He looked out from behind his fists, shifting his weight nervously from foot to foot. The other lad was chunkier, more robust, and

his mates flanked him, egging him on. His hook-nosed profile was caught in silhouette as he quipped confidently to one of them.

One of the girls was crying, and people craned to see. The sobbing rose to a wail until a puffy, high-heeled creature wearing only thin slacks and a jumper broke from the ranks opposite and entered the ring. 'You don't have to, Jimmy!' she called. 'She don't mean nothing! Just leave it, Jimmy, why don't you!' The snow fluttered at her heaped-up hair.

'I ain't fucking leaving it.' A great laugh went up. 'Stupid tart.'

Alan watched the girl turn away. He scanned the faces, saw Nob, caught a glimpse of Macbride. The names echoed grimly in his head. He'd already spotted a length of chain hanging from someone's hand. His heart pounded softly as the two boys at the centre began to circle each other.

The initial blows were feints. Fists skidded off leather, grazing a sleeve or missing a shoulder. Then Pete took a punch to the face and rocked back. The Stanmore gang roared as he rubbed his cheek, and Jimmy paraded in the applause. But Pete was canny, seized the moment to dart in, and came up under the other boy's guard with a smack that glanced his eye. The sound was like fabric tearing. Instantly, the two were clutching one another, wrestling and sliding amongst the flakes while the crowd swayed. People ran this way and that to the rough shove and rhythm of the fight, and Alan moved with them in a wild, weird ballet. Whenever the combatants lurched towards him, he heard their breath as though it were his own, and watched the sharp, committed gusts snatched out of their mouths by the wind.

Now there was a lull, and the fighters were locked, resting on each other's grip. A different girl was across from him, framed momentarily in a gap. Fair-haired, she wore a blue scarf at her neck and a pale blue coat over her jeans. Their eyes met, and it was she who dropped her gaze first. Then the crowd swirled, and when he looked again she was nowhere to be seen, and the two fighters were tangling, kicking each other's legs. It was Pete who slipped. He hit the icy gravel so hard it forced a noise out of him. The chants went up for Jim-my! Jim-my! Jimmy raised his arm and made to drop down with a finisher; but his victim rolled clear and was instantly, spiritedly, back on his feet, half-crouched, coming on with both fists, with the Watford lads yelling for him and Alan yelling, too, until the pair of them spun away and the ring broke up.

Now it was all a whirl of limbs and faces in the slip and slide. Alan elbowed himself to the front. Two heads still bobbed and ducked in a fierce exchange, two bodies were still grappling. One flailed, the other got heaved up. One lost his footing and they were both scrabbling on the ground, here the point of a thin shoe, there a hand trying to get a hold on leather or fleece. But the hand went limp at the sound of a body blow, and another cry went up, and suddenly the figures were apart. It was a chase.

The gangs cheered and surged after them, two forms reeling and stumbling in the dark between the bikes. Alan slid and fell himself in the rush. As he got to his feet, a shape came skipping past him with an outlandish, mocking step, turning first this way, now that – like a matador, the leather jacket open like waistcoat wings. It stopped in front of the café window and waited. The other caught up, floundered, lunged, slipped, and skidded front first into the snow.

Something was spattering out of its face, dark drops falling faster than snowflakes, and it was Jimmy, staggering up, twisting away now and gasping, his hands on his thighs. Still more of the dark stuff was spilling down in the wind, leaving black garlands in the bright, fluorescent white.

He tried to straighten, not in time. Pete came in hard, gave him three punishing jabs to the body, one more to the cut face, and a vicious dead leg with his knee. Jimmy screamed and dropped where he stood. He cringed in the white scuff, covering his head with his arms. 'OK!' His voice was thin. 'OK!' A couple of his mates went over to him. Pete stepped back, and looked away, dusting the snow off his sleeves and the backs of his jeans.

Nobody in the car park moved or spoke. The mere exchange of a look seemed the riskiest thing in the world. Even the wind died, the fat snowflakes coming straight down while the cold plucked

once more at the exposed skin of Alan's throat and neck. A lorry from the main road revved in low gear and began lumbering in at the gate, its lights flashing and sweeping the rows of bikes.

Then the mood broke. Someone from Stanmore cracked on at Jimmy that he was a fucking useless cunt. The insult was buoyant, the relief almost palpable. A roar of merriment went up. Alan felt drunk with events as some great wave of generosity and good humour threatened to make them all lifelong friends. Christ, it was a fucking good dustup, a fucking good Christmas, because that Pete had a few tricks up his sleeve and he bloody gave Jimmy Chapman something to fucking think about. Yes, he fucking did.

JOSHING AND LAUGHING, the two gangs were returning inside to drink tea and talk bikes. Alan was at the doorway when he heard a voice at his shoulder.

It was the fair girl again. She was adjusting her scarf over her head. He could see by the neon flicker and the snow-glaze from the café window her heavily made-up eyes, and her hair under the fabric, fashionably backcombed. Quite tall, she was handsome rather than pretty, seemingly preoccupied with tying the two ends under her chin. Her pale blue mac hung open to reveal her sloppy-Joe jumper, and the tight fit of her jeans. 'They said you were going to Hemel.' She brushed at the flakes just settling on her shoulders.

'Sort of.' He stared at her, then briefly down at his hands.

But she was matter-of-fact, still glancing round, as though unconcernedly. 'You couldn't give me a lift, could you? It's getting worse, isn't it?'

'What, Hemel? D'you mean now?' It was illegal for him to take a passenger.

'I told my parents I'd be back before ten. You needn't if you don't want.' She spoke with an unexpected formality. Then she suddenly smiled straight at him, and the smile and her eyes – another blue – brought him back to that moment he'd first seen her during the fight. 'Except that my … Except that no one in there…' Her voice was disarming, musical. She gestured towards the café, and shrugged again at the weather. Her hair clustered at her brow inside the scarf. She was too attractive.

He nodded. 'OK.' All at once, they were walking together through the bikes towards his own snow-powdered machine. He snatched a look back at the Bee. The only figure watching them was tall and ragged-looking, the one they'd called Nob. He was standing at the entrance under the sign, his scars catching the fitful glow like lines on a mask.

She took no notice of the sidecar, but brushed off the pillion and seated herself, while he tore off the L-plates. Once he'd lowered himself into the saddle in front of her, he felt a warmth despite the icy wind. It was like the heat of a fantasy – but one suddenly sanctioned, and given approval.

Three times he bobbed up and down on the kick-start before the engine fired. As he nudged the rig cautiously out on to the road, she put her hands in the pockets of his jacket and drew her arms tight around his waist. He could feel her fingertips. He looked down and saw her thin red shoes on the footrests, and her parted thighs. He felt her tuck her knees into the crooks of his and nudge her cheek close against the back of his neck. Her body on his was the one warm thing, and he thought he'd always known her, that she'd lain next to him since the start of things.

