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The Insect Farm

Written by Stuart Prebble

Published by Alma Books

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The Insect Farm

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ALMA BOOKS

ALMA BOOKS LTD

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www.almabooks.com

First published by Alma Books Limited in 2015
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Printed and bound by CPI Group (UK) Ltd, Croydon, CR0 4YY

ISBN: 978-1-84688-354-5
eBook ISBN : 978-1-84688-361-3

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The Insect Farm

Prologue

There was no particular sense of urgency about the first call that had come in. The duty sergeant's log said that an unpleasant smell had been reported coming from a shed on a site of allotments, and that the caller had been advised to contact the local council. It was not until three days later, when a complaint was received from the head teacher of a primary school situated next to the allotments, that any notice was taken. A supply teacher who had previously served in the army had mentioned it was a smell he had known before, one he associated with decaying flesh. Even then, it was coincidental that the Chief Inspector of the Serious Crimes Unit was within hearing distance when two constables were being briefed to go to take a look.

"What did the original caller say it was?" asked one of the constables.

"An insect farm, whatever that is."

The unfamiliar phrase triggered a distant memory in the Chief Inspector. He asked if he could hitch a ride.

Thirty minutes later the patrol car pulled up at the allotments. Already parked outside were another police car and a van from the Environmental Health Department. In the middle distance, beyond the wire fence and padlocked gate,

the Chief Inspector could see the outline of the building, which was surrounded by half a dozen men dressed in overalls and a policewoman.

It took a few moments for the policewoman to unlock the gate, and all four officers set off towards the abandoned shed. Ahead of them they could see that two men from the council wearing what looked like bee-keeper outfits were just about to open the door. The Inspector winced as the rank smell of rotting flesh was picked up by the breeze. On one side of the path he noticed a man wearing working clothes.

"That's Mr Bolton, who reported the problem," said the policewoman. "He says the shed has been here since well before he took over his own allotment from his father years ago. He first noticed the smell at the weekend and reported it to us and the council on Monday."

"What made him call us?"

"I think everyone was a bit freaked out by the stench. Shall we stop them from going in?"

The senior officer shook his head.

At first it seemed as though the door had been holding back a mound of powdery soil, which was now spilling out onto the ground in front of the shed like waves on a shoreline. A few steps nearer, what had appeared to be a swamp of inert particles was now a growing mass, swirling and churning within itself. Close up, it became clear that the rising tide was made up of hundreds of thousands of tiny insects, crawling

and tumbling over each other as if they were a moving seascape. The officers took a step back.

"What the hell?…"

The two men in protective clothing waited for the initial surge of tiny bodies to subside and then edged forward through the open door, wading above their ankles in the teeming creatures; multitudes of them, all shapes and sizes, still being driven outwards by the pressure of their own weight. Minuscule red ants were clambering over larger beetles, which scrambled across the backs of grasshoppers and cockroaches. Mixed in haphazardly were worms and moths, all spreading out like an oil slick. Millions of legs waved wildly in the air, as though trying to gain a foothold.

Within less than a minute the men re-emerged, in a state of agitation and trying to kick off the insects still clinging to their boots. They struggled to remove their face masks, as though in panic, then bent over as the masks fell to the floor, coughing violently and gasping for air. After a few seconds one of them straightened up and turned towards the police officers.

"You need to get some of your people to look in there." He was still trying to catch his breath as the other man removed his helmet.

"I think there are two of them, but there is just about nothing left. Two human skeletons, both picked almost clean."

Chapter One

If you have been lucky enough to be able to tell the truth for most of your life, you probably cannot imagine how exhausting it is to spend forever living a lie. The never-ending necessity to police the gap between the thoughts going on inside your head and what is being conveyed to the outside world by your words, your actions and your eyes.

From the cheating wife or husband who spends years in the most intimate relationship with their spouse while living a parallel life with someone else, to the double agent whose safety depends on appearing as one thing to one side while being entirely something else to the other. In the end, it's usually the sheer exhaustion of it which is their undoing.

In my defence I would say that the effort has been hard for me, because deception was not something which came naturally. I had to learn how to conceal the appalling secret which I have kept for all these years, and I made many mistakes along the way. As for my brother Roger? Who knows? Who could ever really know what was going on in the mind of Roger?

