

Love Out of Season

Ray Connolly

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Extract

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Chapter One

Given the choice, which would you prefer: that the person you love is making love to you and thinking about someone else, or that he, or she, is making love to someone else and thinking about you?

Amy considered the words on her screen. Was that an original thought or had she overheard it somewhere? She couldn't be sure. She hesitated for a moment, weighing up the risks of unintended plagiarism, and then continued anyway.

Why can't he, or she, be thinking about me as well as making love to me? you might ask.

But you never do.

She frowned now, then finally added:

You don't dare.

She stopped writing. Was this getting personal? Her finger dawdled on the *delete* button. Of course it was personal. Whatever else love was, a bunch of red roses, a metaphysical

excuse for sex, a passing moment in human evolution, a confidence trick designed by nature, an accident, a song, a game, a poem or a pain, it was always personal. The telephone broke into her musings: a welcome distraction. 'Amy!'

Her work frown dissolved at the voice. 'Oh, *bello!* Nice surprise. I was just thinking about you! You were very good this morning with that...' she searched for the right words, 'that pre-Raphaelite loony. What are you doing? Can you get away, come over...?' As she'd been speaking she'd been taking off her reading glasses.

'Amy, they're on to us.' The famously mellifluent tones interrupted her.

'*What?* This is a joke! Right?'

'They may already be watching.'

She wanted to laugh. That morning on television he'd been the epitome of the urbane, metropolitan man gently ribbing an over-dramatic, tumbling-haired actress whose view of the world ended at her mirror. Now his voice was as hushed as a conspirator. 'Oh, come on! That's just paranoia,' she scolded. 'No one's watching us. I'd have noticed.' And swivelling around on her typing chair she rolled on casters across the polished wooden floor to her study window and looked down through the black winter trees that lined the drive below. 'There you are, noth—' she began, then stopped and stood up to get a better view.

'Yes?'

'Oh, my God!'

Two figures had emerged from the shadows of the bushes and were standing on the pavement, gazing up at her window. Seeing her, one of them appeared to say something to the

other, then indicated her. Immediately a camera bearing a very large and long lens was pointed upwards.

She didn't need to hear the automatic shutter. As she dropped to the carpet she knew what the pictures would show – a fair, pretty-ish woman in her early thirties in a pale-blue working shirt and jeans, staring in dismay as the most exciting part of her life came to an abrupt end.

'Amy?'

She was on the floor, dragging the curtains across the window. 'How did they find out? How did they *know*?' she gabbled into the phone. 'We've been so careful.'

'God knows! But don't worry. We'll sort it out.'

'*Don't worry!* They'll roast us. You'll be skewered.'

'Not if we do the right thing.'

'But we've been doing the *wrong* thing!' She regretted saying that instantly. It wasn't supposed to sound like a wail, either. She didn't wail. She wasn't the type. But she knew that in that moment her life had changed. What she'd most dreaded, yet always half expected, had happened. 'It's my fault,' she said, lifting the hem of the curtains and trying to peep outside. But, as the camera was raised again, she pulled back. 'We're being punished.'

In truth, she wasn't sure she meant that either. In fact, she probably didn't, not being at all certain that she believed in a God who dealt so arbitrarily in rewards and punishments. But this wasn't the moment for reflections on the nature of divinity.

'Don't be silly. We've done nothing to be punished for. Don't panic,' he calmed.

'I'm not panicking,' she lied.

At the other end of the phone there was now a silence.

'Teddy?' she enquired at last. She recognized the sudden quiet. It worried her. He used it very effectively as a technique in his television interviews before asking outrageous questions.

'I was thinking...' he began. 'Perhaps if you were to, you know, disappear...?' It came as a vague suggestion and question combined, but there was an emollient persuasion to the tone.

She was surprised. 'You want me to go away?'

'Just for a few days. A holiday. You know, lie low. Go to ground, that sort of thing.'

'You mean, go into hiding?'

'Well...'

'Like a criminal? On the run?'

'Amy!'

'But I'm working...'

'You can work anywhere.'

