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The Best British Short Stories 2014

Edited by Nicholas Royle

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THE *Best* {BRITISH} *Short Stories* 2014

SERIES EDITOR **NICHOLAS ROYLE**

SALT

CROMER

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In memory of Joel Lane (1963–2013)

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INTRODUCTION

They say there's no accounting for taste and it plays a large part in the assembly of an anthology such as this. Zadie Smith's 'The Embassy of Cambodia', published last year as a handsome stand-alone volume by Hamish Hamilton, was beautifully written and you couldn't fault the author's grasp of the language, unless you objected to her use of 'presently' to mean 'now', but was it to your taste? (It did seem to be to many people's.) What was it anyway? A short story? A very short novella? About 8000 words in length and described by the publisher's blurb simply as a 'story', it came in 21 chapters tricked out with white space, generous leading and wide margins, to look more like a novella or even a short novel. It lifted the spirits to see a major imprint publishing an original short story on its own, even in its crafty little disguise; it would raise them even further to see the same thing happen with authors who don't enjoy the same level of media attention as Zadie Smith.

Smaller publishers, although they have less to spend, may also have less to lose. Daunt Books – better known, in the form of James Daunt, as a classy bookseller who came to the rescue of Waterstone's – has started putting out very smart-looking chapbooks containing individual short stories, among them Philip Langeskov's wonderfully tense 'Barcelona', reprinted herein. I hope readers will forgive my including a story first published in chapbook form by my own Nightjar Press – M John Harrison's 'Getting Out of There'.

Unthank Books, 3:AM Press, Oneworld Publications, Unlocking Press, The Fiction Desk, Tindal Street Fiction Group, TTA Press and Freight Books are all small publishers with the vision – and good taste – to take on authors and projects that would grace bigger imprints' lists if only the editors at those bigger imprints were not obliged to dance to the tune of sales and marketing. The above small publishers are all represented in the present volume. As are literary magazines *The Reader* and *Ambit*, as well as high-achieving online outlet *The View From Here*. Two stories were shortlisted in the Manchester Fiction Prize and the author of one of them, Adam Wilmington, walked off with ten grand as the winner. But the development of the year in short fiction – yes, more exciting, perversely perhaps, for this observer, than either Alice Munro winning the Nobel or Lydia Davis nabbing the Man Booker International – was the emergence of *Lighthouse*, a little magazine from Norwich publishing short stories, poems and essays of exceptional quality, including one (Anna Metcalfe's 'Number Three') that was later shortlisted in the Sunday Times EFG Short Story Award worth £30,000. *Lighthouse*, with its excellent editorial judgment and attractive modishly old-fashioned design, is a publication to cherish.

It's especially cheering that in the digital era, print publications, rather than merely clinging on, are flourishing, and there are more deserving stories being published than there is room for reprints in this book. I was much taken by two stories in the August 2013 issue of *Ellery Queen Mystery Magazine* – Jennifer Reeve's 'A Case of Mis-Identity' and Val McDermid's 'Ghost Writer' – as well as Jason Gould's 'All Items of Value Have Been Removed', in *Structo* 10, 'Two Parties' by Alan Beard, which appeared in *The Sea in Birmingham* (Tindal Street Fiction Group), and Krishan Coupland's 'Men of the Waste', shortlisted for the Bristol Short Story Prize and so

included in the *Bristol Short Story Prize Anthology Volume Six* (Bristol Review of Books).

There wasn't a bad story in *The Longest Night* featuring five 'curious tales' by Alison Moore, Emma Jane Unsworth, Richard Hirst, Tom Fletcher and Jenn Ashworth; this handsome volume, illustrated by Beth Ward, was described as 'an entirely independent collaborative publication' with no named publisher or editor credited. Two regional anthologies provided a generous number of notably good short stories – *Root: New Stories From North East Writers* (Iron Press) edited by Kitty Fitzgerald, and *Connecting Nothing With Something: A Coastal Anthology* (Influx Press) edited by Gary Budden and Kit Caless, featuring new fiction, poetry and illustration inspired by the coastline of south-east England.