Roger was six years older than me, and a six-year gap normally means you have very little in common with your older brother. No shared friends, toys, mysteries or secret camps. The ten-year-old will have defrocked the tooth fairy before

the four-year-old has lost his first teeth. The twelve-year-old will be wondering where Mum and Dad have hidden the presents, while the six-year-old is expecting them to arrive down the chimney. The fifty-year-old isn't far from the forty-four-year-old, but the sixteen-year-old is a whole generation apart from his ten-year-old sibling. Normally.

But Roger was never like any ordinary kid. I always knew that, though at the time I had no idea of why or how. These were the Fifties and Sixties, and while it's true that Roger always was a bit difficult to categorize, if pressed to put a label on him, most people would have chosen the word "simple".

I remember forbidding hospitals with long echoing corridors painted green and cream, and smelling of the unequal battle between stale urine and antiseptic. We waited for many hours on hard chairs in cold rooms, with posters on noticeboards warning of everything from tooth decay to rabies. I watched from a distance as my beloved brother crouched over wooden shapes set out on a small table, trying his best to piece one to another. I saw the tiny lines ploughed in his forehead as he struggled to understand what it was that was being asked of him, and even then, when I was maybe two or three myself, I broke loose from whomever held me to rush over and hand him the round wooden tube that so very obviously was designed to go into the round wooden hole.

I remember our mother sitting on the long bench seat at the back of the 54 bus on the journey home, her self-control

faltering as she struggled to make sense of it all. Her whispered conversations with Dad behind closed doors, a mix of frustration and despair. "Why us?" and "What will become of him?"

From my own point of view though, any awareness of a problem relating to Roger was way in the future. All I knew was that I had an older brother who was much taller than I was, but who liked to do the same stuff I liked. I was far too young to worry about what would become of him – I just loved that he did not treat me with the same contempt with which most older brothers treated their younger brothers, and that he was happy to play the same games that I wanted to play.

Roger was content to take all the turns at being Silver, so that I could take all the turns in being the Lone Ranger. He was happy to be the camel so that I could be Lawrence of Arabia. He would blunder around for hours with a scarf tied around his eyes, while I shrieked and ducked and weaved as though one touch of his outstretched fingertips would spell instant electrocution.

Photos taken at that time show two young boys, one tall and gangly, the other smaller and with more puppy fat; obvious siblings, one just a newer imprint of the other. Without exception they show two lads with smiling faces, perhaps carrying buckets and spades, or sitting side by side in a dodgem car or on a carousel, often with the bigger boy's arm draped protectively over the shoulder of the younger.

There seems to be nothing in those fading photographs to give any hint of what was to come. Here we are, Roger and I, sitting on the bank of a river holding fishing rods made out of bits of bamboo with a length of nylon attached. Here we are again sitting astride a concrete lion guarding the gates of a stately home. Two lads, one aged maybe four, the other ten, floppy haircuts and floppy limbs, neither with a care in the world.

The younger brother in the photographs is undoubtedly the less good-looking, unquestionably the less athletic of the two. His beam into the camera is more guarded and less unswerving than the clear gaze of his older sibling. Though it is not comfortable to admit it, if forced to identify the retard in this picture, it is hard to escape the conclusion that the average observer would choose me.

Of the two of us, I was the one who thought it a good idea to use my colouring crayons to join up the polka dots on the wallpaper in the bedroom we shared, while Roger confined his involvement to a fit of giggling. I was the one who experimented with the possibility of human flight by jumping off the garage roof, breaking my ankle in the attempt, and leaving Roger collapsed in tears on the grass as the ambulance took me away. And I was the one who took our home-made go-kart and careered within inches of the path of an oncoming bus.

One day I was playing hopscotch near our house with three friends of my own age when a bigger boy who lived nearby

decided to wreck our game by rubbing out our chalk lines on the pavement. Brian Maddox was the same age as Roger, but far bigger and stronger. More important than that, members of the Maddox family were used to fighting in a way that we were not. We were not soft, but neither were we quite that sort of family. Not like the Maddoxes.