This irritated. It wasn't true, but he wouldn't understand. He never did, and she'd given up trying to explain to him that writers work best at the same desk in the same room day after day. She'd been pathetic about that. Now she was giving in again. 'Where would I go?' she heard herself ask, and realized she'd already agreed.

'Anywhere.' He was coaxing now, cooing almost. 'Somewhere anonymous and quiet until I can...' He stopped and corrected himself. 'Until *we* can, you know, sort things out.'

He's getting rid of me, she thought. I'm in the way. And, still on the floor, she gazed around her study walls at the silver-framed posters of the novels she'd written, the trophies that charted the somehow largely vicarious life she'd been living until

she met him. Finally, her eyes came to rest on the blinking cursor of her computer, still waiting for her to finish her paragraph. She wouldn't be doing that tonight. Would she ever finish it? When it comes down to it, she thought, he's just a married man, a very famously, happily married man. And for a single woman, particularly one with a well-known name, to be in love with such a man had suddenly become an inconvenience he could do without.

Will Abbott contemplated the top-floor window of the apartment block. It would be an expensive place to own in such a fashionable area. But then she was a successful girl. Pity she'd spotted them so soon.

At his side, the photographer, cocooned in wet-weather gear, sniffed. He'd be complaining soon. Photographers always complained. But stake-outs weren't fun for anyone on a cold and wet February evening. Famous adulterers would be doing everybody a favour if they only let themselves be outed in the summer. Their pictures would come out better then, too.

Rubber brakes squeaked quietly behind them as a bicycle bumped on to the kerb and came to rest. A gawky girl in a school raincoat, a brace on her teeth and a *South Park* transfer on her helmet stood astride the pedals, watching them. 'Her name's Amy Miller,' the girl volunteered at last. 'She writes romantic fiction.'

We're so obvious, thought Abbott, the policemen of celebrity morals. The photographer wiped his lens, amused.

The girl indicated Amy's window. 'I read one once. It wasn't bad. But the sex was a bit on the tepid side.'

Abbott chose to ignore that observation. She was all of

thirteen. 'Have you... er... have you ever seen anyone visit her?' he asked. 'Anyone famous, I mean.'

The girl considered him without expression.

Reaching inside his overcoat for his wallet he withdrew a ten-pound note.

'More famous than that,' she said scornfully. But now she smiled.

They settled at twenty, which he could later inflate to forty for his expenses. The girl's name was Polly.

'Yes, I've seen someone,' she confided with quiet glee. 'Teddy Farrow from *The Teddy Farrow Show*. He usually comes at night when I'm finishing my homework. He parks his car around the corner. It's a black BMW. Then he sneaks in... and... sneaks out again... much later!' She smirked knowingly when she said 'much later', as though she had some personal experience of what occurred when Teddy Farrow came to call.

Abbott looked again at the sixth-floor window. There was now no sign of activity behind the drawn curtains, no shadows. 'Do you live here?' he asked.

Polly nodded.

'And you know Amy Miller?'

'I've seen her. That's all.'

He was pleased about that. It meant no loyalties would be compromised. He smiled at the girl, as though taking her into his confidence, flirting really, if one could flirt with a child. 'You know, Polly, this may be really important. I don't know. But it might help if you could invite us into the building so that we could talk to the lady,' he said.

Legally it would, he knew, still count as trespass, but as Amy Miller was now aware that they were there she could stay

inside for days, and Teddy Farrow certainly wouldn't be coming around for a while. The old rules of reporting always applied. It was no use standing in the porch speaking into an intercom that could be slammed down at any moment. Until you actually knocked on the door and confronted your quarry eye to eye you never knew what reaction you might get.

She was racing. Dashing from bathroom to bedroom, she was quickly filling a large canvas bag with jeans, shirts, underclothes, shoes and sweaters. In her study she copied her work on to a disc and slid it into her laptop case. Then, turning off all the lights, she grabbed her coat and car keys, and, opening her front door, stepped out on to the landing.