Some titles may reach small audiences, but they are labours of love and we are all richer for their existing. *Hoax* started up last year, a single A3 sheet folded to A5 and describing itself as 'a literary venture to present all forms of creative, text-based work as equal and to remove useless definitions of what creative work can be'. Further information at hoaxpublication.co.uk. Piece of Paper Press, run by author Tony White, is going strong after a number of years; last year saw it publish an original short story by Michael Moorcock, 'A Twist in the Lines'. *Interrobang*, possibly the world's first origami literary magazine, was created by York St John creative writing student Fionn Coughlan-Wills; like *Hoax*, this unfolds to a single piece of paper – glossy and printed in colour – but you try folding it back up again after a couple of drinks.

York St John is just one of the many universities around the country running lively and imaginative creative writing departments with excellent staff and talented students. Novelist, screenwriter and short story writer Hanif Kureishi made the news early this year with comments he was reported to have made at the Independent Bath Literature Festival.

Kureishi, who was made a professor at Kingston University in autumn 2013 and teaches creative writing there, was reported to have said, 'A lot of my students just can't tell a story.' He was reported to have gone on: 'A lot of them don't really understand. It's the story that really helps you. They worry about the writing and the prose and you think: "Fuck the prose, no one's going to read your book for the writing, all they want to do is find out what happens in the story next."'

This perhaps resonates with the experience of a friend of mine who applied for a job teaching creative writing at a university in the north of England. He confided that, when he went for an interview, there were four people in the room including the Head of English and himself, and three of them said they weren't that fussed about punctuation. The Head of English admitted to not knowing how to use a semi-colon. My friend was shocked and was quite relieved not to be offered the job and so have to decide whether to compromise his standards.

But the fact is there are some excellent writer-teachers on the staff at Kingston, as elsewhere, who must have been rather frustrated by Kureishi's comments. Why did he appear to bite the hand that feeds, adding, according to the *Independent*, 'The whole thing with courses is that there are too many teachers on them, and most are going to teach you stuff that is a waste of time for you'? Was he venting spleen, stating a sincerely held view, being mildly disingenuous or simply engaging in downright mischief? He did, after all, have a new book out, and newspapers never tire of the old debate: can you or can you not teach creative writing?

While the smart answer may be that you can teach it all you like, and the real question remains whether you can learn it, the fact is that my colleagues and I at the Manchester Writing School at MMU see remarkable results every year, and we're not alone in that. If you can write, the practice of workshop-

ping and exposure to other elements of a creative writing MA will, in most cases, help you to write better.

This year's anthology is dedicated to the memory of Birmingham-based author Joel Lane, a much-loved writer of bleak and disturbing short stories – his preferred term was 'weird fiction' – as well as two outstanding novels and several volumes of poetry, who died unexpectedly on 25 November 2013 aged only 50.

Nicholas Royle
Manchester
April 2014

JONATHAN GIBBS

THE FABER BOOK OF ADULTERY

Mark followed her to the living room, drink in hand. The room was two rooms knocked together, running from white wooden slatted shutters at the front to a view of the lawn at the rear, scattered with toys. The long wall opposite was thick with shelves, the books backing onto the no doubt equally well-stocked shelves of the house next door. The terrace, in Mark's mind, extended away from them in both directions, like a paper chain of human figures joined at the hand and foot, a procession of paired mirror images. In all of them, people having dinner parties, couples flirting, children soundly sleeping.

Elizabeth had gone to the stereo, with her husband's iPhone, so he took himself in the other direction. He cruised the shelves, running his fingers over the spines, before allowing them to settle on one, as if at random. He levered it out, enjoying the feeling of resistance it gave as it slid against those packed tight on either side. When it came free, almost with a pop, the books alongside seemed to sigh into the space it left, their pages filling with air.

The book was Richard Ford's *Women with Men* – the handsome Harvill Panther edition. On the cover was a Doisneau-

esque couple kissing, or sort of kissing, on a railway platform. He flicked the book open with his thumb – the page edges smudged with age – to reveal a second photo, inside, of a barge on the Seine. Those low embankment walkways. That was where the true loucheness of Paris lay, he thought, in the flatness of its river water, so far from the sea – no overexcited tides, falling and rising, like the Thames.

Have you read this? he said. She was coming back over to him, her music selection drifting from the speakers.

Let me see, she said.

Yes. Look. And she showed him her initials, penned into the top corner of the first page. She thumbed on through it, giving a little grunt of recognition, or surprise.

Mark oriented himself against the mantel shelf, giving himself a clear view of the doorway into the hall, which turned and led down to the kitchen extension, where they had eaten: he and Laura and Elizabeth and Zac, and these two other women, Genevieve and Nicci, friends of Elizabeth's. The others were clearing the table and loading the dishwasher. Elizabeth, having cooked, was exempt, and Mark had said he would keep her entertained until they were done.