Brian pushed me to one side when I protested, and in a moment of recklessness much like the one which had propelled me off the garage roof and into space, I summoned all my strength and shoved him backwards. He regained his balance quickly and came back strong and hard, lashing out with closed fists. Instinctively I fought back, but I was no match for him.

I still remember the look on Roger's face when I came into the house, shedding floods of tears and bleeding from scraped knees. He seemed in that instant to become another person, someone I did not recognize, and I watched in amazement as he strode along the street towards a group of boys which included Brian, and attacked without pause or hesitation. There was a brief whirlwind of flailing limbs as Roger advanced and more or less fell onto the bully, both of them thudding down onto the concrete. It took three kids to pull Roger off the boy, who limped away with a stream of blood and saliva flowing from his mouth. After that, no one in the area bullied me again.

Even in those earliest days, though, Roger had his softer side. I remember that we were driving one day to the seaside

in Dad's car, singing songs and generally having a good time, when there was the sound of a splat on the windscreen as a large flying insect met a dramatic end. Roger suddenly stopped singing.

"What would happen," he said after a few moments, "if enough cars drove along enough roads and killed enough insects?" He paused. "In the end, would there be any insects left?"

There was silence as my mother tried to formulate her answer.

"I don't think there is much danger of that, Roger. There are so many fields and hedges and forests where there aren't any cars," she said, trying to sound reassuring. "But it is a pity—"

"Yes," my father interrupted her, "apart from anything else, they make such a bloody mess on the windscreen." I was ready to burst out laughing, but just in time I saw a look of sadness in Roger's face which I don't think I had seen before, and had to make an effort to suppress my amusement.

So yes, even from the earliest days, Roger and I were inseparable. If Roger was a problem, or had a problem, or caused a problem, then none of these problems were mine. All I had was the sort of older brother that everyone would wish for: bigger than me, stronger than me, and who would do anything for me, as indeed I would for him.

It was only a matter of time before some busybody – maybe a doctor or a teacher or a social worker – suggested that it

wasn't good for me to spend so much time with Roger. It was nice that we were so close, but perhaps I needed some other friends of my own if my development was not to be impaired. No doubt the idea of two kids with restricted development so alarmed our parents that they were thrown into a panic. For several days there were whispered discussions which were said, when I enquired, to be "nothing to do with you". It turned out that they were everything to do with me, because the upshot was that in the summer holidays of 1959, when I was eight, my parents made me join the local cubs, and I was packed off on the annual camping trip to Torbay.

A more loyal fellow than I would be able to report the distress from missing his older brother and only true friend, every hour and every day, and of pining for the opportunity to make an early return. However such is the promiscuity of youth and the enchanting nature of anything new, that I should admit that for most of my time away I hardly missed Roger at all. The novelty of cooking our own food around campfires, of going on treasure hunts, building rafts and singing songs to the accompaniment of out-of-tune guitars, and all of it way past my usual bedtime, absorbed my small life.

Once we had made the phone call to reassure our parents that we had arrived safely, we were encouraged to contact our homes as seldom as possible, and in my case this involved an occasional brief call on a crackly phone line from the red telephone box in the nearby village. My memories are all overlaid by the smell of damp cloth and canvas. Damp

socks and sleeping bags. Damp grass and plimsolls. If I was missing Roger, I don't think I sent a message to say so, and if he was missing me – well, the unattractive truth is that I hardly gave it a thought.

Time is distorted in the young mind, and at this vantage point I cannot recall whether I was away for as little as a week or as much as two. Whatever the case, I know that it was not until the end of the holidays, as we were packing up our soggy clothes into sodden bundles and pledging lifelong allegiance to the new friends we had made over burnt sausages and dew-soaked sleeping bags, that my mind returned to my family. Only then, as coaches departed en route to Basildon and Dagenham and other places on the periphery of my tiny universe, did I give any thought at all to what had become of Roger during what seemed to be a long absence. For all this time I had enjoyed constant entertainment and companionship, while he, I had little doubt, would have had few activities provided for him, and few if any friends to play with.

Before leaving for the six-hour bus ride, we were instructed to make one last phone call home to confirm our expected time of arrival. Having reassured my mother that everything was fine and that I was looking forward to seeing her again, I asked:

"How is Roger?"