Even before she'd finished locking the door she realized that the chase had entered the building. She could hear the hunters murmuring to each other about the swankiness of the place as they came up the stairs. Tiptoeing along the landing she reached the lift. A red light read 'Occupied'. She winced. Her plan had been to take the lift down to the garage, and then drive out at speed, taking her tormentors by surprise. That was no longer an option.

'Next floor,' she heard a man's voice echo in the stairwell.

Had her top-floor neighbour been at home she might have sought sanctuary in his flat. But this was professional London. Nobody was ever around when you needed them.

She glanced at her door. It was too late. She would be spotted now if she tried to get back.

Taking off her shoes, she shoved them into her coat pockets and crept silently up the stairs to the top landing. There was only

one door. Pushing down the bar of the fire lock, she opened it and stepped out on to the flat roof of the apartment block.

He knew she hadn't gone down because Polly, the neighbourhood snitch, was earning an extra fiver in the lobby blocking the lift door with her bike. But she wasn't answering her door either. He rang the bell one more time. Nothing.

Kneeling down, the photographer tried to see through the letter box, then shook his head.

She could, of course, have been sitting inside the flat with the lights turned off, waiting for them to give up and leave. On the other hand... Abbott looked up the stairs to the top floor.

Holding on to the handrail, the other hand gripping her bag and laptop, she carefully felt her way down the iron steps of the fire escape. Soon she was passing the lighted, deckchair-curtained windows of flats lower down the block. Snatches of dialogue from *The Simpsons* and then *BBC News 24* followed her, voices welding together so that it sounded as though Homer was running the war on terror. She was already regretting her decision to leave, wondering what on earth she was doing, hating herself for being so easily persuaded. But to turn around now and face her pursuers was out of the question. People with nothing to hide didn't run, they'd say, and they'd be right. All the same, this was the most out of character thing she'd ever done. Teddy's anxieties had infected her.

From above she could hear footsteps and voices on the roof and instinctively she tried to make herself smaller.

Pressing close against the wall, she realized she was peering into a sitting room. A couple of fifteen-year-olds were lolling on an island of large purple and yellow cushions, the girl watching a rock video on television around the side of the boy's hooded head while he snogged her, one hand up the back of her sweater trying to unfasten her bra.

Amy looked quickly away. This would be all she needed: a conviction as a peeping Tom. She half turned to continue down the steps, but further mutterings from above stopped her. She waited and, inevitably, almost magnetically, found herself looking back into the room.

With her eyes still on the television, the boy's mouth still stuck to hers, the girl now had both hands behind her back and was helpfully unfastening the clip of her bra.

Amy closed her eyes and waited for deliverance of some kind. There was none. When she opened them again it was worse. The boy was now putting an exploratory hand up the girl's cherry-red skirt.

Just then, perhaps disturbed by the boy's new approach, or just bored with the record playing, the girl peeled away from the television. Her eyes met Amy's gaze.

For a moment Amy just stared back, rooted with embarrassment. Dear God, they'll think I've gone mad, she thought. Perhaps I have. So be it. *Hello!* she mouthed with a wave and a smile, as though she always left the building by the fire escape. Then, disregarding the hounds above, she hurried on down the iron staircase.

The girl didn't move. The boy, more interestingly occupied, didn't notice.

Amy didn't even think about going back for her car. As her

feet hit the garden she was already running through the rhododendrons towards the drive, the road and the yellow, for-hire light of an approaching taxi. She just had to get away before this night got any worse.

Abbott watched her from the roof. When he'd received the tip from the television researcher about Amy Miller and Teddy Farrow he'd been disinclined to believe it. Farrow had built his daytime-TV career on an unblemished image as a family man, now with sensible, grown-up children and a clever, attractive wife. Amy Miller was the pretty bookworm who led a quiet, unreported life, didn't give interviews and sold, it was said, mountain ranges of books.

But now Abbott had no doubts. As the photographer cursed his luck at missing her getaway, and made his way back to the fire door, Abbott smiled to himself. The cute runaway author and the goody-goody TV star making the beast with two backs. It was going to be an interesting chase.

 Chapter Two

‘I’m sorry, sir, I’m getting no reply from 1507.’ The hotel operator was a middle aged, homely woman.