He took his first sip of the whisky Zac had poured him in the kitchen. The taste of it spread, making his mouth glow, as if he'd been given a very gentle anaesthetic, or stung by a swarm of infinitesimal and ultimately benign bees. Elizabeth's hair was the colour of whisky, but not whisky held up to the light: whisky seen looking down into the glass. He was quite drunk.

Why did nobody have drinks cabinets any more? He looked around the room. This was another difference between their generation and their parents'. Did this mean they were less adventurous in their drinking? Were their parents' hangovers worse, then? Grander, more splendid?

Elizabeth closed the book and handed it back. It's been a while since I read it, she said. And those American writers,

sometimes it's difficult to hold onto a definite image of each individual story, you know.

All those endless adulteries, you mean.

I suppose so.

He could hear occasional yelps of laughter from the kitchen, short swells of conversation that gave birth to others: a healthy, stable wash of chit-chat.

I know what you mean, he said. Ford. Updike. Cheever. Yates.

Philip Roth.

Philip Roth. It's like they're incapable of writing a story that doesn't hinge, doesn't depend entirely for its moral resonance, on the traducement – is that the word? – of a marriage.

And you've never written a story about adultery?

No, but then I don't really do stories that much. And the novels are reasonably free of them, I think. But no. I'm yet to write my first adultery story.

She raised her eyebrows at him, and he considered the terrible, and terribly exact beauty of a woman's eyebrows, their pluckedness and trimmedness. Really, it made you wonder if binding their feet might not be such a bad idea either, after all.

Adultery and the short story, he said, in his seminar voice, and gave the whisky in his glass a swirl. Actually, I had this horrible realisation, in the class I've been teaching, that a good half of the stories I'd set them were about adultery. Carver, obviously. Not Updike – nobody teaches him any more, it seems – but Yates, Lorrie Moore, Anne Beattie. Yes, the women, too. What?

She was laughing, into her glass.

I was just thinking, how nice it is for the women that they get to have first names.

Ha.

No, I'm sorry. And what do they think of it, of their tutor foisting all this filth on them? Does it embarrass them?

God, no. If it was tutor-shagging-student stories, perhaps. But adultery, marriage, middle age, all that is so remote from their lives, it might as well be Chekhov.

She laughed again, the laugh turning into a sneeze. He removed a tissue from a box on the shelf beside them and offered it to her.

Thanks.

It's interesting, though, don't you think?

She finished blowing her nose. Interesting?

The short story, its use of adultery as the ethical question of the modern age. Not war, not death or grief – well, those too, but not, you know, bullfighting, or money, or violence. Do you think I'm obsessed?

I think that's a question you should ask your wife.

But before he could think of something to say to this, the others came through, Zac swinging the whisky bottle by its neck, then sort of half-throwing it up to catch it full in his hand.

Looks like you need some of this, he said.

Indeed I do. Thank you. Mark held out the glass for Zac to splash into, and smiled to the others. I was just banging on to Liz about adultery and the short story, he said. Actually, I've got this fantasy, this book I'm going to edit. The Faber Book of Adultery. The joke being, I suppose, that the subject is so all-pervasive as to make the selection entirely otiose. It could be pages taken at random from any book, published ever. They're all about adultery. A sweep of his arm, as if reading from a banner. The. Faber. Book. Of. Adultery. The Faber. Book of. Words.

They laughed, and he blushed, and warned himself to ease off on the adultery. Accordingly the conversation became general, and they grouped themselves and sat, in pairs and threes. Mark could feel the alcohol in his bloodstream, and the music thrumming along behind the conversation, as if to

underpin and corroborate it. Flirtation was a wonderful thing, he felt, and he was, he also felt, quite good at it. Flirtation was all about the navigation of invisible boundaries and contours, the skirting of a hill, the climbing of a stile. The only thing was that the line that stood between him and his friend's wife wasn't acting like a line. It was humming, glowing like a strip light, expanding and contracting, becoming more a zone than a line, something that could be stepped into without necessarily being crossed.

Even filching glances at Laura, he got no sense that he'd overstepped any mark. He sat there, sipping his drink and nodding along to whatever it was this Nicci was saying, but really he was listening to his body. His body was singing – or, not singing, but something like it, something like the harmonics you get from a piano. This heightened sense of – not desire, exactly, or desiredness, but something to do with desire.

