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The Last Honeytrap

Written by Louise Lee

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THE LAST HONEYTRAP

Louise Lee

headline

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1

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Entrapment 101 Tip #1: Never be yourself

Be this woman instead, the one with a fabulous name – you choose, have fun with it.

Affect a show-stopping walk. Glide as though your head is being pulled up and away from your shoulders by an invisible rope. The postural device elongates the neck, flattens the stomach and makes saggy babaloos pert.

Pretend you're French. Acting French is the best entrapment tip ever. Yes, they can be flat-chested, with alarming teeth (see Vanessa Paradis). But by God, they can exude the most breathtaking allure (see Vanessa Paradis).

A rough guide to being Vanessa Paradis: put your copy of *Feminist Literary Theory* in the shredder. Your new bible is *Fatale: How French Women Do It*. Now ooze attainability and elusiveness in equal amounts, using only your eyes.

Practise on homely strangers. Oh, men aren't stupid, they'll see straight through it, but it's too tantalising a game – like football, or doctors and nurses, or punters and lap-dancers. Evolution has programmed them to play it, even when they shouldn't.

Always have a golden rule. This is mine: one kiss, with tongues, five seconds, case closed.

Finally, find your motivation. My suggestion: nobody should be duped into living a lie – whatever that lie may be.

The Human Zoo

The tongue in my ear belongs to the Dutch Minister for Security and Justice.

We are huddled in a dimly lit corner of the 101, an exclusive members' club in London's Mayfair. A popular haunt for the rich and famous, the bar has a discreet, almost diaphanous waiter service. Dark oak panels, cubbyholes, anonymous jazz – it's the perfect place in which to disappear.

Minister de Groot was hoping for such a night – quiet, uninterrupted, with just an indiscreetly plopped bodyguard for company.

The bullet-stopper is three tables behind us. I spotted him as soon as I walked in; talking to his wrist, feigning nonchalance. Gustav is his name, and although I can't see him at the moment, I can feel his eyes. They bore into my back like a wolf watching a cocky caribou, because quite uninvited, I sashayed directly to the bar and sat beside his boss.

He has no need to fret. Minister de Groot is the biggest fish I've ever had to sear; cocky I'm not.

Indeed, the minister took a while to bite, given his distinguished job, one in which he helps run the entire world. Yes, he humoured me, agreed to buy me a drink, but his chest remained pointed ahead, both hands defending a tumbler of Glendronach.

I put the minister's mind at rest. Played silently with my wedding ring. I have as much to lose as you, the gold band whispered up at him.

His eyes flicked north to my chest . . .

With the right posture and bra, I have an impeccable décolletage. A physically unappealing teenager, I deserved a little aesthetic luck. It arrived five years ago, when, without warning, my face and body fell into place. I was twenty-seven. For a year I watched myself blossom. To cement the good work, I studied the Alexander Technique and bought a biofit uplift bra.

Voluptuous yet chaste, that's what a guy said at the time. He worked at the post office, at the counter next to mine. *You're the type of bird men want to deflower; until you open your mouth*, he said. I've never been so happy – attractive at last. Alternative life choices cascaded like ticker tape.

Next Minister de Groot studied my face . . .

I would like to think it conveys intelligence. Not too much – my IQ would frighten them off – just a soupçon. Enough to reassure them: women like me don't end up in an underwear-clad kiss and tell.

They're right, I don't. That's not my style.

I doubt very much that the minister wondered about my current job, which is a shame. It could have saved him a whole world of shit. Plus from a personal point of view it's ever so nice when the target shows an interest in you. They rarely do. And that disappoints me, because I always show an interest in them.

Tonight, for example.

I asked about his accent, the purpose of his visit, his tie – Aspinal of London; he'd smoothed it flat, all proud like a tourist. This, an extraordinarily bright man who makes decisions on behalf of a nation, gooey at the groin because I complimented his neckwear – ugly neckwear with no practical purpose other than to point directions to his beef bayonet.

Yet as he stroked the paisley sliver of silk, he repositioned his knees to face me, a manoeuvre that speaks volumes – he was inviting his groin to join in the conversation.

Tonight was a goer.

Kinesics fact: human communication consists of ninety-three per cent body language and paralinguistic cues. That leaves just seven per cent for actual words, which are very easily manipulated; whereas body language is subliminal and extremely hard to fake, unless you're a Royal Marine or a psychopath.