The full storm had crept up on them. Now it matted the air and blotted out the road. The few cars crawled in each other's tracks, the snow piling up in ridges either side. Drivers peered through freezing slots scraped in their windscreens; lights narrowed and swung. He guessed at the chaos on the low road and took his chance along the motorway. Five minutes later they were slogging up past Bricket Wood with the snow sweeping at them from over the hills, and the cold so intense he kept calling back just to make sure she was alive. Each time, she gripped more tightly and pressed herself more closely against him.

At last, he took the exit and cut down past Hemel new town, driving under its hard sodium lights, beside its rows of council terraces, until she called out where she lived – in Boxmoor, she said, near the Fishery pub. He took her down towards the canal, and from there along a lane to a cottage

which backed right on to the tow-path. And he was sure her family had lived there for centuries. And for ever, he reckoned, he'd known about them and longed for the girl in the pale blue coat.

She got off the bike. He sat still, keeping the Triumph idling.

'Thanks for the lift.' She was halfway to her door.

'Wait!' He let the bike fail and went after her, his shoe skating on the path. He thought she looked frightened for a moment. 'Will I see you again?'

'Do you want to?'

'What do you think?'

She hesitated.

'For Christ's sake,' he said. 'I don't even know your name.'

'It's Cynthia. Didn't I tell you? But everyone calls me Cynth.'

'Jesus! I mean … sorry.' He was alarmed. 'I'm Alan. I suppose I'd better…' His voice dropped, suspicious. 'Why did you ask me for a lift?'

She shrugged. 'It was a hunch. I needed to get away. Didn't I?' She looked down. Then she said again, 'Didn't I?' as though he must understand.

'Can I see you?'

'All right,' she murmured.

'What was that?'

'I said all right.'

'When? I don't live round here. Tell me!'

'I don't know. Come when the snow clears away. If you want to.'

'You mean that?'

'If you want to.'

'Of course I do!' On an impulse, he put his gloved hands on either side of her shoulders. Before he knew it she was close up against his chest, her arms clutching on to him. She didn't let go.

The embrace lasted a minute, long enough for her warmth to seep into him again. When they broke apart, she lifted her face and allowed her open lips to touch his. For a second, he tasted her mouth. Then, before he could respond, she'd turned away and was at her door, the key already in her hand, the lock already clicking. 'Cynthia!'

Her door was open. He took a step towards her.

She raised her hand once, swinging round in the frame. 'I'il see you, then, Alan. Come when the snow clears away.' She smiled.

He raised his own hand. The door closed behind her. He called out softly, wary of rousing the house, 'OK. I'll do that. When the snow clears away!'

He kick-started the bike. 'I'il see you, then, Cynth. I'll see you!' Revving the engine, he turned the machine around in the road and drove out by Two Waters.

All along the valley road, picking his way in the wheel-marked drifts through little Bourne End, steering the last two miles by pub signs or gate lanterns, skidding kerbless and guideless in the white-out between farms, he felt her kiss still on his lips and her name still on his tongue. He felt her embrace still behind his own back. And he knew somehow, somewhere, it was behind his father's back, too, and he was betraying him.

A SOUND SLICED through a dream. Geoffrey Fairhurst opened his eyes enough to aim the flat of his hand at the stud on his alarm clock. Broad daylight was seeping from the curtain edges. He cursed the clock for making him late for work, because, as the simplest fool knew, at twenty past seven in the tail end of December nothing half so bright was supposed to occur. And what mocking brightness it was – a sweet limpidity that washed pearl the moulded ridges in the ceiling's plaster and stole almost a yard along the papered walls. Wearily, he raised himself.

His wife, Louisa, began to stir. 'Louie?' He put a hand to her shoulder, and she made a series of indefinable noises before turning over and huddling further into the blankets.

He didn't blame her. The room was even colder than the past few mornings, and, as he groped on the bedside table for his watch, the air bit wickedly at his ears and nostrils. It reminded him there'd been a snowstorm. In the same breath, it explained the light outside.

His spirits lifted. An uncomplicated man in a plainer tale – so he'd have described himself – he felt a childhood excitement that made him throw off the covers and climb out of bed. He grabbed his dressing gown around him, tiptoed shivering across the rug to the window and parted the curtains.

A radiance from the frostwork on the glass bathed him from every angle. It was like the illumination of some white rock, exuberant, cleansing, touching his good-natured, standard-English profile, probing his already slightly receding hairline. It lit up the stubble under his chin. But the panes were so scribbled over and spangled he could see nothing of the world outside. And the ice was so coarse that when he rubbed at it with the heel of his hand it stung his skin and cost him seconds of a delicate tingling pain before he'd melted a patch large enough to squint through.

The effort was worth it. The fall had been as heavy as any child could have wished. He remembered looking out over the Vale of Aylesbury from the tied cottage on the Waddesdon Estate, where he'd been born twenty-three years previously. Now, he lived only a dozen miles away – in a self-possessed little Chiltern town suddenly buried under snow. From the window of his house on Cowper Road, through the dip and up the slope to the new so-called chalets opposite, each roof was laden a foot thick, every branch above the blanketed ridges was freighted with finely balanced icing, and each smoking chimney exhaled almost clandestinely from an overcoat of slow grey white – that brightened even as he watched. All fuss and detail of things was covered. Even the bristly woods on the crown of the far hill were mere smudges, nothing but white heaps under the sky. Snow was still falling.

Then Louisa was standing beside him. She'd bundled herself in the eiderdown, and was melting her own view-hole. He waited for her to share the moment, but she made no comment on what she saw, only turned away after a few seconds to crouch at the paraffin heater. He watched her open the stove, light a match and touch it to the wick, until the flame spread around the rim of the burner. 'Wonderful isn't it, the snow?' He put a hand on her hair.

She glanced back at him in the way that so confused him. 'Yes, it is, isn't it,' she said, flatly, and began putting the flue back together.

He picked up the flannel trousers he wore for work and made his way across the landing, feeling angry and bewildered in ways he didn't understand. He trod quietly on the bare boards, as though there were sleeping children in the next room, but it struck him that he didn't quite belong any more in his own home.

A more mundane problem nagged him while he was shaving. It was his week to drive, and exactly how he was going to get his car across the other side of the valley to pick up Lionel Rae, who worked in the same lab, he couldn't tell. Dressed and breakfasted, he remembered Rae was staying a couple of extra days at his sister's somewhere down in Kent. So he was let off tackling the steep slopes round the chalets where Lionel and Judith lived.

It was odd he should feel so relieved, because as a rule he enjoyed Rae's company. He felt lucky to have found someone he could get on with. Rae didn't stand on ceremony, didn't preen in his former glory, but was informal and approachable. Geoffrey already saw himself as something of a protégé. Rae encouraged him to question everything dusty or old-fashioned, and he liked the attention. To tell the truth, he liked Lionel better than his own equally brilliant, but rather remote and punctilious boss, Dr Raj Gill.