Tim Fairweather considered the rain splashing off his gutterless attic roof and running down his window pane, and wondered whether his home could take much more. February in London was a terrible, dismal month, and he could see a patch of damp plaster beginning to bubble and flake around the edge of the skylight above his head. ‘I see,’ he said. ‘By the way, what time is it in Denver now?’

‘A quarter after two... in the morning.’ The operator stressed the last part. ‘Would you care to leave a message?’

‘Well, perhaps you could just tell her that... Tim rang...’

‘I’ll do that, sir. “Tim rang... *again!*” Goodnight now.’

The connection went dead. Night in Denver, Colorado; morning in London. It was a pity the operator had added the ‘again’ bit. If only Amanda would switch on her mobile. A text would do.

Putting the phone down, he considered a sequence of musical notes on the laptop screen attached to the Yamaha

keyboard that dominated his small living room. One-handed he played a short sequence, then stopped, unhappy.

He was a tall man of thirty-five, and his hair was dark, long, wavy and unkempt. This wasn't a shaving day. Not many were. He wore jeans and a navy blue shirt, and the room around him suggested the comfortable if frugal chaos of a musician who lived alone. Records and CDs rose in stacks like miniature housing projects across the faded Indian carpet, where music by Gershwin and Chopin inhabited the same neighbourhood as the Blind Boys of Alabama, the Eagles' Greatest Hits, Natalie Merchant, the Red Hot Chili Peppers, Dylan, favourite movie composers and hundreds of others. Sheets of discarded music manuscript lay abandoned across the furniture, while on the mantelpiece, along with the old letters, a postcard of Neil Young and various bills, was a partially obscured photograph showing an attractive, dark-haired, slim, determined-looking woman in a black mandarin outfit standing beside a battery of chimes.

Beside the photograph was a clock. Glancing at it, Tim swore quietly to himself. He was going to be late for his lesson. Pulling on his overcoat, he began to look quickly through a box of CDs. 'Pie-Eyed Posse,' he muttered to himself as he searched. 'Where are you, Pie-Eyed...?' His fingers stopped as five young men stared accusingly at him from a plastic box. 'Got you!'

And pushing the CD into his pocket he ran from his flat, down the echoing, uncarpeted stairs and out into the busy cacophony of a North Kensington street.

The school wasn't far away, a stern Victorian building with modern, once pastel but now graffiti-decorated wings, where, as he arrived, pupils were noisily mobbing their way from one

lesson to the next. Pushing through, he made his way to the staff room, retrieved a portable CD player from his locker, and hurried to his classroom.

He would reflect later that 3M looked unusually pleased to see him as he entered. But, having told them at their last music lesson to expect something interesting today, he put it down to enthusiasm.

‘Good morning. Sorry I’m late,’ he said as he stepped up on to the rostrum at the front of the room.

The thirty-strong class of fourteen-year-old boys and girls, who, for various reasons, few likely to be educational, had ticked the ‘music appreciation’ box as their cultural activity choice, grinned back.

‘As I said last week, I thought we’d listen to something new today to see if we can hear connections between different kinds of music,’ he went on. ‘So, I’ve brought along a record I know some of you at least will like – Pie-Eyed Posse...’ As he’d been speaking he’d been taking the CD he’d brought out of its box and slipping it into the player.

‘Oohh!’ the class murmured sarcastically, mock impressed.

Tim smiled. He’d done the same when he’d been at school and young teachers had tried to earn some street cred. ‘Yes, even I’ve heard of Pie-Eyed Posse! And, despite their appearance,’ he said, happy to play for the ridicule he knew he’d get, ‘they’re a clever group... interesting rhythms, a bit of techno, hip-hop...’ What he didn’t say was that they’d been his pick for big things when he’d seen them at the Glastonbury Festival two years earlier. These weren’t the sort of kids who had the opportunity to go to Glastonbury. It was probably time he stopped going.

At their desks the pupils exchanged exaggeratedly pained

glances, humouring him. Desiree, a nervous, plump girl with braids who sat at the front of the room, bit her lip. Tim knew she liked him. The other kids mocked her for it.