You're flirting with yourself, he told himself, and smiled at the thought.

You're flirting with yourself, over her.

He watched Zac get up, laughing at something Laura had said, and go to the far end of the room. He leaned to tap at the screen of his iPhone, there in its dock, then scrolled with his finger. He tapped again, and the music changed: something harder, folky still, but with an electronic undercurrent that seemed to chivvy it along.

It was as Zac walked back over, affecting a cool/dumb clown-dance as he came, that Mark was struck by an appalling thought.

His wife, and his kids, treated his iPhone just the same as Elizabeth had treated Zac's: as common property. The kids even knew the pass code for it. They played games on it, when they were allowed, and Laura checked the weather and looked things up on the web if the laptop was off, or being used. And

then there was that app they'd downloaded onto their phones that allowed each of them to see where the other's was, for if it got lost. How was anyone supposed to have an affair under such circumstances?

All those post-war Yank adulterers, with their elegant tail-finned cars, and their motels and pools, and their bright New England suburbs, they were all shagging away in what now seemed like a golden age. Nobody could have affairs any more, surely, any more than they could have drinks cabinets. He knew they did, in the abstract, but he certainly didn't know anyone who had. He couldn't see how anyone would even start to go about it.

It was a chastening thought, and his thank you kiss to Elizabeth, there in the hallway, was chaste, too, though he couldn't help but note the particular quality of the pressure with which she squeezed his arm, through the corduroy of his jacket, as they smudged cheeks, in a way that might have been code, or the code for a code. The still night air and back-of-the-head buzz of the booze and the warm clear rising thought of the impossibility of it all put a spring in his step as they walked home, and he clinched his wife's waist tight in to his, so she nearly tripped, and squeezed his bum in retaliation, and they laughed, and quickened their step again.

In the weeks that followed he thought about it more. He got out his Oxford Concise Dictionary, as was his habit at such times – when he felt an idea coming, beginning to take up residence in the part of him that wrote, that made him a writer – and looked up the etymology. It came from the Latin: Adulterare, to corrupt, as in to adulterate. Which was a nicely moral formulation: anything else added to a marriage being necessarily inferior, like cutting cocaine with baking powder, or worse. He'd assumed it shared a root with 'adult', but it didn't. That came from adolescere, to grow up. You had to be an adult to

commit adultery, had been his thinking. After all, teenagers didn't do it, nor really did twenty-somethings. It was a grown-up activity, a mark of maturity.

He thought about how a story about adultery might work. If he was to have an affair, in this world of smartphones and itemised bills, and of couples who both held down jobs, and had kids, this world without motels and Cadillacs and back-yard pools, how would he go about it? If he was going to have an affair with Elizabeth, for instance, how would it happen? He thought of the readings and events he had coming up, and of other ones he could organise or invent, and he thought about how he would make contact with Elizabeth, safely and discreetly and deniably, or places they might bump into each other as if by chance.

Before any of these hypothetical situations could resolve themselves into anything like a plot, he found himself back at her house. It was a Friday evening, and he was babysitting Walter, their four-year-old, as the first leg of a trial babysitting swap. The plan had been that Laura would do it, but their own eldest, Morrie, was poorly, and Laura said she'd stay at home, and Mark should go.

Zac let him into the house, and told him to get himself a drink while they finished getting ready. It was the fortieth birthday of a friend from school, in a pub a taxi ride away. Elizabeth looked gorgeous in a wrap dress – he said as much after he'd kissed her hello – and she acknowledged the compliment by dipping her head to one side to fix her earring, a movement that dislodged a segment of hair that seemed to unfurl, in slow motion, down to her shoulder.

He stood on the front step to wave them off, feeling that strange feeling you get sending people out into the world from their own home, as if you'd become their doppelgänger, slipped yourself into the hierarchy. He watched till the taxi

rounded the corner, then closed the door, gently, listening for the click of the latch. The house was his.

To begin with, he went to the kitchen and topped up his glass from the bottle Zac had pointed out to him. The place was messier than the night of the dinner party. There was a stack of children's paintings at the far end of the kitchen surface, stiff as poppadoms. More paper, with pencils and crayons, and left-over bits of the newspaper on the table. Two plates slotted slantwise in the sink, stuck with dried tubes of pasta and what looked like congealed custard. He opened a cupboard and looked inside, closed it, switched on the radio, then switched it off again.