He didn't reach the lab until ten thirty. The drive to St Albans was infinitely slow, pretty but dangerous, and there were abandoned cars all along the way. The snow would melt under the tyres of the little convoys, then freeze again in their tracks. His brisk white Mini did better than most, but still slid about badly, and a crawl was the best he could manage. By the time he turned into the factory car park, his nerves were jangled. Few of his colleagues appeared to have made it. His half-finished, makeshift lab space was entirely empty.

GEOFFREY STOOD AMONGST the electronic paraphernalia and metallic grey cabinets that defined his days. The lab was both futuristic and foetal: there were ducts and pipes, and cables angled across the walls like rationalised veins. It was warm. There was an audible mains hum, combined with an intermittent buzzing sound. Something was switching in and out. It made him think of Louisa again. A threat hung in the air between them, so recent and out of the blue that he couldn't see why it should be, or exactly what he might have done wrong. Of course he loved her. He filled a glass beaker with water and placed it in the specimen kiln to heat up, then closed the snug steel door and paced about.

He went downstairs to the basement where the big new electron microscope was set up beyond the clean-room barriers. Just short of the airlock, he paused. He knew the machine intimately, felt its function almost in his own body. It had its own hums and whispers, the heating and refrigerant drives for its diffusion pumps, the sense of its own electronic life. In a climate of science and specialisation, he'd specialised – and been hired here at Lidlock. Though he was young and very much the new boy, the microprobe was 'his baby'.

He felt his body shiver in spite of the warmth. As a great telescope observed the past, so perhaps the electron beam looked into the future. Threat was writ large enough there. It was a threat that had been engineered by men just like himself and Lionel – intelligent people, scientists. Since the Missile Crisis, there was no getting away from it, no hope of keeping the rival megatonnage at some intellectual arm's length. What was one actually supposed to do before hail and fire scorched the grass, and burning mountains toppled into the sea? The question wasn't rhetorical. No wonder he'd shivered. Sooner or later, someone would press the button; people were even savvy about it.

At least Rae had left his warheads behind him; at least both of them were out of all that. He compressed his lips and cast an eye over the schedule of tasks pinned up before the holiday. Lidlock Ltd had been a backwater until quite recently. The company made safety systems for rotating machinery, and that was still its stock in trade – a more benign manufacture it was hard to imagine. St Albans itself had somehow remained 'saintly' and aloof, squeezed between the Hatfield defence complex and the Handley Page airstrip at Frogmore. And if Lidlock seemed to have done exceptionally well, with two recent units put up like glass boxes, and a lab section – the section Geoffrey had been recruited to join – hastily erected and tooled up to poke into fresh possibilities, well, what of it? Technology was expanding everywhere. The company was starting to diversify.

Technology was more than expanding. Four years previously, an engineer in Dallas, Texas, had built the first integrated circuit: virtually on his kitchen table, Jack Kilby, a self-effacing back-room boy with a knack for DIY, had etched the equivalent of a transistor, a capacitor and three resistors into a sliver of germanium. With its sticking-out wires sealed crudely in celluloid, Kilby's finger-sized mock-up represented a breakthrough. Robert Noyce, a rival American, had made a similar invention using silicon. In only months, Texas Instruments had Kilby's device down near the size of a pencil point; and Fairchild Corporation likewise with Noyce's. Soon enough, there was the race to write entire textual machines on to microscopic wafers of single-crystal silicon. To those who *knew*, technology was about to exceed itself.

Miles away across the Atlantic, struggling with hastily adapted equipment, settling into half-finished premises and sharing temporary desk space with 'Design', Geoffrey's colleagues didn't *know* officially. When they saw their precocious junior fitted for his 'clean suit', however, and were asked to prepare him ever smaller samples of grit, they mostly guessed the drift – and the source of the funding.

Geoffrey himself didn't, quite. That is, he guessed and didn't guess. A country lad, snapped up on graduation at nearly a thousand pounds a year, soon married – wedded also to Apollonian notions of the common good – he still couldn't quite let two and two make four. At school, he'd been taught by a charismatic science master. At UCL, a professor had uncovered his extraordinary flair for microscopy. Now, his bright start at Lidlock had thrust him to the very edge of the new, but he

was still wet behind the ears, and his brain was fully stretched piloting his incredible new instrument over sub-miniature horizons. So the leap of dimension was too great. Computers were still adding machines the size of houses: he'd seen the immense ACE at the National Physical Laboratory in Bushy Park. It was the leading device in a country that led the world, and it could just about tackle the school timetable problem, the freeze-cooling of fish, and the simplest Fourier analyses.

No, in his conscious mind, he failed to join the dots. His research was pure, and the company – with an eye to the commercial future only – was just speculating in semiconductor techniques thrown up by the Americans. Nor was it remotely possible that this micro-calligraphy on grains of frosted rock could have summoned his fellow traveller, Lionel Rae, appearing from De Havilland's barely a month after his own arrival.

Geoffrey returned upstairs without yet confronting the electron probe, and went to sit at the section of bench which was his office space. On the pad in front of him lay a stencilled notice that must have been circulated during the holiday. He took the biro from his jacket and idly clicked the button at the end. Hardly noticing what he was doing, he wrote the letters 'C.S.' at the top of the page. Then he sighed, because those two telltale initials let slip the person who was really on his mind. He glanced down at the memo.

To all Lab staff: The Requirements of the Official Secrets Act 1911, Section 2. A Reminder …

He felt his face redden, and hastily scrubbed out the two jottings. He picked up the sheet to read it.

The several recent and gravely troubling spy scandals in the news … a heightened state of alert … on our guard against any species of conduct which might render us liable to …

At the end of its three paragraphs was the signature of Bob Butterfield, the company's managing director.

He glanced around nervously, until he saw that there was a copy for everyone. He relaxed. It was nothing. In fact, when he read it again, the memo cheered him immensely. It wasn't like Butterfield to dream of Reds under the bed. The likely case, surely, was that some civil servant on high had got into a flap and issued a directive to every boss in the region with a government contract. It was certainly no secret that Lidlock supplied a minor safety device for Victor jets. Butterfield was just passing the flap down.

Geoffrey pictured the Yorkshire engineer's bottled fury at the risk to his pension from sexual goings-on. Amused, he vaguely remembered having signed something when he'd joined. But the idea of anyone at Lidlock having the inclination to sidle off in search of a Russian – for the sake of one military component – was surely far-fetched. He crumpled the memo between his palms just as Lance O'Neill burst into the lab.

'GOOD CHRISTMAS, GEOFF?' Hat in hand, overcoat unbuttoned, Lance was a kindred spirit. He was tall, dark-haired, only a few years older. His school-hero face glowed, and the cold had heightened the scrum injuries it catalogued: the broken nose, the notched eyebrow, the resculpted right ear. 'Well?' He flung his scarf on to the extraction unit and leaned back against the pipework to slap snow off his trouser bottoms.