‘Anyway, let’s give them a listen, shall we!’ And, pressing the *play* button, he settled further back into a chair by the teacher’s desk and looked around the class as he waited for the disc to engage. 3M were almost attentive now. Perhaps they weren’t as bad as their reputation suggested after all.

They were. With a massive yelp of laughter there was a sudden explosion of derision. The music had started, but it was the wrong music, not the drum and bass of Pie-Eyed Posse, but the swell of a full symphony orchestra. Tim stood up, grabbing at the Pie-Eyed Posse CD container. Inwardly he groaned. He must have accidentally put the wrong disc in it when preparing for the class.

‘I’m sorry,’ he said above the music and the laughter. ‘Tchaikovsky seems to have sneaked into the wrong box.’ There was more guffawing. ‘All right, calm down, calm down.’

Eventually they did.

But what should he do now? Best to brazen it out, he decided. The music played on. ‘Well, as we can’t really discuss the merits of Pie-Eyed Posse without hearing them, what do we know about Tchaikovsky?’ he asked. ‘Anyone?’

Smiling, empty, young faces filled the room.

‘Anything?’

‘He was a poof, wasn’t he?’ The speaker was a shaven-headed, beatific-looking imp.

‘Well, yes, I believe he might have been gay,’ Tim replied, hearing the creak of boredom in his voice. ‘He was also a composer.’

‘*Was he?*’ the imp replied, pretend astounded, insolently straight-faced. There was more laughter.

Again, Tim waited for the mood to settle. ‘Yes, he was. One of the great, classical, Russian composers. Just listen to this. Does anybody recognize it?’ And turning the music louder he sat down again and leaned back in his chair as he always did.

Perhaps, he would also think later, he should have suspected something when he noticed the quiet boy from Mogadishu, the one they called Jay-Jay, staring fixedly at the legs of his chair, but he didn’t. The music had taken his attention, and he was wondering exactly how he was going to explain it to them. Pie-Eyed Posse would have been a lot easier.

‘Well, we’re listening to Tchaikovsky’s music for the ballet *Romeo and Juliet*,’ he began, ‘and—’

He didn’t finish. There was a sudden jolt as though a minor earthquake had occurred right under him. Then a shudder. And then with a crack he felt the back legs of his chair bend and snap sharply, first one then the other. Too late he put his hands out to protect himself, but there was nothing to grab hold of as he and the broken chair tumbled backwards off the rostrum, and, in a rush of gravity, the back of his head crashed onto the floor beneath him.

And as the class roared in triumph and hilarity at the success of their practical joke, he lost consciousness.

‘*Romeo and Juliet*, you say. That was lucky.’ The young Egyptian doctor stared at the X-ray of Tim’s skull on the light box.

‘It was?’ Tim put a hand gingerly to the lump on the back

of his head. Gruesome, worrying moans were coming from the next A-and-E cubicle.

‘Oh, yes. Think what they’d have done to the *1812 Overture*. Ingenious little buggers. Sawed through your chair legs, just for the fun of it?’

‘They aren’t all little. Some of them are bigger than you. But I don’t think they meant to injure me.’

‘Well, try or not, they certainly did.’ The doctor smiled and unclipped the X-ray. ‘Luckily, you haven’t fractured your skull or damaged your brain, so that’s good news, just a deep cut and a coconut of a lump.’ He turned back to Tim. ‘How are you feeling?’

‘Fine,’ Tim lied. He’d recovered consciousness before the ambulance had arrived at the school, but now he felt weak and, for some reason – probably shock – slightly tearful.

‘I doubt it,’ the doctor contradicted, writing out a prescription. ‘Get these from the pharmacy on the way out. Concussion can be tricky. You’ll probably need a few days to get over it. Is there anyone at home who can keep an eye on you?’

‘No. I live alone. And my girlfriend’s in America. But I’m sure I’ll be all right.’

‘Probably. But you never know. If I were you I’d go and stay with relations or friends for a few days.’

Tim shook his head, then immediately regretted it. It felt heavy, and made his neck ache. ‘I can’t do that,’ he said.