"Roger?" she said, as though she didn't know whom I meant. "Oh, Roger's fine."

"Has he been missing me?"

"Yes, I suppose so," she said. It was obviously not something she had thought about. "He hasn't mentioned it."

In my self-centred world, for a moment I was hurt not to have been missed, and thought nothing of the fact that I had hardly missed Roger either. "Will he be there?…" I began to say, but she was gone.

The journey back from Torbay seemed to take for ever, and was only punctuated from time to time by some half-hearted attempts at singing the songs which had sounded so melodious when sung around the campfire.

After the hilarity of making faces and V-signs at passing motorists wore off, some of us went to sleep and others retreated into our own thoughts. Eventually, any feeling of guilt I experienced at not having communicated with the brother from whom I had been all but inseparable, gradually gave way to anxiety to see him; an anxiety that grew as the miles passed by and the thatches and hedges of rural England merged into suburbs. Though I hadn't missed him at the time, I now missed him awfully in retrospect, so that by the time the bus neared the gates of the school where we were due to be met by our families, I found myself craning my neck to catch an early glimpse of Roger among the gathering.

"Where's Roger?" I asked. The look on my mother's face was enough to tell me that the more diplomatic thing would have been to express joy at seeing her.

"Oh, Roger's at home. He said he'd see you when you got there," she said.

I was disappointed. "Didn't he want to come to meet me?"

"I don't know," said my dad. "He was preoccupied."

"What with?"

It was clear that my parents didn't want to talk about Roger. They were eager to know how their younger son had fared during his first extended stay away from them. But at that age you don't care about the stuff that has happened already; that was great, but it's in the past, and what's the point of going over it with someone else who wasn't there? So I didn't tell my parents that I had had a great time but had missed them both. I didn't mention how much I had missed my mother's cooking and a goodnight cuddle. Now that I think about it, I don't think I ever got round to telling my parents properly that I appreciated them, or that I knew what they had done for me. By now all of my attention was focused on Roger, on seeing him again and finding out what he had been doing. How had he coped without me?

Our family home was a small terraced house in Croydon, south-east London, though if anyone had describe it as "terraced" within earshot of my mother she would instantly have put them right. She preferred the expression "one of three" which meant that we had a semi on one side of us and a semi on the other side of us – leaving our house most accurately described as "terraced", but not to my mother. The house was one of those between-the-wars mock something or other, with fake timbers embedded in

pebble-dash, which characterized the southern suburbs of London and no doubt many other towns and cities.

"Where's Roger?" I said again as we got out of the car and he was nowhere to be seen. I thought that if he couldn't come to meet the coach, he might at least have been waiting at the window, but there was no sign of my older brother, no twitch of the nets to indicate his presence. When I burst through the front door in late August of 1959, it took me all of forty seconds to put my head into every room in the house, and to reach the conclusion that Roger wasn't in any of them.

"Where's Roger?"

Considering that the purpose of my banishment to summer camp had been to loosen my ties with my older brother, my mother and father now seemed to take pleasure in my enthusiasm to see him again. Which parent of siblings would not take pride in such closeness?

"I guess he's in the shed," said my mother. "That's where he spends most of his time lately."

There was a tiny garden at the back of the house laid to lawn with a few ornamental flower beds carved into the soil and filled with specimen roses, the names of which were written in black magic marker on yellow labels affixed like a dog collar to the stems. Beyond the boundary fence there was a garage which was designed to accommodate just one car, but was filled to the rafters with my dad's tools, offcuts of timber and some garden equipment. Next to that again was a large wooden shed which had been allocated to Roger

and me for use as a den. Over the years the shed had doubled as a cave (in our Batman and Robin phase), as a stable (in our Wyatt Earp phase) and as a spaceship (in our Dan Dare phase).

"What's he doing?" It had never occurred to me that Roger could effectively occupy himself without me. I was thinking of all our games together – most of which involved an inseparable pair. "How can he be spending time in the shed when I'm not around?"

Roger had his back to me when I yanked open the shed door and threw myself in. Just beyond him I could see what looked like a pane of glass, all smeared and dirty, with a bank of soil behind it. The atmosphere smelt of the damp and dank of wet earth, the smell you associate with nightmares of being buried alive.