He went into the sitting room, his sock feet making him feel even more like an intruder, and picked three recentish novels from the shelves, trying to guess which of them – Zac or Elizabeth – they belonged to. He took them to the sofa and flicked on the television. With half an eye on the telly he read their back covers, copyright pages, acknowledgements and openings, then put them down. He took his wine and went up the stairs. He stood for a moment outside Walter's door, listening for his breathing. He went inside and stood in the middle of the room. The boy was sprawled face down on his bed, in flannel pyjamas, with his duvet kicked down to the foot of the bed and his bum stuck in the air. Mark thought of his own children, of Morrie, and reminded himself to text home to check how he was. He pulled the duvet over Walter, who grunted and shifted in response.

One by one he pushed open the other doors off the landing: the bathroom, with its strange array of bottles and pots on the shelf and window sill; the spare room, clothes laid out on the bed in dry-cleaner bags; and then the master bedroom.

He stood looking at the bed, the two bedside tables, then he went to the cupboards and opened them. The doors on the right were Zac's, those on the left, hers.

He ran the back of a hand over the sleeves and sides of the garments gathered there, her clothes, then pushed his arm in, making a gap and widening it, to expose a delicate grey cardigan with mother of pearl buttons. His neck muscles were tight from the strain of listening for the sound of the front door. He slid his fingers inside the opening of the cardigan and ran them up and down against the weave of it. He had given himself the beginning of an erection. This is what he did, he thought, he vampirised other people's lives, sucking up incident and detail and squirrelling it away. He drew out his hand slowly, letting the fibres snag on his knuckles as they came, then brushed the clothes straight and went around the bed and sat down on it.

There, face down on the bedside table, was his own novel, his second and best one. He gave a laugh. This must be Elizabeth's side, mustn't it? He lifted a corner of the duvet and saw the beginnings of something liquid, a silk pyjama top. He switched on the bedside lamp and opened the book at the marked place. It was the scene in which the protagonist, Ricardo, was having his final confrontation with his father, accusing him of ruining his life by, well, by doing all manner of not particularly awful things, like being a bit strict, and making him play rugby, and sending him to a school he hated. He turned to the front.

'To Laura, always,' it said. The first was to Laura, the second to Laura, always. He'd set a precedent, and if he didn't keep dedicating his books to his wife, it would look odd. Why had he not simply dedicated it to his father, who was still alive when he wrote it, dead when it came out? His father, who had done so much to instil in him his love of books, and films, and so little to turn him into the kind of snivelling, self-pitying squib of character epitomised by Ricardo.

He flicked through the pages, to see if Elizabeth had left any mark of herself or her thoughts: an underlining, a folded

corner. Nothing. People didn't have that kind of relationship with books, really, sad to say, not even him. Books, he felt, had usually stopped meaning very much to people by the time they were old enough to benefit from the wisdom they contained. People – grown-ups, adulterers – read books for the consolation they offered for the sad, true fact that they hadn't become the sort of the people they'd thought they would by reading the books they did when they were younger. He shook his head at himself. It was a stupid thought, the sort of thing he'd put in his book and his editor would insist he take out.

He put the book back on the table, stood and sighed, and looked around the room. The double-stacked pillows, the painting above the bed, the full-length mirror on its stand in the corner. There was something here, he thought. The marital bedroom.

He went down to the kitchen and found a couple of unscribbled-upon sheets of paper and a pen and went back upstairs. He sat on the bed and started writing.

The marital bedroom. Not so much a physical space as a mental one. A place where certain things happen. Some allowed, some proscribed.

Then:

He followed Frances into the living room. The curves of her backside. Crossed that out. The way the downward curve of her back changed direction, rotating through the three dimensions, to become the swelling pads of her derriere.

Just writing it brought back the sensation of arousal. The loosening at the insides of his legs, the hairs on his scrotum. He wrote there for ten minutes, sat bent over on the edge of the bed, then decided he had best go downstairs. He smoothed the duvet and double-checked the room before he went.

It was gone twelve when he heard the key in the lock. He was lying stretched out on the sofa, half-dozing, with a bad

early Julian Barnes splayed open on his chest. He blinked awake and swung himself round and up. Felt for the wad of folded pages in his back jeans pocket.

It was Elizabeth. She stood in the doorway and smiled a little fuzzily at him.