The doctor looked at him over his glasses, one of those professional expressions that conveys authority. ‘Well, you can’t go back to school. And certainly not *that* school. The noise alone would probably kill you.’

‘Yes, but you see... I’m writing something... composing, I

mean. Well, trying to...' Tim realized he was stammering, embarrassed, as he always was, by the word 'composing'. It sounded so pretentious. Besides, the continued groans emanating from beyond the screen made his problems seem so small. He felt like a cheat. He tried again. 'I mean, the teaching bit is only part time. I play in a bar as well, actually several bars, but I write music, too. And as I've entered a competition for new works I'm really very busy at the moment.'

'Doctor...!' A harassed-looking nurse put her head inside the cubicle.

'So,' the doctor finished writing his report, 'what about a hotel? Go and spoil yourself.'

Tim grimaced again.

The young doctor gave up. 'Well, it's up to you. If you can't get away, you can't. It's a pity, though, because I would have thought a change might have helped your composing, especially somewhere quiet where you could be properly fed and looked after.' He handed over a list of instructions. 'Anyway, read this. Any headaches, blackouts, dizziness or nausea, come back here or call a doctor. You'll probably feel tired and a bit shaken at first. But that'll pass. Otherwise, a few days' peace and quiet and you should be as right as rain.' And with that he hurried from the consulting cubicle, shedding one pair and pulling on another of surgical gloves as he went. 'Now, what seems to be the trouble?' Tim heard from the next cubicle. The moans immediately stopped.

A second nurse, an ample, smiling woman holding a roll of elastic bandage, entered and peered at Tim's head. 'Right,' she said in a flat Glaswegian accent, 'if you've ever fancied yourself as Che Guevara this is your day.'

Amy hadn't slept well, not at all, until after four, the previous evening's events and her abrupt change of plans having tormented her.

She'd intended, in her first moments of panic, to seek sanctuary with one of her friends, but had quickly realized that that would have called for explanations which she just hadn't wanted to give. The affair had been that secret. So when, as the taxi driver had begun fretting after her second change of instructions, she'd spotted a blue neon vacancy light over the door of a small hotel near Paddington Station, its anonymity had beckoned. She'd needed time to think of a better idea.

Unfortunately, she hadn't been able to. Awoken by the racket of passing traffic she'd found herself in a narrow, cream room under a framed photograph of Princess Diana at the Taj Mahal, feeling locked out of her own life. As she looked down on the morning of a strange London street like a foreign tourist, today even the buses looked different.

Going without breakfast, because she really hadn't wanted to face anyone, she'd watched *The Teddy Farrow Show* on the television in her room, wagging her head admiringly at his skill in encouraging his guests to betray themselves so unwittingly. He was so good at getting exactly what he wanted from people. Sometimes when she'd watched the show at home she'd wondered whether he might send her a little message in code, and that had crossed her mind this morning, too. But when he hadn't she'd told herself she hadn't expected him to, anyway. He was, after all, renowned for his professionalism. Then she'd felt a fool for even entertaining such thoughts.

After the show had gone off the air, she'd taken a long bath, killing time. Only at eleven, and with some trepidation, did she put in a call to Teddy's mobile phone. It was switched off. Leaving a carefully worded message that would have meant nothing to anyone else, she'd then waited, afraid to leave the hotel because in her haste the previous night she'd left her own mobile on her desk.

Teddy hadn't returned the call, but then, she'd excused, he'd obviously have to schmooze with the guests after the programme, something he said he hated doing, after which there was always a production meeting to discuss the next show's line-up.

So she'd waited even longer, desperate for a word from him, yet, with every passing hour, hating herself more for being so bloody pathetic. How could she be behaving like this? No leading character in the novels she wrote would have put up with it. Her women were independent, witty creatures who knew exactly how to put a man in his place, the sort of girls whom reviewers in friendly newspapers described as 'feisty'. Yet here *she* was, totally *feistless*, if there were such a word. She was a fraud. And she remembered with some shame the intolerance she'd had to hide as she'd seen friends unroll themselves like doormats which turned into mattresses for the men they'd decided they loved.