"What's that?" I asked him.

"Oh, hi, Jonathan," he said, more or less as he would have done if I'd popped back to the house five minutes ago for a glass of orange squash. "It's my insect farm."

"What's an insect farm?"

He hesitated, as I might have hesitated if someone had asked me what the moon is. As though the answer is obvious, but you want to find the right words which don't imply you think the person asking the question is an idiot.

"It's a place where you keep insects so that you study them." Roger still had not turned to look at me.

"What kinds of insects?"

"Well you can keep any kinds of insects you like. All you have to do is to create the right conditions for them to live in. These are ants." Roger stood back to allow me a better view through the gloom at the installation in front of him. It looked like an aquarium that you might use for tropical fish, except that the panes of glass were only an inch or so apart at the width. "Come closer and have a look."

I did, and on the edge of my vision I caught a glimpse of Roger in the half-darkness. It had been only a week or two, but something about him seemed older. Or if not older, then perhaps more mature or in command. That was probably the first time I noticed a little bit of downy fluff in front of his ears and across his top lip. Roger was fourteen and entering puberty, but at the time I didn't know what puberty was, and was much more interested in examining whatever had preoccupied him so thoroughly that he hadn't had the chance to miss his younger brother and only real friend. Still, the only thing I could make out was a mass of what looked like soil, squished up against the glass.

"Closer still."

It was not until my face was a few inches away and my eyes began to adjust to the gloom that I could identify anything other than the sludge. Gradually I began to focus, and I could make out tiny avenues carved into the soil, little thoroughfares in which I detected the shapes of tiny creatures. Dozens and dozens of them slowly materialized, scuttling backwards and forwards, tripping and clambering over each

other, apparently oblivious to anything other than whatever was their task at hand.

"Amazing," I said, and it was true. Obviously I wanted to be nice to Roger about his new preoccupation, but I genuinely did think it was amazing. "What are they doing?"

"Look even closer and you'll see." Roger handed me a magnifying glass.

"How come Dad let you play with this?" The magnifying glass had belonged to our grandfather, who had died a decade ago. It was understood that it now belonged to Roger and me, but we hadn't been allowed to keep it among our stuff because Dad said it was too expensive to be used as a toy. I remember feeling a sting of resentment that Roger had been allowed to use it without me being there.

"I'm not playing with it," Roger said. It was a distinction which carried a lot of importance at that age. "I'm using it to study the ants. It's what it was meant for."

I already knew that the magnifying glass wasn't meant for melting toy soldiers with the focused beam of the sun, as Roger and I had been doing when we were first allowed to try it out. I took it from him and drew it backwards and forwards, Sherlock Holmes style, attempting to focus on the glass frame.

"Keep watching carefully," he said, "and you'll be able to see what they're doing."

Chapter Two

As the years went by, and my older brother and I passed through our childhood and into adolescence, Roger's preoccupation with his beloved insect farm expanded and grew, just as did my interest in music, fashion and, of course, girls.

I always think it's implausible when characters in police dramas seem to know where they were on the night when the crime was committed, but I can remember vividly and in detail the occasion when I first met Harriet. It was in the end of the autumn term between my first and second year in the sixth form, and I recall it for two reasons – one was, of course, that first sight of her. The other was that it was the evening of the farewell concert by the band Cream.

A ramshackle group of us had arranged to go to the concert, and I was there with Angela, who was my girlfriend of the moment. Angela was fabulous, or certainly I thought so at the time. Long straight brown hair, as thin as a rake, with tiny, scarcely budding breasts, and those dark shadows below her eyes which we associated with late nights and soft drugs, and which later came to be toughened up by fashion and labelled "heroin chic". Angela knew the right places to buy the right clothes, was always on the crest of whatever was the latest wave, and somehow managed to be wherever it was "at".

Harriet was also with a boyfriend on that night, although she told me later that they were just mates and were not sleeping together. I took some comfort from that, until I realized that this did not mean that they were not having sex. To Harriet, sleeping with someone would have involved a whole level of intimacy that merely having sex would not have come near, but all that represented a dimension of her that it was way in my future to learn about.