'Good enough, thanks,' Geoffrey laughed. 'And you?'

'The usual,' said O'Neill. 'Kids enjoyed it, I suppose. Brass monkeys, wasn't it? We ran out of coal. Can't say I'm sorry to be back.' He looked about him as he peeled off his coat. 'Bugger of a job getting in. Trains no go. Buses no go. Half an hour to get the bloody car started.'

'Don't tell me,' Geoffrey said. 'Still,' he put on a radio voice, 'we must all do our duty and keep our spirits up.' He tossed his ball of paper into the air and caught it. 'So take a look at this, why don't you? Better still …' Rather than trying to salvage his own, he got up and fetched Lance's memo from the corner where he worked. 'Bobby's got the wind up about spies and sex. We've all been sent one.' Grinning, he held it out for him, and indicated Lionel Rae's empty desk by the window. 'His nibs as well.'

'Hang on. Let me thaw out a bit first. Made the coffee, have you?'

Geoffrey took the beaker from the kiln. 'Sorry.'

Finally ensconced on a high stool next to the radiator, with his pipe alight and his cup delicately balanced on the slatted top of a small, but very expensive, oscilloscope, Lance cast an eye over the memo. He seemed to miss the joke. 'Well, it was on the cards, wasn't it?'

'What was?'

'We're being designated, aren't we. Dedicated. Whatever you want to call it. Especially you and your Dr Gill.'

'Me and Raj?' Geoffrey perched on the edge of his bench and began once more to click his pen. His Dr Gill could hardly be dragged away from the silicon, or the clean rooms where it was aligned, cut into discs, polished, oxidised, doped, baked, masked and etched. Dr Gill's empathy with the whole mysterious process, and with the quantum values of semiconductor atoms themselves, was such that Geoffrey often strove to understand quite what his boss required of him.

'It's a measure of your success, Geoff. They're upping the stakes.'

'What stakes, for God's sake?'

'Oh, come on. Haven't you got the hang of it? It's the MOD. I worry for you. They're not pissing around, matey. Why do you think Rae's here? Work it out, *for God's sake*.'

A technician came in with a batch of perspex cases, each bound with surgical tape. They were old samples, and had to be archived. He put the cases down, pointedly removed Lance's cup from the oscilloscope and handed it back to him.

'Thanks, Terry.' Lance drained the cup and tapped his pipe into a large meniscus glass he kept for the purpose. 'Message received. Here we go, then.' He got off his stool, glanced first at Terry, and then back to Geoffrey. 'Enough said, I think. We'll speak later. There's stuff here I'd better be getting straight on with.'

Geoffrey stood blinking as Lance's words sank in. It took him several seconds to lose his pastoral innocence: if Lance was right, his whole life had shifted gear. He stared at his colleague, now bent over an optical device for classifying the specimens. Everything belatedly added up. What if the buildings, the expansion, the investment were *all* military? Once the old man retired, the factory premises could be painlessly rejigged – to make pocket-sized guidance systems for missiles. A technology was about to take off, but its production was already earmarked by the government. He, the well-meaning Geoff Fairhurst, was about to become absorbed into the armaments and aerospace frenzy that occupied the lee of the Chilterns from Stevenage right down to Aldermaston.

What a simpleton he'd been. His body gave that shiver again. The agricultural landscape he'd grown up in – the fertile plain, the windy chalk hills and sloping beechwoods, the ancient estates with their cottages, brakes and streams – was taking on a seamy side, a sense of underworld. For it might not be coincidence that the big V-bombers flew slowly and protectively over the factory like great grey bats. And maybe British intelligence already had a strong presence in the area. There might really be enemy agents, sympathisers, potential traitors somewhere out there. Eyes and ears might even now be sending details of his own life, his own name, directly to London … or to Moscow.

And suddenly, the pompous 'any species of conduct' *did* apply to him. His heart thumped. 'C.S.' He unscrewed the ball of paper, smoothed it with the side of his hand and scratched again with his pen at the initials he'd written at the top. Cynthia Somers was nothing real, nothing tangible. There'd been no furtive fumblings in corridors. Assignations had not been made. It was all pure as the driven snow, and he was a happily married man. No substantial alteration would occur if he never saw Cynthia again. Yet he wasn't being honest with himself. In truth, she was a gamble with his deepest feelings, Cynthia, the missing term of an equation. His cover seemed almost blown, the sense of threat sharpening itself to a point.

Down in the basement, the microscope preserved its vacuum and waited. It was indeed a tool that could scry into the invisible. Before long, dressed in his special spacesuit, he'd be approaching it once again. A bead of sweat moistened the armpit of his shirt.

Now he had to see her, simply to reassure himself. He needed to be certain it was all in his own mind, this infatuation, that it was his *own* fire he was playing with, that he wasn't at risk of making a complete and dangerous fool of himself.

LANCE WAS ABSORBED with the specimens; Terry was labelling them. Geoffrey went over to the lab window. A flake or two spiralled in the airstream against a dull hurry of clouds. Track-marked snow covered the car park a foot deep. Snow lay upon the pavements and window sills of the old quarter, above whose fairy-tale roofs towered the Norman abbey of St Alban the Martyr. The great building shimmered at the heart of things. He understood nothing of women – no one understood them, not even themselves.

There were pencilled circuit diagrams on Lionel Rae's desk. He picked a few up, complex, hurriedly sketched logic gates with their spiky symbols and jotted values – emblems, he thought in passing, of Rae's extraordinary mind. The man calculated like a machine, as fluent in electronics as ordinary people were in English. But the pages would do to cloak his mission. He held the sheaf out purposefully in front of him. 'I'm going up to the drawing office,' he said.

The drawing office lay at the far end of the block. Just before it, he could contrive to pass the room where the six girl typists sat at their desks. All down the ground-floor corridor with its run of identical newly painted flushpanel doors he was amazed at the lengths to which his emotions were taking him. The large, metal-framed windows looked over crystallised rose beds to whitened, wooded parkland. Children in the distance were sledging down a bank.

'Morning, Geoff.' Someone barged past his shoulder, and he turned, startled, uncertain to whom the retreating back belonged. Others were arriving ahead of him, scarfed up in greatcoats, disappearing into offices. He nodded to one or two as he passed; the place was filling up, coming to life. For form's sake, he put his head in to exchange a few words with Clive Powell, the production manager, and again felt he had no outer shell, that his thoughts were leaking out somehow to betray him, and that was why Louisa …

But with Cynthia Somers it was *not* sex. It was precisely because his feeling for her would not 'render any one of us liable' that there was nothing to feel ashamed of.

Blushing again, he made his way on through the double doors and up the main staircase. It led straight to photolitho on the second floor. But a narrow passage on the first led to the test shop stair at the far end, and, half-way along, there was a glass partition which looked into the typists' room. Once he reached it, Geoffrey allowed himself to hesitate and glance sideways. Four of the girls were there under the strip lighting, rattling away at their machines, pausing every now and then, elbows in, to flick the carriage levers across in that upright, female way they had. Cynthia's chair was empty.