A noon check-out time finally forced her to make a decision and, carrying her belongings, she made her way through the rain down the street, still unsure of what to do next. If she were to return home now, she wondered, would the Press leave her in peace?

A photograph staring out at her from a rack of news-

papers on a corner news-stand answered her question. It was of her, caught the previous night, her fair hair looking as though it had become electrified in shock as she'd spotted the photographer's telephoto lens. A headline under the picture teased coyly:

**ROMANCE FOR AMY – BUT WHO'S
HER MYSTERY MAN?**

(Turn to page 5)

It wasn't the lead item in the paper, obviously. It was worse. It was the human-interest celebrity story. The one everyone read. In despair she turned to page 5.

'Shorter,' she said above the insistent hammer of a rapper on the radio who was, it seemed, threatening all kinds of mayhem if he didn't get a pay rise, some juicy sex and puddin' pie, and if his bitch didn't start respecting him more. She'd like to have said 'Quieter', too, but that wasn't up to her.

'Shorter?' the young hairdresser with the ring and silver chain hanging from her belly button repeated. 'Your friends won't recognize you.'

'Promise me,' Amy replied. This girl certainly didn't recognize her, but then Economy Cutz didn't look the sort of place where the reading of books, not even the books she wrote, would have been a priority.

With a downward movement of the corners of her mouth and the raising of her shoulders, which Amy interpreted as a 'suit yourself' surrender, the girl continued to chop at Amy's

hair. Already it lay around her like the jettisoned frills of a former, happy life.

Cautiously, as the stylist moved from one side of her to the other, Amy glanced at her newspaper, which was lying folded on a shelf below the mirror. The article on page five hadn't named the 'mystery man'. It couldn't. Get that wrong and it could mean a serious and expensive libel. Instead, knowing hints about a new friendship with a 'television family favourite' came free of risk.

'Something special in today, is there?' the girl asked as she noticed Amy's attention stray to the paper.

'What?' Amy quickly looked away. 'Oh, no.'

'No?'

'Well, just the usual.'

'The usual?' This girl would make conversation with her client if it killed them both.

Amy tried a joke. 'Yes, you know, *TWO SETS OF SIAMESE TWINS IN WIFE-SWAPPING MIX-UP.*'

'Really!' the stylist said seriously, concentrating on her job.

'Mmm. They took a bit of unravelling apparently.'

'I bet,' the girl came back, distractedly studying the lengths of two sheaves of hair. 'It's the firemen I feel sorry for.'

Amy didn't answer. There was no answer to that. And as the stylist went off to find a fresh pair of scissors she sighed inwardly and looked again at her newspaper. She hadn't noticed when she'd first read it, but at the bottom of the page about her was a two-inches-deep travel advertisement, an engraving of a large rambling house with balconies, ivy and a palm tree on the edge of a range of cliffs.

When you really want to get away from it all... the advertisement beckoned. The North Devon Riviera Hotel.

He'd fully intended to stay at home, work at his music and shiver in his mansard flat. But then the head teacher had called, and, relieved that Tim wasn't more seriously injured, had offered, on the school's behalf, to pay for a week's recuperation at a resort of his choice, 'provided it's reasonably priced, of course'.

The stain around the skylight decided him. If he stayed at home, watching it grow bigger by the day, he'd probably have to do something about it, which would inevitably turn into a displacement activity when the music became even more difficult, which in turn would defeat the whole object of staying at home. Besides, there was still no word from Amanda in Denver. So he thanked the headmaster for his solicitude and accepted the offer.

As it happened it turned out to be a resort of Valerie the school secretary's choice. She'd been there on holiday three years earlier with her mother and they'd had 'a lovely time', she said when she called him with the details. 'It was very quiet, with very nice people.' It was called the North Devon Riviera Hotel.

So Valerie made the booking, and, after calling Razza, the manager of the Settle Bar in Muswell Hill and Harry at Ballantines in Victoria, to explain why he wouldn't be able to play for a week, Tim quickly packed his clothes and equipment and set off for Victoria Coach Station.