Engleby

Sebastian Faulks

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Extract

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One

My name is Mike Engleby, and I'm in my second year at an ancient university. My college was founded in 1662, which means it's viewed here as modern. Its chapel was designed by Hawksmoor, or possibly Wren; its gardens were laid out by someone else whose name is familiar. The choir stalls were carved by the only woodcarver you've ever heard of. The captain of the Boat Club won a gold medal at an international games last year. (I think he's studying physical education.) The captain of cricket has played for Pakistan, though he talks like the Prince of Wales. The teachers, or 'dons', include three university professors, one of whom was on the radio recently talking about lizards. He's known as the Iguanodon.

Tonight I won't study in my room because there's the weekly meeting of the Folk Club. Almost all the boys in my college go to this, not for the music, though it's normally quite good, but because lots of girl students come here for the evening. The only boys who don't go are those with a work compulsion, or the ones who think folk music died when Bob Dylan went electric.

There's someone I've seen a few times, called Jennifer Arkland. I discovered her name because she stood for election to the committee of a society. On the posters, the candidates had small pictures of themselves and, under their names and colleges, a few personal details. Hers said: 'Second-year History exhibitioner. Previously educated at Lymington High School and Sorbonne. Hobbies: music, dance, film-making, cooking. Would like to make the society more democratic with more women members and have more outings.'

I'd seen her in the tea room of the University Library, where she

was usually with two other girls from her college, a fat one called Molly and a severe dark one, whose name I hadn't caught. There was often Steve from Christ's or Dave from Jesus sniffing round them.

I think I'll join this society of hers. It doesn't matter what it's for because they're all the same. They're all called something Soc, short for Society. Lab Soc, Lit Soc, Geog Soc. There's probably a knitting group called Sock Soc.

I'll find out about Jen Soc, then go along so I can get to know her better.

I won a prize to come to my college and it pays my fees; my family's poor. I took a train from school one day after I'd sat the exams and had been called for interview. I must have stayed in London on the way, but I have no memory of it. My memory's odd like that. I'm big on detail, but there are holes in the fabric. I do remember that I took a bus from the station, though I didn't know then what my college looked like. I went round the whole city and ended up back at the station, having made the round trip. Then I took a taxi and had to borrow some money from the porter to pay for it. I still had a pound note in my wallet for emergencies.

They gave me a key to a bedroom; it was in a courtyard that I reached by a tunnel under the road. I imagined what kind of student lived there normally. I pictured someone called Tony with a beard and a duffel coat. I tried really hard to like the room and the college that was going to be mine. I imagined bicycling off to lectures in the early morning with my books balanced on a rack over the back wheel. I'd be shouting out to the other guys, 'See you there!' I'd probably smoke a pipe. I'd also probably have a girlfriend – some quite stern grammar school girl with glasses, who wouldn't be to everyone's taste.

In fact, I didn't like the room I was in that night. It was damp, it was small and it felt as though too many people had been through it. It didn't seem old enough; it didn't seem 17th century, or modern:

it was more like 1955. Also, there was no bathroom. I found one up the stairs. It was very cold and I had to stay dressed until the bath was run. The water itself was very hot. Everything in the room and on the stairs smelled slightly of gas, and lino.

I slept fine, but I didn't want to have breakfast in the dining hall because of having to talk to the other candidates. I went along the street and found a café and had weak coffee and a sausage roll, which I paid for from my spare pound. I re-entered the college by the main gate. The porter was sullen in his damp lodge with a paraffin heater. 'G12, Dr Woodrow's rooms,' he said. I found it all right, and there was another boy waiting outside. He looked clever.

Eventually, the door opened and it was my turn. There were two of them in there: a big schoolmasterly man who showed me to a chair, then sat down at a desk; and a younger, thin man with a beard who didn't get up from his armchair. Teachers at my school didn't have beards.

'You wrote well on Shakespeare. Do you visit the theatre a good deal?' This was the big one talking. It sounded too much like an ordinary conversation to be an interview. I suspected a trap. I told him there wasn't a theatre where we lived, in Reading.

I was watching him all the time. How grand, to be a Doctor of whatever and to weigh up and decide people's future. I'd once seen a set of table mats in a shop which had pictures of men in different academic gowns: Doctor of Divinity, Master of Arts and so on. But this was the first real one I'd seen. He asked me a few more things, none of them interesting.

'. . . the poetry of Eliot. Would you care to make a comparison between Eliot and Lawrence?'

This was the younger one, and it was his first contribution. I thought he must be joking. An American banker interested in the rhythms of the Anglican liturgy and a pitman's son who wanted to escape from Nottingham, maybe via sex, or by his crude paintings. Compare them? I looked at him carefully, but he showed no sign of humour so I gave an answer about their use of verse forms, trying to make it sound as though it had been a reasonable question.

He nodded a few times and looked relieved. He didn't follow it up.

The big one leafed through my papers again. 'Your personal report,' he said at last, 'from your teacher . . . Did you have difficulties with him?'

I hadn't been aware of any, I said.

'Is there anything that you'd like to ask us about life in college? We try to make everyone feel welcome.'