Someone was working the Roneo. He craned his neck to see. At the same moment, the girl gave over cranking the handle, turned and stared back at him – not Cynthia but the freckly redhead from accounts, June Something-or-other. His spirits plummeted as he looked hastily away, shocked at the extent of his disappointment, at how much he'd anticipated seeing her again. Then another girl caught his eye, and he retreated, diagrams in hand.

They'd spoken several times, Cynthia and he. Once in the spring, she'd come with some files for Lionel Rae, and had stopped by Geoffrey's piece of bench to look over his shoulder. He'd been examining photographic results, swirling iridescent images and beautiful sliced forms that could sometimes take on all kinds of impressions. They could almost stand as pictures in their own right. He'd got up in his white coat to explain them to her, though words had seemed only to mar a shared sense of wonder. Then he'd even taken her down to show her where the probe was, outlined its principles as simply as he could, chattered on at times too freely – at others with a formality that

verged on the tongue-tied – about the semi-magical properties of silicon, and about his own scanning electron beam. It could penetrate, he'd said, more deeply into nature's enigma than anything before it.

A flicker of a smile had crossed her face. But she'd seemed genuinely interested; and it was flattering, since she was so attractive. That was when he'd first felt the understanding between them, a meeting of minds. Most definitely, he wasn't sexually in love with her. In fact he'd have liked to protect her from the sexual tide coming in, an intelligent girl who might all too easily be damaged. She was younger, and he was married. She had her own life, of which he could, and should, know nothing.

It scared him to feel quite so devastated at her absence from the typing room. He stuffed the papers into his jacket pocket. *She* scared him, even as she thrilled him with her sense of difference, of selfhood, the crisp, faintly provocative way she wore her clothes, the cut of her hair, the tightness of her skirt.

THERE WAS NO thaw overnight. More snow fell. On the next day, a Friday, the earth had another new beginning, without smutch or stain. Then a wind got up from the east that set ranks of silver-grey clouds streaming in the middle air. It plucked the traceries from stalks and wires, dislodged the frosting of empty boughs, and brought great swags of snow from shifting evergreens thudding down on to the white carpet below. Any wakeful creatures hoping to scavenge food it sent back to their burrows.

The roads were more perilous than ever. Driving off from his house, Geoffrey skidded most of the way down Cowper Road. The only visible patches of tarmac showed on the High Street, the long straight road which neatly bisected his home town along the valley floor. Attempts had been made to put down salt and grit. He watched the market people while he waited behind a van at the traffic lights. The fishmonger had shovelled up two huge sugary pyramids on the wide pavement in front of the old Town Hall. He was setting out his stock under the arches, wearing fingerless gloves and an Arsenal bobble-hat, and whistling at the favour of sub-zero temperatures. The packed fish lay incalculably cooled, head to tail in their propped-up boxes.

Few other people were on foot. A dark-coated City commuter was starting down King's Road towards the station, his bowler resolute, his rolled umbrella held out to the side like a ski stick. The market boys by WH Smith's were larking round their trailer with handfuls of snow. A woman pushed a pram in the direction of Woolworths.

The lights changed to green and Geoffrey's wheels slipped as he accelerated behind the van. Then the old road bottlenecked between Victorian shopfronts and the fine eighteenth-century houses with discreet brass plates of solicitors and accountants. He nose-to-tailed it past the medieval church on the left and the modest cinema on the right.

Five ancient routes converge towards London through the chalk knuckles of the Chilterns. The small market town that was home to both Geoffrey and Alan was on the middle one of these, its fold the Roman Akeman Street. A canal and a mainline railway ran in addition, hidden by the tangled lanes yet squeezed to within almost touching distance of the road. Somehow, the valley accommodated a ruined castle, a ruined gasworks, an aerosol factory and a Tudor public school. Most of the houses were old and higgledy-piggledy, though there was nothing outrageously quaint, nor very ugly, nor very remarkable. Geoffrey had grown fiercely fond of the place. He'd imagined it would be a home for a family. He believed it still could be.

The cars in front of him crept past the Eagle and Child. Run-down timbered cottages marked the town's end by Swing Gate Lane. Then the hedges after Bankmill were all but covered, and the road seemed one ruck in a stark white bedsheet, along which Geoffrey crawled for three interminable miles. When he turned off at Two Waters to cross the Grand Union, the canal appeared oddly to craze and steam in the shelter of its bridge.

There was another queue right into Hemel Hempstead new town and up through the housing estate. The hill was steep. On one side, the local boys had made a strip of ice and were taking turns to slide down; on the other, a stream of younger children were dragging toboggans up towards Jarman's

Field, their progress mostly faster than the cars. He turned off at the crest to cross the bridge over the motorway, but St Albans Abbey only came into view after another five-mile slog against the grain of the landscape. Built from the stone slabs of Watling Street, it marked the next Roman route around the capital.

But at Lidlock there was still no sign of Cynthia, even though he found pretexts enough to pass the typists' room, to check post and reception, to roam the stores and the workshops. He gained no more than enquiring looks, and was left to deal with a sense of loss he hadn't bargained for. It had been, he ruefully acknowledged, in the nature of an experiment.

More staff had made it into the lab: Bill Hollingworth, Royston Gaines, Millicent Throssel, the female metallurgist. Lance was there, of course. Geoffrey stood beside Rae's empty desk looking out of the window at the white expanse between himself and the parked cars. He felt strangely old and set up for life. In his sports jacket and flannels, with his honest looks – the sandy hair just a little unruly, the blue eyes engaging, the smile a fraction too ready and disarming – he'd tried to pull this masculine world around him. He had slide-rule and praxis at work, his good wife at home. He drew a promising salary.

So he stared at the featureless white outside, as at a screen on which his past life could be projected. A village youth, he'd courted Merriam, from the prefabs. She'd caught the same bus to school. As it jolted towards Aylesbury Grammar, she'd seemed so perfect, two rows in front, half-obscured by the rail at the back of her seat. Her sleeve, her shoulder, the line of her neck, the clusters of her auburn hair – he'd been struck to the quick when she'd turned round to look at him.

One day, he'd encountered her, and there was nothing for it but to ask her out. They'd been to the Gaumont matinee, and for cycle rides together. They'd lain in the long grass at the edge of Lodge Hill and he'd kissed her romantically. So far, so good. But the lips of an unknown girl he kissed at a party game suddenly tasted far sweeter, and filled his sexual imagination to bursting for more than a week. He was flummoxed. Shortly afterwards, the illusion collapsed and he hadn't loved Merriam at all.

A similar disenchantment happened a year later. He was left thinking he'd misunderstood the whole business, and this was exactly when his intellectual engagement had been caught by the inspired science master. Science was manly, and above all hectic fictions of his heart. He'd met Louisa while they were both students in London, and married her, on the basis that what he'd felt before was infatuation, not love at all. He *loved* Louisa.