The silent language, they call it, and I'm fluent.

I'd never visited Holland, I told the minister, not properly. The culture nevertheless fascinated me . . .

This gave him the floor – a luxury wives tend not to bestow – and throughout his soliloquy I giggled, asked pertinent questions and placed flirtatious fingers on his arm, each time counting to three in my head.

Touch test fact: if a date returns your touch within ten minutes, there is sexual chemistry. On a successful first date, there will be three sets of touching, three seconds apiece.

Tonight there were eight.

By 9.53 p.m. the minister had slow-danced me away from the bar and into a booth. Here he ordered champagne, homed in on my neck and wheedled a route to my ear.

That's where we're at now.

And although I'm satisfied with my success so far, I've had quite enough of my ear being licked. Women like me, however, have a game to play. We titter inanely. We stroke the pride of unprincipled men. We remind ourselves constantly that this job is a worthy way to make a pound.

Or in tonight's case, thousands of the little buggers.

The minister had assumed we'd be making our way to the Mayfair Hotel. The Schiaparelli Suite, to be precise – that's where he generally takes his conquests. It's a shame really. According to the literature, the suite is named after the designer who first unleashed fuchsia on a glamour-starved

world. Antique Chinese art, pink pony-skin bed dressing, I'm sorely tempted to pop along just to have a peek.

Trouble is, I have a very strict rule. Never go back to theirs on a first date.

There's a further rule too. Don't shit on your own doorstep.

Here my brother helps me out. Lets me shit on his. Though I'm mindful not to put him in danger. Michael and I are professional partners, yes; but first and foremost I'm his big sister – it's my duty to look after him.

My brother's only rule: *never* touch his stuff.

He has a touch of the OCD.

Yet the look I'm going for is *sinuous* and *alluring*; it's imperative I finger ornaments and stroke the frames of black and white photos.

One of the frames contains a photograph of our mother.

Bambi, everyone called her. Because the world left her simultaneously startled and astonished? No. I caress her frame a little longer than the others. Because she was Italian and that was her name.

Women like me usually hide evidence of their identity. Especially photos of their mums. But mine's in no danger. It's been twenty-five years since we saw her last – if I can't find her, nobody can.

'Minister de Groot,' I swivel Bambi so she's facing the wall, 'a sensible offer, please.'

The minister is animated. His original assumptions about me were wrong.

'A woman of the night,' he is saying. 'I had no idea.'

I am not.

'I'd have got down to business sooner . . .' looking through his wallet, pulling out one card after another, plumping finally for an Amex, which he proceeds to glide up and down my arm as if icing my bicep.

How many working girls back in Holland have credit card-machines? I wonder.

'Five hundred,' he says.

'Excuse me?'

'For the night. Five hundred pounds.'

I scoff.

Were I to sleep with a man for money – which incidentally hasn't happened and never will – it would be for a good deal more than five hundred quid.

'Six hundred, then?'

That doesn't warrant a response. I know the minister's paid five times that in the past. He tells people he was Maurice of Nassau, Prince of Orange, in a previous incarnation – throwing money at sexually charged serfs plays to his megalomaniacal streak. Though I'm informed that he errs towards the high-class hooker, it being safer. In a fortnight they make the same as your average tabloid exposé, so selling a story makes no business sense. Sometimes, too, prostitutes are rather nice to talk to. Unlike his wife they simply listen and nod and groan as if he's the most desirable man they've ever had to fellate.

Yes, a good old-fashioned, no-strings business arrangement suits the minister right down to the ground.

Look at him now, I smile despite myself. He thinks he's at a charity auction.

'Seven hundred!'

Pushing my chest against him, I half-whisper, 'You get what you pay for, Minister de Groot.'

I'm rather pleased with how that comes out. Counterfeit sexiness can sometimes fall flat on its face, the naff words left hanging in the air like a ring of Stilton. In this instance, however, my timing and tone are consummate.

Even the minister does a half-clap. 'You drive a hard bargain. I like it. I like you, Isabella.'

My name is not Isabella.

I use it because it conjures images of ball-tingling eroticism and Latin fire. I stole it from a girl I went to school with. Isabella Purdy-Valentine. Her parents had really given that thought – the boys got erections just hearing it read out at registration.