Hi there.

Hi.

Everything okay?

He stretched. Yup. All fine. Not a peep. Good time?

She nodded, and shrugged off her coat.

I'll just pop upstairs and look in on him.

Sure. Mark followed her out into the hallway. Zac was nowhere in sight. He stood there, thinking, until she reappeared.

A load of them went on to a club, she said, as she came down, but I decided to call it a night. They're Zac's gang, really.

Right.

He'll regret it in the morning, of course.

Of course.

Now they were both stood in the hallway. He hadn't moved to get his things together, his jacket and phone. A moment arrived, and sort of hung between them. He waited it out, then said, with a carefully calibrated half-smile, So can I interest you in a nightcap?

A nightcap?

I quite fancy a drink, to be honest. He pulled a hangdog expression, watching her face, as if to show he was already resigned to her saying no.

Okay. What'll you have?

Well, I've had a couple of glasses of this very nice Sancerre, but I think I could push to a glass of that Talisker from the other night.

Talisker it is then.

He followed her into the kitchen, tracking the movement,

slightly weaving, of her hips and back – and, okay, her bottom – her furtive nips at her hair. This he wasn't good at. He could do dialogue, and drama, and introspection, but it was the transitional moments that got him stuck. Getting a character into the room. Getting them out of a car, in through the front door. It was laborious, self-conscious work. Nor could he assume that she would turn around and kiss him, just like that. If he wanted this to happen, he would have to make it happen – and that was the hardest thing. Now she had the bottle, and two glasses, and was pouring. When she turned, he would do it. But then if she went to the sink to get water? When she passed him the glass, then.

Water? Or do you prefer ice?

A drop of water. Lovely. Perfect.

There you go.

She held him out the glass and he took it and as he took it he pressed his fingers onto hers. And, at the same time, pushed his mouth down onto hers. That impossible, unthinkable action, like wilfully smashing your head against a wall, or the trunk of a tree. And, for a moment, she let herself be held there, be stopped, for a moment. Then she slowly pulled back, so very slowly he could feel the suck of the skin of their lips as they parted.

Well, then. What do you think you're doing?

I'm sorry. I just . . .

His mouth, he couldn't stop it, was hovering in the vicinity of a grin, as if waiting for permission to feel relief, or wicked embarrassment.

Ah, you just, she said. I see. Well, that's clear, then.

I just wanted to kiss you.

She lifted her arm to put her glass to her mouth, and his hand fell from it. She drank, swallowed, then tidied her lips with her tongue.

And what did you think would happen then?

Well, I suppose I thought that either you'd kiss me back, or you'd ask me to leave. Or, you know, slap my face . . .

She said nothing.

And, well, you've not done any of those things.

She slid the few inches along the kitchen counter until she was right next to him.

I'm not about to throw you out, am I?

Does that mean you are going to kiss me?

Ah, well.

They were standing so close now it was like being stuck in a crowded lift together. It would be impossible to even breathe without touching her. His erection was back, and he felt in it something like the power he felt when he was writing, and it was going well, the words revealing themselves one after the other on the screen, the text shifting up, line by line, to accommodate him.

It's not something I'm used to, kissing strange men in my kitchen. Or any men at all, really. Though I would like to kiss you.

And she did, curling her arm up to cradle the back of his head, and they brought their heads together in a whisky-tinted kiss that seemed to act, as he closed his eyes, like some kind of sacrament. He moved the hand that wasn't around his glass, on the kitchen counter, down to her waist. They were both making quiet noises of surprise and approval in their mouths, while their mouths, too, made noises, the incidental laps of tongues and lips.

He spoke, the words humming in the cavity of her mouth.

I wonder if you think we should go upstairs, he said.

She seemed to ponder this for a moment, then unkissed herself.

You want to go upstairs?

Mm.

Upstairs, as in to the bedroom? She distanced herself

further, a matter of inches, or centimetres, or less. Mark, I am not having sex with you upstairs, with my son asleep next door. She said this with a hoarse half-laugh that only served to mark the utter humourlessness of his proposition.

Well, obviously, he said. I didn't mean. I mean, we don't have to go upstairs.

Now they were talking over each other, she saying, What, so you want to have sex in the kitchen? while he was saying, I didn't mean that at all, and sort of paddling at the air between them, while she seemed to be trying to find a pose for her chin, her arms, her hips, that might best transmit whatever it was she might be thinking. She picked up her glass, empty, and drank from it. She poured more, in anger, then went out of the kitchen into the hallway.