IT WAS CYNTHIA who woke those first feelings again, still stranger and more knowing. She focused him, as if one of the electromagnetic lenses he worked with had been switched on. Her skin, her eyes, the colours she wore, the weave of her clothes, things she'd touched assumed a special quality – but he couldn't imagine sleeping with her as he slept with Louisa. Neither could he fancy her privately, as he fancied any number of women rather more than his wife.

This time, however, he knew what was happening. He'd read of Huxley's experiments with mescalin. Vision was chemical; the lucid phenomenon of the girl at work was some brainstorm of illusion. The mind was a frontier, and there was a secret gambler in him. He'd elected to observe himself 'falling in love'.

He was paying a price, of sorts. Now the lab had its own alteration. Its metallic surfaces, lit oddly from the whiteness outside, were too smooth, too grey, their edges too hard. It was suddenly a barren place. Nor could he lose himself in the work. Dr Gill was being cryptic, full of nods and winks, but seemingly producing nothing for his attention. Geoffrey could only attend to a backlog of routine tasks: on the microscope, he checked supply voltages, performed unnecessary recalibrations. He couldn't run the electron beam itself because he lacked any detailed brief.

Lance took him to a pub in the cattle market for lunch. They sat by the fire with beer and sandwiches, surrounded by the smoke and backchat of stockmen. 'Things all right, Geoff? You were looking a bit down in the mouth this morning.'

'Was I? Yes. Fine, thanks.'

'Not your normal chatty self.'

'Haven't been sleeping too well. Maybe it's a bug. There's one going around, isn't there? Louie's been a bit off colour this last week or so.'

'Oh, well, that explains it. Not getting enough. That's your problem, old son.'

'It's nothing like that.' Geoffrey laughed uncomfortably.

In the afternoon, morbid thoughts of Cynthia crowded in on him: she'd left the firm; she was seriously ill; some Brylcreemed boyfriend with a car had smashed her up in an accident on the ice, her legs, her spine, her face; some thug in leather and jeans had lured her on to his motorbike.

There came a point where he managed to tell himself these imaginings were false, and that, as a true researcher, he should be taking note of them. He reached for a pad. But pen on paper would leave a trail of evidence. With Butterfield's memo still in his mind, he paused, biro unclicked. Again, it was as though his thoughts were on display, as though his skull had been can-openered and the brain laid bare.

At last, with darkness beginning to fall, the frenzy seemed to drain away. Cynthia Somers was just a nice girl, nothing more – maybe not even a nice girl. Perhaps he really had been fighting off a bug of some kind. Maybe it was something he'd eaten.

With great relief he worked on for two hours, setting up a control programme of silica-film deposit tests for the following week. And he felt reconciled to the firm. Government patronage needn't just be military. In any case, someone had to invest in initial research. Great benefits had come out of the hectic experimentation of the war years – nuclear power, for one. Lionel Rae hadn't necessarily been hired to steer the firm into dark waters, no matter what Lance believed. Rae was all right, he thought. Rae would look after him. On his way home, he'd stop and buy Louie something nice.

Lance looked up at him. 'That's more like it, Geoff,' he said.

There was permission to leave early. Geoffrey quit the building at four thirty, and the freezing crust in the car park crunched under his feet. But the Mini started first time. He set the electric heater, and the demisters, and turned on the lights. Gloved and scarfed, he nudged his way out of the gates and crept along the skirt of town. There was the frailest early sunset: strips of pale yellow were brushed on the cloud cover just above the horizon. He crossed the Verulam Road, where slush churned up by the day's traffic had frozen into brown heaps. The car struck one of them. It made a dull sound against the bodywork.

Then, at the bus-stop on Bluehouse Hill, just beside the tract of ground that covered the Roman town and the site of the martyrdom, he saw Cynthia in the queue. He was sure he did. She was wearing calf-length boots, black, quite breathtaking. He braked involuntarily, and the wheels locked. The car slithered to a halt five yards past the stop, stalling the engine as his foot slipped off the clutch. In the mirror, he saw the six or so people in the queue staring at him.

PLATITUDES SPILLED FROM his mouth as he stepped through the foot-deep kerbside snow towards her: 'Thought I recognised you … too cold to be hanging about for a bus that might never come … wondered whether I was going your way.' He felt they would do, in front of the onlookers. She had that smile on her face.

Now she was next to him in the car, and they were heading off along the Hempstead road. He drove in silence, horrified at himself, and intrigued. He could see out of the corner of his eye the tight grey pencil skirt that folded over her knees, the tops of her boots.

She seemed to read his mind. 'Kinky boots,' she said. She lifted the right one as far as the skirt would allow and angled it towards him.

He pretended to take his first look. The boots were soft leather that hugged her calves, wrinkled at the ankle and stretched smoothly, sexily, over a high heel. 'They're lovely.' He looked back at the road.

‘When the bus didn’t turn up yesterday, I took the day off and bought them with my Christmas money.’ She seemed completely natural. ‘Aren’t they fabulous? They’ve just come in. Everyone wants a pair.’

‘I didn’t know they were allowed,’ he said.

She laughed. ‘Oh, yes.’ She was delightful.

‘So yesterday the bus didn’t show up?’

‘I nearly froze to death waiting.’

‘But today?’

She seemed once again to know what prompted his questions. ‘Oh, today Butterfield’s Doreen was off and they couldn’t find anyone to take his shorthand, except me. So I was drafted queen bee for the day. Makes a change, I suppose.’

Geoffrey believed he might have heard an apology in her tone. He stole a glance at her face. She was gazing straight ahead through the windscreen, at the landscape. Then she smiled and turned to meet his eye. ‘I like the snow,’ she said. ‘Don’t you?’

‘Yes. Yes, I do, actually. I like it, too.’

‘I taught myself shorthand when I was still at school. My mum helped. It makes a difference. What about you? You’ve been working on all that hush-hush integrated-circuit stuff I was typing up for old Butterfield. You have, haven’t you?’

He was silent for a moment. The snow in the headlights glistened. ‘I’m not really supposed to say. Cynthia.’ Her name.

‘Oh come on, Geoff.’ She’d spoken his. ‘I probably know more about it than you.’

‘Do you?’

‘We work for the same outfit, don’t we? Do you like records? Do you like the Beatles?’

‘I don’t know,’ he said. ‘Should I?’

‘Only the group everyone’s talking about.’

‘Were they the ones who made “Walk Right In"?’

She spluttered. ‘Not likely.’

‘Oh.’

He thought the subject closed.

‘Love me, do,’ she said.

Geoffrey’s foot flapped down on to the accelerator just when he should have been braking for a bend. Luckily, the wheels spun at the low speed, and the car simply skidded sideways. He brought it under control, unnerved.

‘It’s been in the charts for weeks.’

‘Oh,’ he said. ‘Yes.’

‘I thought we were going into the hedge, then.’