Minister de Groot has an erection – it follows me around the room like a dowsing rod.

'Nine hundred? Come on, Isabella, that's an awful lot of money.'

I wholeheartedly agree. It remains, however, some way off Robert Redford's very decent proposal of one million dollars.

My eyes twinkle as I smooth imaginary creases from my hips. 'A lot of woman, Pieter, requires an awful lot of money.'

Momentarily I forget to slink as I move back to the shelving unit and reposition a hefty book: *Family: Nature's Masterpiece* by Dr Dan Halliday.

Were the minister to peruse this hardback, he'd see that on the front cover it says: *The nuclear family – a definitive guide to happiness*.

That's quite a promise.

He won't pick this book up, however. Men never pick up self-help manuals once their brains have slithered south.

My first husband, now he did a lot of thinking with his genitals. Eureka moments, if you like, and they struck in the most unexpected of places, my best friend being one of them. I actually caught them at it, yet still they maintained an indignant astonishment, as if I'd accused them of something implausible, like ram-raiding or starting forest fires.

He admitted his infidelity finally, though put the blame squarely in my court – I had become complacent, he told everybody; let the sexual fervour dwindle. Oh, I fought my corner. *I'm just a bit shy*. But guys kept their distance for a

while after that, the least attractive trait in a woman being sexual sloth.

Tonight my smile promises filth.

'Isabella, Isabella. You're bleeding me dry.'

I certainly am not.

'Fifteen hundred?'

'Better.' Secretly I look up his nose. The man's face is fleshy and wrinkled as a Shar Pei puppy, yet he has not one strand of nasal hair – for all his faults, I like that in a man, bald sinuses.

Husband Number Two was extremely hirsute. In the nude he looked like he was wearing a gorilla suit without the head. I married him on the rebound. He felt such a safe bet. Friendship surely had to be the most sensible basis for an enduring marriage? Turns out that obsessive animal passion that refuses to dissipate is the more effective ingredient.

Three years of marriage and still it remained awkward in the bedroom – we went at different tempos: slow rumba and disco beat.

My second husband held me a little responsible. Men don't want to marry their sister or best friend, he told the marriage counsellor. And he was right. They'd rather opt for eternity with a domesticated whore.

Bent over, checking the contents of my handbag, my face is flush with my knees. This position is called a Standing Forward Bend, or Uttanasana for the purists. My life coach taught it to me. It is supposed to evoke mental calmness, stress reduction and body awareness. Today it provides Minister de Groot with an opportunity to leer at my arse.

I give him a better view; lean against the windowsill, look out on to Greek Street below, its pavement a twinkling strip of eateries, its hum as magnetic as an electric fly trap. Leaving life above ground level to dissipate clandestinely into the night – which is why so many of the top flats in this street

are walk-ins, the walk-in being a provider of legal prostitution. There's one just across the road, nesting above the seductive rouge of a Lebanese restaurant.

I look back down at the street – holding gently on to the sill because I suffer a smidge of vertigo – and peruse bald patches, ponytails, the roof of a black Bentley Continental Flying Spur, the minister's bullet-saver leaning against the driver's door.

Unblinking, he stares back up at me. His look is one of repugnance.

Total fact: it should be one of marvel, because I know an awful lot about him . . .

His full name is Gustav Aart Nijstad, and he is one of perhaps twelve people in Holland who cannot speak English better than the English. Maybe his non-bilingualism is a deliberate show of patriotism – he is an extraordinarily dedicated employee of the Netherlands government, and particularly of Minister de Groot. His job is to accompany and guard his protectee to the death (his own), which he'd do in a heartbeat if only someone would just launch an attack. When not waiting for assassins, however, Gustav can find himself sitting outside hotel rooms and walk-ins. Naturally he is bound by a contract that ensures the minister's frolics remain top secret. The contract is, however, unnecessary. He'd triple-jump into hot oil rather than compromise Pieter de Groot. In fact if Gustav had any friends, they'd take the piss, say he had a crush on his blubbery boss; and he'd shoot them in the head because Gustav's so far in the closet, he's emigrated to Narnia.

I am well apprised. Then again, my contact is excellent.

Look at him – I give the bullet-saver a finger wave. His chin strains up at me, at his beloved boss somewhere in the room behind me; he reminds me of a lovelorn meerkat.