I was besotted with Harriet from the very first. It's a rarely used word which sounds like something out of Jane Austen, and ordinarily you would never use it or think deeply about its meaning. In this case, though, "besotted" is the right word for what I was. It even sounds like it. Being "sotted", to be "sotted" – somehow the word suggests that all reason has been lost.

My most vivid first memory is of the view of her from the south-east – one row back and a few seats along – the back right-hand side of Harriet's head. The fine silhouette of her chin, partially obscured by her long and curling brown hair, a few stray strands stuck in place by perspiration to that tantalizing area of skin just in front of the ears. Even in the multicoloured glow of psychedelic lights, Harriet shone pink and white.

No doubt the passage of time filters any negatives from the memory, but I do know that it was not only I who recognized that Harriet was unlike those around her. For one thing, her look was unique. When everyone else of her age was wearing

dungarees or tie-dye, Harriet's big-print floral dresses marked her out from the crowd. When Dusty Springfield wore spiders on her eyelids and Kathy Kirby's lips shone like a warning to low-flying aircraft, Harriet remained unmade-up. When the world was going barefoot, Harriet delighted in wearing wool socks pulled up to her knees.

My girlfriend Angela dressed in variations on the theme adopted by all the girls of the same age – flowing clothes, patched jeans, tumbling tresses, tassels and beads in multi-colours. All the other girls were cool and sexy and slightly exotic and certainly desirable, but Harriet was not one of them. Where Angela and her friends were of the moment, Harriet's look seemed timeless. While their femininity was just being discovered and then reinvented in the spirit of the age, Harriet's brand of sexiness would have worked its magic in any decade past or future. Something about her had a particular way of reaching out and taking an intensely discomforting grip around your groin. To see her was to want her, and it was on that day in November 1969 that I saw her.

After the concert we all headed onto the street. Angela went into a huddle with the other girls and I stood on the fringes of the group. We discussed what to do next and I saw Harriet hanging back, not quite part of the inner circle. Had she noticed me? She said later that she had, but there was nothing at the time to suggest it. As we reconciled ourselves to the fact that the pubs were closed and we would soon miss

the last train home, I tried to make it seem an accident that I fell in alongside her.

"Some concert, huh?" Her smile was a tiny flicker of warmth, but she said nothing.

"I don't like to talk about it." I expected her to continue, but she did not.

"Don't like to talk about the concert?"

"Not for a little while, no."

"Oh," I said. "Is that just this one, or don't you like to talk about any concerts?"

"I don't like to talk about rock concerts," said Harriet, "because everything that everyone says about them seems utterly facile, and somehow talking about it devalues the experience I feel I've just had."

"I think I know what you mean," I said, but I didn't really, and I hadn't often met people who used words like "facile" in ordinary conversation.

"Some of us are going back to my place," she said. It sounded like a statement of fact rather than an invitation and, in my adolescent infatuation, I failed to understand.

"That's nice." I felt like an idiot. *That's nice?* I sounded like Alec Guinness.

There was a pause.

"You could come too if you'd like."

It turned out that she lived above a shop in Carnaby Street, and she said it with an interrogative in her voice which seemed to question whether it was possible to live anywhere else.

A dozen of us ended up walking the couple of miles or so from the Albert Hall to Harriet's flat in the West End. There were far fewer cars on the road in those days, and by now the streets were emptying fast. Angela was immersed in conversation with two friends, and so seemed not to notice my instant infatuation with another girl.

We were headed towards a flat above a clothes shop, halfway down the street, and next to a pair of red telephone boxes. Despite being one of the most famous streets in the world, at that time of night it was all surprisingly quiet. I learnt that the place belonged to Harriet's uncle, who lived in the country and used it when he was in town on business; I cannot now remember the actual words she used, but they were designed, I think, to give the impression that he was some kind of a spy. Certainly Harriet's father worked for the Foreign Office, and he and her mother were on a temporary posting in Hong Kong. They had left Harriet to finish at boarding school. The uncle was on an extended trip somewhere far away, and so she had been allowed to stay in it long term. Seventeen years old, with independence and her own flat in the West End of swinging London.