The earth was silver. The farms and woodlands stretched away to either side under a darkening sky, supernaturally luminous.

‘Sorry about that,’ he said.

‘We’d have been in a pickle, wouldn’t we, stuck out here?’

Geoffrey trained his eyes on the road. He could feel her face turned towards his. He believed her eyes were amused, her lips slightly parted. He could see her without looking, knew her already. He felt the blush creep up from his collar and into his cheeks, and he cleared his throat. ‘Now. Where am I supposed to be taking you?’

‘Boxmoor. You go by there, don’t you? I’ve seen you a few times. Sure I have.’

‘Have you?’

‘You must have seen me, too. At the bus-stop. Blackbirds Moor, by the cut.’

‘No. Never.’ He took a risk. ‘Wish I had, though.’

Cynthia made no reply. They crossed the motorway and came to the heights of the new town. His heart thumped. She'd dealt him a card: he could offer to take her in to work. Something would begin whose end it was impossible to foresee. Perhaps, just while the snow lay, there was a brief dispensation, an angel of *mise-en-scène* under whose wings they were allowed to meet. How easy she seemed with the flirtation – for flirtation it undoubtedly was. He flicked an eye sideways again at the skirt over her knees, and at her boots.

They drove down the hill from Adeyfield. Hemel Hempstead shopping centre raised its modernist blocks, and lights blazed from the strict mathematical forms. Geoffrey negotiated the roundabout named Paradise, felt it apt and ebbing. The Mini nosed towards Boxmoor under the very faintest western glow.

'Now. Whereabouts am I to drop you?'

'Oh, anywhere will do. It's an easy walk from here. I don't want to put you to any trouble.'

'Honestly, it's no trouble. No trouble at all. It'll save you a bit of time. After all, Friday night, a girl like you … I expect the boys'll be queuing up to take you out. And women always need ages to get ready, don't they?' He was crass. But he continued, because he was doing nothing wrong, 'Take my wife, for example …'

She crossed and uncrossed her ankles. 'The boys I knock about with,' she said, 'you'd call them rough and ready. Till you get to know them, that is. Teds, really. We go out on the bikes. That's what I like.'

'On the bikes?'

'Yes. There's nothing like it. When you're on the back and the world's coming at you and you're going faster and faster and there's nothing you could ever do. So you just hang on. And all at once there's a moment when you're not afraid any more, you're not left out, or alone, or different, and it's like … I don't know. Like you're winning.' Her voice was animated. 'Like that's the only time, the only chance you've ever got. When any second … the next second, you might die and you don't care. You just don't care. Blokes think they own you. One kiss and you're property, you don't exist any more. But on the bikes you come back to life.'

Geoffrey's throat was tight. He tried to swallow. 'I've never ridden a motorbike,' he said.

'You should try it.' She sounded sincere. 'You might like it.'

She showed him the turn-off. It took him to the road behind the pub called the Fishery, a snow-blank lane with only tyre tracks between the cottages. 'Just here. Next to that lamppost. Thank you ever so much. I'm really grateful.'

He stopped, and she opened the door her side. And he watched her swing her boots away and lever herself lightly out of the car. Her feet sank deep into the white drift. She turned and looked in at him. 'Thanks again, then.' Her voice seemed suddenly serious, a little sad.

He heard himself say, 'This weather's so awkward if you haven't got transport. Tell you what. If I see you Monday morning and it's still like this, I'll stop. How about that?'

'Oh,' she said. He saw her hesitate. 'All right. That would be nice.'

'Could be any time between eight and half past. I can't guarantee …'

'Till Monday, then. Perhaps.' She smiled and shut the car door. 'Thanks, Geoff.'

He watched her go up to the little house. She turned once more and waved briefly before disappearing inside.

All along the valley road, between the occluded farms and the occasional pubs, he felt such elation, and such guilt. His blood pumped. His legs shook so that he could hardly manage the pedals. Almost, he wished there'd be a thaw over the weekend – for by that the deed would be undone.

But there was no thaw. Instead, most unusually for temperate southern England, the mercury dropped like a stone, and the winds got up again. The weather was about to strut and ad lib. On the Saturday night blizzards west of the Malverns would drift twenty feet deep. By the Sunday, cars and houses not so very far from Geoffrey's home would be completely buried, with never a train able

to move. Sheep on the Welsh hills would disappear along with their shepherds. Birds in mid-flight would fall lifeless from the air.

II
PARALLEL COURSES

THE PHONE RANG. Cynth had got hold of his number. Alan hurried downstairs into the hall to pick up the receiver. He stood barefoot on the floor tiles in his pyjamas, the memory of her lips still touching his.

It was his mother. She sounded strained, far more distant than his aunt's house in Kent, her voice almost scrambled. His father had been called away, unexpectedly, on business, and she'd be returning home alone. But not until the weather eased. Travelling just now was next to nigh impossible. Was Alan coping? Would he pass on the message about Lionel to the Fairhursts, as their phone line seemed to be down?

'Called away?'

'Yes. On business.'

'What business?' He could hardly hide his disappointment.

'You know, dear. The firm.'

'Oh. Just like that? Out of the blue?'

'Sometimes it isn't for us to ask … Apparently, there's an emergency. He *is* still important, Alan, in spite of what you seem to think. They're sending a car to take him to the airfield at Northolt. I'm only worried he won't have enough to wear.' His mother sighed; the sound was crackly, metallic. 'So can you manage to go up to the Fairhursts for us? About getting to work. Geoffrey and … Louise, I think her name is. You know who I mean, don't you?'

'More or less. Give me the address, then.'

He heard her calling to his father. The name of the road was indistinct.

'What was that?'

'Cowper.'

'Oh, right,' he said. 'Up past the almshouses.'

'That's it, dear. Your dad says it's on a corner. The point is he doesn't remember the exact number. But my address book should be on my dressing table. You'll keep the boiler going, won't you? We don't want burst pipes. And you've got enough to eat?'

'Sure,' he said. 'Bye.' He put the phone down.

He had to pull himself together to attend to his mother's message. Of course it wouldn't have been Cynth. His father had been called away, and he was to tell the Fairhursts. He bit his lip and turned back to the stair. Then he stopped. *Called away.*

He'd paid no heed to the spy theory since the Busy Bee. The absurd notion of Lionel in the pay of the Kremlin had simply bobbed up in the wake of his scare, and, with equal facility, it had bobbed down again. All his imagination had been taken up with the girl in blue. *Come when the snow clears away.* The snow this morning lay deeper than ever. It was four days since he'd seen her.

Still, there was a grainy, B-movie quality to his mother's news. He noted how on edge she'd been. He recalled her sideswipe for his lack of respect. And the scene she'd evoked was open to interpretation. Under the cover of darkness, later that afternoon, an unmarked car would appear out of the murky, snow-covered backstreets of south-east London. It would halt before the house in Wickham Lane, engine running, headlights flaring. A peremptory knock at the door would be followed by the emergence of his father, and an awkward farewell would take place in the presence of two men in raincoats, who would then whisk Lionel off – to Northolt, she claimed. Taken with a dose of Harry Lime, it had all the elements of an arrest by MI6, or even a lift-out by the Russians. At the very least it was a coincidence: as if his own lurid suspicions had already exposed his dad, as if a weird mirror life of his whole family had started to materialise.