Spinning back around, I sit on the sill, my back against

cold glass, and issue the minister with a thin, honest smile – because Pieter de Groot is living on the edge. Unlike Gustav, I have not signed a contract. Well, I did once, when I started at the post office, but that was ten years ago. and unless Minister de Groot was mentioned in the small print, I'm pretty sure I can say what I like to whomever I like.

Silly man.

Minister de Groot moves at me, grabs my waist, manoeuvres me towards the hall as if I'm a delightfully petulant child.

'Fifteen hundred it is then,' he says, no-nonsense. 'Let's take this to the bedroom.'

There is one bedroom in the apartment – my brother's room, a no-go area, always. As a matter of damage limitation I pull the minister on to the sofa. The weight of his stomach drives every drop of air from the scatter cushions beneath me, scatter cushions I should *always* place in a tidy stack against the wall – extremely important rule.

Now the minister rediscovers my ear.

'Two thousand.' I push him out of my neck. 'But you can't stay the night,'

'Done.' His smile is triumphant. 'I'd have given you five.'

I maintain my cool. Not one penny will change hands this evening, yet I feel duped, totally duped – the minister now considers me a bargain.

'So, Minister. Have you done this kind of thing before? You know . . .' I spell it out, 'paid women to sleep with you?'

He is thoroughly amused. Rearranges himself. My internal organs sigh with relief.

'And why, Isabella, do you ask?'

'Because I've met many men like you, Pieter. Rich men. Powerful men. Extremely famous men. And it never fails to fascinate me – the indiscretions of such *commanding* individuals as yourself.'

I slap his bottom hard and summon a look that says: Tell me how despicable you are, because, by God, I fucking love it.

That look has taken some work.

His shrug is indulgent, unrepentant. 'I'm a very bad man. I have an uncontrollable penchant for working girls. And you, Isabella, are one in a rather long line.'

'You disgust me.' My smile is genuine. 'Tell me more.'

His confession is elaborate and depraved. Now and then he dry-humps my thigh, but mainly he concentrates on telling me filthy secrets. I can see he's enjoying this bit the best. And as his admission gathers momentum, it dawns on me. How remarkable that it took me two failed marriages to work out a simple universal truth – that strange is erotic.

Once aware of this truth, other truths became apparent. Like, the institution of marriage is flawed, as is monogamy, as is truth and respect and honour, because at some point a less attractive person, dim-witted, maybe unkind, will turn your partner's head. In the black of night he'll be pretending your shoulder blades, the small of your back, your buttocks are hers. And it will be for one reason only. She is *not you*. Anything that is *not you* will be sexier. Because strange is so bloody erotic, it makes a mockery of love, leaving marriage as the cruellest joke ever.

The minister's confession over, I watch him fumble with his belt – he is ready to seal the deal.

Hurry up, I beg of my brother, because he's cutting it fine.

And when, at last, I see him come into the room, I scream; not too loudly – the neighbours might knock – just loud enough for Minister de Groot to stop unbuckling and look up from the sofa.

'Fuck,' he shrieks, because a man of baby-giraffe proportions looks down on us.

My brother's name is Michael, after St Michael the

Archangel. Six feet two, twenty-eight years old, lateral muscles like folded-up wings. Erudite-looking, singularly benevolent, a total mix between Noël Coward and Lennie Small (the mentally impaired lovable murderer in *Of Mice and Men*) – only my brother is strawberry blond, with a beautiful West Country lilt, its undulating song as familiar as the Purbeck Hills, if you're from Dorset.

He's also a very mediocre actor, so even I'm surprised at the menace with which he says, 'You are squashing my fucking cushions.'

Bewildered, the minister flies to his feet, half holds out a hand.

Formalities don't interest Michael. He's in character – the aggrieved husband. Revolted, he glares at the stranger in his living room whilst pointing a rigid finger in my direction.

'She's a married woman,' he spits.

Technically this is true. Though I haven't seen Husband Number Two in years, he's no doubt looking for me. Eager to untie the knot and retie it with some domesticated whore he picked up in Poole. Well, he can look for me all he likes. I intend on doing her a favour.

'You're married?' The minister looks at me, sickened, like he didn't notice the ring; and I in turn shrug at the unfaithful father of four, because mine is a very long story.