The decor and furniture looked and felt like something out of a 1950s film set – a bolt-upright sofa and two armchairs, a small Formica-topped table with four wooden chairs, standard lamps with shades made of discoloured fabric. Someone began playing 45s on the record player and someone else started rolling some joints. It was a small work of art to paste

together three Rizlas and roll up the end of a cigarette packet to make a roach, and it was an art form we had all practised. Angela and her friends went into the kitchen to make tea, and I did my best to position myself as close to Harriet as I could, while seeming not to do so.

I have now had many years in which to turn over in my mind the conversation I had on that evening with Harriet. So frequently have I done so that I believe I can recall it – if not precisely word for word – then as near to accurately as makes no difference. Since I have recalled it so often, what she said has gained the sense of the everyday that comes with familiarity, and so now I have entirely lost any perspective I may ever have had on how weird or otherwise it must have appeared at the time. She had a glass of red wine in one hand and a joint in the other, but seemed to be neither drunk nor stoned. I, on the other hand, had by now had too much to drink, which no doubt added to the mesmeric effect of her words.

"I am not all that good at drinking alcohol or taking drugs," she said, as though continuing some earlier conversation of ours without a pause, "but at the right volume and in the right place and time, rock music can do something for me that no narcotic can." It was as if she had been thinking about this for ages, and had decided that this was the moment to express it. No doubt her mood was partially drug-induced, but still there was something within and about her that made what would usually come across as pretentious rubbish sound real.

"Music comes into your body through the ears, right?" She raised her eyebrows in enquiry. "But in a weird sort of way I also feel that somehow it comes in through my eyes, my nose and through every pore of my skin." She paused, her pupils darting left and right and joining the dots between the silver stars upon the purple sky of the ceiling, searching for the right simile. Then she seemed to find it. "It's like the lovemaking between two people who have come to know each other over many years. A little stimulation here, a hint of a caress somewhere else, the brush of lips across your skin. The music has the power to join all my senses together, each one overlapping the last, to build me up and up, finally reaching a level where to go forward would tip you over, but to go back would disappoint. And to stay there, for seconds, maybe minutes, before being taken gently or convulsively back down to earth."

Maybe it was just adolescent rubbish, but I didn't think so then, and I still don't think so now. What I do know for sure is that Harriet wasn't like anyone else I had met before. Leave aside what she said about the music: I was seventeen for heaven's sake, and here was this wonderful girl talking about soft kissing and experienced lovers and caresses on the skin.

"I love the opera," she continued, "and in the right time and place I love jazz. But there is something about rock music the way we heard it tonight. Something about how those guitar notes seem to come from a union of the soul with the instrument, and flow from the musician to the hearer like the

bolt of lightning passing life from God to Adam." I know, I know, but this is what she said. I was lost. Lost for words, lost for an appropriate reaction, lost in Harriet.

The Carnaby Street flat was small and there were probably a dozen of us, and so, even if it had been anywhere on her agenda, there was no chance that she and I could have been alone, and that's not to mention the matter of my current girlfriend. Harriet and I were sitting on the landing on the stairs just outside the door of the flat when Angela put her head halfway out.

"Aren't you supposed to be doing something with Roger?"

Oh God! I was supposed to be home for Roger.

In the year since I had started studying seriously for my A-level exams, the duty of taking care of Roger had fallen entirely on my parents, and the strain was showing. This is not to suggest that I had been of all that much help before, but just the fact of having me around, able to go with Roger to the cinema or to the football, gave my parents an occasional break from the otherwise continuous responsibility.

The point was that, on this summer's evening when I was lured by the unique charms of Harriet, Roger was due to return home from a trip which had been organized by a group at the local church. I don't remember where they had been or for how long they had been away. All I recall is that Roger was due to arrive home in Croydon by midnight, and that I had promised to be back before then to be there to make sure he was OK. My parents had said they would like to take

the opportunity to go to bed early, and I was responsible for ensuring that Roger was safe and settled.

"I have to go," I said, dragging myself to my feet. "My brother Roger needs me."

Nothing in Harriet's face gave a clue as to whether she regarded this as good news or bad news or even particularly any news at all. What was perfectly clear was that she by no means shared or even sensed my desolation. What appeared to her to be no more than a casual meeting for me was an evening that was to change my short life.