He went to the sitting room. The grey-white glare struck up through the undrawn curtains. It scoured the hastily textured ceiling, exposed the jazzy walls, the geometric light fittings, the scratch-resistant wood-block floor, the teak-style sideboard. It clung to the one beauty, the polished piano, where Alan and his mother found a degree of sympathy. The Rayburn in the fireplace had gone out. He switched on the electric heater in the dining area and stood over it, shivering, holding his breath.

Then he switched it off. Four days – because of the snow. Or was that merely an excuse? Cynth could hardly have predicted the weather. All he had to do was swap brooding for action. And there was no need to take the bike. All he had to do was get over to her door somehow and knock, while the snow kept the gangs away. He'd walk if he had to, set off as soon as he'd run his mother's errand. He must simply get dressed, snatch something to eat, wrap up. Four days. There was only the Fairhursts' address. Only that one thing. He went up to his parents' bedroom.

The address book lay on her dressing table, exactly where she'd said. He found the house number and closed it again. His fingertips rested on the cover. The book was right next to her lipsticks, her powder jars and sprays. Her scent still lingered in the air; her dresses filled the cupboard. Fastened to tangled nylons in her drawer was an elasticated garment she wore next to her skin. Before he knew it, before he even knew why, he was wavering. Cynth would never know, neither would his mother. It was just a game. He could give it up when he liked. Four days was long enough – a good stint, even.

Now he was remote, almost an onlooker. Someone had said there was a tart in the fourth year, if you gave her a quid … Tarts with Teds, bike boys with painted girls, grubby, trodden articles from *Tit Bits, The People, Reveille* – some women liked it, were insatiable. There was a place you could touch them and they'd do anything. The complicated female clothes fastened awkwardly here, zipped clumsily there, and soon Cynth was queen of the bypass. After that, in his mother's threefold mirror, it didn't take him long. A few minutes, and it was all over.

But the feeling afterwards was bitter as ever. Poor boy, he hated himself. He wished he *had* been killed at the Elstree. It wasn't the deed – trivial, a pantomime – but the shame. Why did this shitty side of things always have to show through, this script of a dirty planet, hurriedly made-up, abruptly shoved in, scrawled across unsullied teenage love? His life was worthless. He was paralysed, crippled, because his father so respected his mother, cared so assiduously for her, showed nothing the least sexual in his approaches to her. Lionel in this so triumphed over his oddities – while *he*, Alan, was the sick, perverted one. He alone wore the family's missing sexuality.

ALAN CLEANED HIS face and put the garments back, still covering his traces. He thought of the bike death he'd escaped and Cynth picking him out, and he tried not to cry. She was real and waiting for him, and he'd just disqualified himself from ever going near her. He'd let her and everyone down, because of what he *was.*

He stood for a moment on the stair, oblivious to the cold. *Called away. Come when the snow clears away.* As his hand strayed over the splodgy, embossed wallpaper, a peculiar train of thought struck him: Cynth and the disappearance of his father were somehow connected. He snorted and carried on down. But there was a logic to it so perfect and tempting – just as at the Bee – that he stopped once again to let the idea sink in. It was like one of those flip-flop circuits his father went on about. If he let Cynth go, Lionel would be back in a day or two. If, on the other hand, Alan went after Cynth – as he still longed to, as she herself had invited him to – the eerie conviction grew that his Commie dad would never show up again. The hairs stood up on the back of his neck as he recognised exactly the quantum condition his father had joked about. Lionel, just like the cat in the story, was in two situations at once, and the determining factor was Alan himself.

He laughed out loud and dismissed the whole notion. It was a thought experiment, the sort of ridiculous parlour game Lionel himself might have dreamed up – if he'd ever played parlour games. No one could shape things *retrospectively.* The bells of St Peter's began in the town.

His mother had been concerned about the heating. The so-called chalet was deceptively spacious; two of its four bedrooms were tucked like polar caves under the ground-floor eaves. In one

was a huge cast-iron boiler, which Lionel had found in *Exchange and Mart*, its pieces so heavy they'd almost crushed the car's suspension. His father, fired up himself, had assembled it, persisting with calculation and design.

The other bedroom he'd already turned into a workshop for his projects, installing a bench and a Gothic, industrial lathe. For the boiler, he'd burst forth to rip the home apart, tunnelling through walls, wrenching up floor-boards, creating ventages and installing thermostats, wiring and cursing again. Flung hammers had missed Alan, the dutiful apprentice, by inches. For all this sweat and telemetry, the heating system had failed to heat. A fault lay at its heart so basic as to be childlike – a complete misimagination of the heat transfer from copper to ducted air. Prime Lionel, of course, unworldly and bitterly funny; but an image came to Alan before he could stop it, of his father already under interrogation, his face bloodied, his legs jerking. He hooked an iron handle into the boiler's lid, lifted it and peered inside.

Only embers remained from the night. He opened the draught as far as it would go, before dumping in fresh coke from the scuttle. Then he prowled for food. Back in his bedroom, he dressed himself beside one of Lionel's grilles, and the breeze raised goose pimples on his legs.

He hitched up his jeans. Sadly, he scooped Brylcreem on to the palm of each hand, and swept it through his thick dark hair. He had to stoop to see in his own mirror – quite *like* his mother as it happened, sultry, maybe a GI's kid, even. He combed his quiff, checked this profile, now that, touched at definite sideburns with his razor. The good looks were a cruel irony; it was a cold hard world. Lionel had said so often enough – and Lionel should know.

Listlessly, he zipped his suede jacket, picked up his gloves and silk scarf. He went down to run his drab errand – all that was left of an impulse so hopeful only minutes before. A pair of his dad's wellingtons stood by the door to the boiler room. He plunged his feet in them, because there were no others to fit him.

CRYSTALLINE BETWEEN CHALET and garage, the snow was chest high. He kicked a path. The slot of sky was leaden. The frontages, all open-plan, were mapped into one steep slope by the overnight fall. A neighbour was clearing a drive; a child, wrapped up in coats and scarves, patted a snowman. The church bells began again, echoing back from the opposite side of the muffled town, and the sound touched him – strident, so public.

He screwed the key and swung the garage door up from its white wedge. His Triumph stood on the oil-stained cement gleaming dimly, its mudguards spotless, the chrome of its two silencers lustrous from his efforts. He sat astride the tangerine-and-cream petrol tank and the big twin wafted up its greased-burnt metal smell. He squeezed at the clutch and clicked the gear change with his toe. The handlebars swerved in his grip when he twisted the throttle.

Конец ознакомительного фрагмента.