Not that he's interested. They never are.

He simply holds his hands aloft as if Michael is pointing a gun and gestures desperately at the door with his chin.

Let me live, the minister's eyes beg.

But Michael has first to sob at me, 'How could you do this?'

My heart sinks for him. He's never landed an acting gig. Years of drama school and Michael still struggles with angst.

The minister doesn't notice – he's too intent on squeezing

a route past him and out of the front door, back to his trusted Gustav.

There is no backward glance from Pieter de Groot. No request for my telephone number. No plan ever to meet in the future. Categorically I will never see the Dutch Minister for Security and Justice ever again.

In the silence of the living room, my brother and I look at one another and sigh.

He picks up a scatter cushion as though it's a dead dog.

Quickly I fetch my purse. 'Buy yourself some more.' It's time to spend a little time chivvying him along, because although Michael's been bursting in on me for a year now, he remains his own harshest critic.

Sitting on the sofa, I tap the space beside me.

'Brilliant timing, partner,' I nod.

He brushes fresh air from the coffee table. 'I was total litter. A chimp could do better.'

'A chimp couldn't bring the performance element, though, could it? *How could you do this?* You've been practising, right?'

He straightens his smoking jacket. 'I'm trying to use my own emotions and memories.' He squints, tries to recall what it said in the textbook. 'I'm developing my internal sensory abilities.'

'Sounds hard.'

'It is hard.'

'It's paying off, though.'

'Yes, it is,' he says without modesty. 'It's important to consider the character's motives; to identify with them. That's what Christian Bale does, and Dustin Hoffman.'

'And the smoking jacket?' I neaten up its velvet lapels, like a mum.

'I'm using the Method,' he explains. Then his eyes become wide. 'Do you fancy sushi?'

I punch his thigh. 'Totally.'

The ephemeral nature of his thoughts.

Michael can feel a moment so passionately, only to discard it one second later in favour of a new, more intriguing one. He's always been like that. The teachers at school were disconcerted by him – Sister Angela, whose nerves he frazzled regularly, once told him that his educational needs were special. He had been extremely sorry about the fact; had shaken the nun's hand. Thirty-nine on the autistic spectrum sounded woefully low – he'd try harder next time.

Mum called him special too, because the fleeting heartfelt moments were the very best of all, she told him earnestly. Certainly they're the most truthful – they've had no time to tarnish. Asperger's, my elbow, she said. Michael was just extraordinarily unique.

I smooth the hair from his forehead. 'Sushi it is. But first I've got to do my stuff. You hoover. Then we'll eat and close this case.'

We're too old to high-five really, but we perform one with gusto.

Midnight.

The vacuum cleaner roars into action and I move to the bookshelf, carefully pulling free the self-help book, *Family: Nature's Masterpiece*.

Its author, Dr Dan, was the relationship expert on a morning programme. The picture on the front cover shows a congenial and wise man – bald as a bowling ball, a moustache like a yard broom – who has changed the lives of a million Britons.

I open the hardback.

There are no pages inside. The book's not worth the paper it's written on. Dr Dan was later outed as an unethical businessman who abused his wife. I didn't feel so bad then about cutting up his life's work, replacing the sanctimonious pages with a wireless unit the size of a deck of cards.

The camera's a great bit of kit – sixty-two-degree view, three-eighty TV line quality, powerful built-in microphone, the lens peeping through an imperceptibly small hole in the book's spine.

There are also pinhole cameras in my handbag and the smoke detector above the sofa.

In the wrong hands, the DVD of tonight's proceedings could destroy the minister professionally. Political ruin, however, is not my client's intention.

I'm not hungry, but I eat – Michael loves watching me gorge on makizushi whilst congratulating him on his culinary skills. Afterwards I download the DVD of tonight's proceedings, though not before turning the photograph on the shelf back around.

I look into my mother's eyes – they're wide as coat buttons – and I wonder if the world remains a riddle to her. Assuming, of course, that Bambi Love still inhabits it.

Two a.m.

My client waits for us in the lobby of the Knightsbridge Hotel in Chelsea.