Shit, look, he said, but he was talking to himself.

He followed her out.

So how was your evening, then? he said, hating himself as he spoke. I hate myself, he thought, and he shoved the pages of writing further down into his jeans pocket.

Oh, there was dancing, she said, and her anger seemed to have dissipated, or transferred itself somewhat. We danced.

She went into the sitting room and over to the stereo. She bent down – he watched the material of her dress shift to accommodate the flow of the anatomy beneath it – and brought out from a low cupboard a stack of CDs. Accommodate, he thought: horrific, unforgivable word. He was repeating himself.

She slid it . . . Christ, she *put* the fucking compact disc into the sodding machine and pressed play. Picked up her drink and came towards him.

So, Mark, Mark. Marky Mark. What's going on in that head of yours?

He smiled, as cover.

As cover, he smiled.

I've been thinking about you, he said.

Well, I've been thinking about you, too. I've been thinking about you especially hard in the last few minutes.

And before he could come back with some no doubt asinine reply to that they were kissing again. Thank God, he thought. Very gently, very deliberately, he lifted a hand and put it through her hair at the side of her hand. Her head. The side of her head. Ran his fingers through the strands, separating and defining them, as if to honour each one. She seemed to appreciate this, and began to push at him more with her mouth, implicating and exploring him, and making a use of her relative lack of height that he found just delicious. So much so that he gave, or let out, or emitted, a quiet grunt or groan. Or moan. Please more of a moan than a groan, he thought, reaching after the awful sound, to hear it again, fix it in his mind.

She was on tiptoe, one hand on his upper arm to steady herself. Her other hand on his waist. His shirt ridden up, she had her hand on his belt, the thumb inside the waistband, and she slid it around, as if unthinkingly, towards his back pocket. He shifted his stance, to stop her getting even slightly near the pages of his story – not a story, not yet; just notes, really – and this brought the front of his jeans into contact with the front of her, the what, the declivity of her? She gave a sort of moany groan – she was doing it now, too, whatever it was – and it carried within it, the sound, particles of what sounded like laughter. She slid her hand back around and pressed it against him, flat on the raw denim.

Oh god, she said, talking now to his shirt. What are we going to do with you?

Eyes closed, he found a way to press himself harder against her hand, and she pressed back, actually holding him, as best she could, through his jeans, showing through the action of her palm her intimate understanding of the matter. He pushed even harder, hating himself, but wanting above all to find

some way of expressing himself, his intentions, his delicate reservations, past history, world view, thoughts on the nature of signification, the problem of endings, Wittgenstein, Kelly Brook, the de Stijl movement, the novels of Michel Houellebecq and Chris Cleave, any or all of this.

He shifted himself and tried to reciprocate, moving his hand to the front of her dress, but she outflanked him, still kissing, shaking her head in the kiss – Uh-uh, she said, or otherwise intoned – twisting her hips to deflect or dissuade him. He turned his head to the side, and felt his body be jerked forward two, three times as she tugged his belt out from its buckle. He thought of dressing and undressing his children, the thousands of instances of it, their patience and passivity in the face of it, the way they held out their legs, or raised their arms. She opened his fly, pop-pop-pop went the buttons, and he said, well, something. Who knows what he said. To her or himself. Something about a text not sent. An exclamation, exhortation, appeal to the deity.

Is this what you want? she said, and he bit his lip, unwilling to trust himself to words. She had his what, his cock? his dick? his fucking prick free of his underwear now and was working, quite unconscionably, away, with a solicitude that seemed to go quite beyond intimacy, that was almost incestuous. His hand was on the mantel shelf. The other on her shoulder, bracing himself.

Please, he said.

What?

Please.

Shh, she said, and he heard, too, the quiet susurration of a tissue being drawn from its box. He opened his eyes in fright and saw books, hundreds of them, up, down, left and right. None of them his, but each one of them chock full of adultery, even the ones entirely free of it. His gaze skittered desperately across their spines, pressed hard as a cliff face, nowhere

safe, nowhere to hold onto, to come to rest. This can't be it, he thought, as his fingers gripped tight on her shoulder and she leaned into him, thinking no doubt of the carpet, closing the gap between them, and as he felt her forehead buck gently against his shoulder he thought: not this. This can't be what it's like.