Michael and I sit at the lights on the King's Road; me in the passenger seat, Michael at the wheel tapping imprecisely to the radio – it's free jazz, the genre of music that accompanied late-night US shows back in the seventies. The ones about talk-show radio DJs who worked on the suicide shift; and the cop shows; and the shows about serial killers with telescopes who lived opposite women who perpetually undressed for bed. Their soundtracks were always a funky fusion of lonely and sinister jazz. Like the music out of *Dirty Harry* – Lalo Schifrin was the composer who wrote that score.

I look out of the car window.

Soundtrack fact: one day, Lalo Schifrin will write the music to my life too – something experimental and timeless, fifteen

or so tracks, the dominant theme a driving percussion and restless electric bass. Assuming, of course, he's not dead by then.

To stop Lalo Schifrin from being dead by then, I do a secret sign of the cross – scratch my temple, fiddle with a button on my jacket, pick dust from the left shoulder, straighten the right sleeve. I have to perform it secretly because I don't *do* God. Plus Michael would join in because he does do God, religion being a far comfier option than scientific truth.

I am saying Amen with my eyes when I spot the Jiffy bag in the footwell – inside is tonight's ensemble of video footage and still shots.

It'll be a simple handover. Nonetheless, I dread this bit. I imagine the client's face – the nausea as she flicks through her husband's holiday snaps – and my stomach slumps.

Noticing I've gone quiet, Michael gives me a dead leg.

'It's your birthday next week,' he tells me, all mature.

I rub my thigh and stare at a teenage couple frantically kissing against a street light.

'Bet they're French.' I point.

'Flo, you have to celebrate. We could go to a club or a bar.'

'Sounds like a busman's holiday.'

'Good,' he says, satisfied. 'I'll invite Sébastien.'

'Yay,' I mumble. 'I'll spend my birthday playing gooseberry at PDA Central.'

But public displays of affection are Michael's speciality. He's too faithful to the moment, *way* too unconcerned with diplomatic social etiquette – just like the French teenagers, who are currently kissing like it's a life-or-death situation.

'Do you think he's trying to get gum out of her gullet?'

Michael becomes concerned. 'Shout out of the window, Flo. Tell him to use his fingers.'

'I am actually doing a sympathy heave.'

'Me too,' says Michael, even though he's not.

Flopping exhausted back into my seat, I explain birthday facts.

'A quiet night in on my own is just the job – when you get to twenty-nine, it's rude to keep counting.'

'You'll be thirty-three.'

'It is *infinitely* more rude for you to keep counting. Let me just be on my own. I'll watch a film or something – *Sleepless in Seattle, Gone with the Wind*.' I mouth at the French lovers, 'Something romantic.'

'*PS I Love you*.' He makes this suggestion because he once bought me this book. I've not read it, though he doesn't know that. As far as he's concerned, I thought it a corker of a read.

The light turns green.

I continue to spy on the French lovers in the wing mirror until their pumping heads shrink from view.

The reflection doesn't stay empty for long.

A black Triumph Scrambler trails ten metres behind. I squint into the side mirror, then turn around. Through the rear window I see only black leathers and a loud pelmet of white-blond hair; his tresses sprout from the helmet's sides and back like a wacky hi-vis accessory.

Scientific blondness fact: gentlemen might prefer them, but blonds have nothing whatsoever to be proud of. They suffer a deficiency of eumelanin, the dark pigment in hair. And on the Fischer-Saller scale of blondness, the motorcyclist behind would be ranked a paltry B.

That's virtually albino.

I, on the other hand, am full of eumelanin. Like Pocahontas. That's what a homeless drunk called me when I first arrived in London, three years ago now. A rucksack on my back, a rolled-up private investigations diploma in its

side pocket – an online course for which I achieved a hundred per cent.

I was a wide-eyed newbie to the Big Smoke.

The tramp was sitting on the steps at Paddington train station. *Oi, Pocahontas!* He shouted it with considerable venom. White spit coagulated like spunk in the corners of his mouth. Yet I smiled and waved back as if I were indeed she, because Pocahontas was very beautiful in the cartoon. In real life, not so much. I looked her up on Wikipedia.

The Triumph Scrambler behind us growls, speeds up, overtakes slowly. I watch it, watch the motorcyclist pass Michael's window. Instinctively I pick up the Jiffy bag, put it inside my jacket, under my armpit.

There's no need.

The flaxen-haired rider doesn't glance in at us, at me, at it – he seems aware only of the road ahead.