It seemed wrong not to ask something; it might look as though I didn't care. But I couldn't ask any of the things I really wanted to know. In the silence we heard the college clock chime the half-hour. I felt them both looking at me. Then I felt a trickle of sweat on my spine. I hardly ever sweat normally, and it gave me an idea.

'What's the thing with laundry?'

'What?' said the big one, gruffly.

'Do you have . . . Well, like, washing machines? Is it done centrally or do I take it somewhere or what?'

'Gerald?'

'I'm not quite sure,' said the younger one.

'Each undergraduate is assigned a moral tutor,' said the schoolmasterly one. 'A Fellow of the college who can help you with all your personal and health questions.'

'So he'd be the one to ask?'

'Yes. Yes, I imagine so.'

I thought that now I'd broken the ice, it might be good to ask another question. 'What about money?' I said.

'What?'

'How much money will I need?'

'I imagine your local authority will provide a grant. It's up to you how you spend it. Do you have questions about the work?'

'No. I read the prospectus.'

'Do you find the idea of Chaucer daunting?'

'No, I like Chaucer.'

'Yes, yes, I can see that from your paper. Well, Mr Engle . . . er . . .'

'Engleby.'

'Englebury. You can go now, unless . . . Gerald?'

'No, no.'

'Good. So we'll look forward to seeing you next autumn.'

I didn't see how they could let me go without telling me how it had gone. 'Have I won a prize?' I said.

'We shall be writing to your school in due course. When we've completed the interview process. It's an exceptional year.'

I shook his offered hand, waved at the seated one and went out, down the oak stairs. What a pair of frauds.

In the evening I tear a ticket from a book and take it to the college dining hall, which was designed by Robert Adam. You have to buy a book of thirty-five every term; you don't actually have to use them, but the cash you pay in advance keeps the kitchen going. I'm wearing a long black gown over my jeans and sweater and there are candles in sconces on the painted plaster walls. We stand up when a door behind the top table opens and the Fellows of the college come in to dine. The Master is an oceanographer, who once drew maps of undersea mountain ranges. He knows how Australia was once attached to China or how Ghana sweated in the foothills of the Andes. I think he imagines that New Zealand once broke free from Germany.

The crystal glasses glitter in the candlelight. They drink wine. We drink water, though you are allowed to ask for beer if you like. Stellings is the only man to do this.

'A pint of ale, please, Robinson,' he says to the stooping butler. 'Beer for you, Mike?'

I shake my head. Stellings brews his own beer in a plastic barrel. He calls it SG (short for student's gin: drunk for a penny, dead drunk for twopence) and once forced me to drink it, even though it made me sick, with its powerful taste of malt and raw alcohol, which he achieves by doubling the sugar input recommended on the side of the kit. There is no bathroom near his room, so I had to vomit into a plastic watering can on the landing.

I sometimes don't take dinner in the dining hall. I've found some places I like better. One of them is a pub, a walk of ten or fifteen minutes away, over a green (there are a lot of greens or 'pieces' as they call them here), down a side street, up a back street. The beer there tastes much better than Stellings's homebrew. It's made by a brewery called Greene King. One of the King family, they say, is a famous novelist. The lights here are low, the floor is made of wooden boards; the other people are not from the university. They are what are called ordinary people, though each person is really too specific to be ordinary. It's quite dark, and people talk softly. Although the barman knows me, he doesn't intrude. I often have a baked potato, or a cheese and ham pie, which is messy to eat because the melted cheese is stringy and there's so much of it between the layers of filo pastry.

I also drink gin and vermouth, mixed. I like red vermouth better than white. When I've drunk two or three of these, I feel I understand the world better. At least, I don't mind so much that I don't understand it; I can be tolerant of my ignorance. After three or four, I feel that my ignorance is not only tolerable, but possibly in some way noble.

Other times, I go into the middle of the town. There's a bright Greek restaurant there, where it's embarrassing to be seen alone – but I like the food: they bring moussaka with rice and with chips and with Greek salad and pitta bread with olives and hummus, so if you're hungry it's a good place to go. Sometimes I don't eat for two or three days, so I need to load up. With this Greek food I drink white wine that tastes of toilet cleaner, and they go together well.

I also take drugs. I've tried most things. My favourite is opium, though I've had it only once. It's really hard to get hold of and involves a palaver with a flame and a pipe. I bought it from a boy who got it from a Modern History Fellow in Corpus Christi who had recently been to the Far East. The thing about opium is that it makes pain or difficulty unimaginable. If while you were under its influence someone were to tell you about Zyklon B and your parents dying and life in a dementia ward or Passchendaele, you might be

able to understand what they meant – but only in a hypothetical sense. You might be interested by this idea of 'pain', but in a donnish way. I mean, I'm 'interested' in the special theory of relativity; the idea that there's a dimension in which space rolls up and time distorts and you come back from a journey younger than you left is certainly intriguing, but it doesn't have an impact on me, day by day. That's what opium does to suffering: makes it of hypothetical interest only.

I mostly smoke marijuana, which I buy from a boy called Glynn Powers. I don't know where Glynn buys it, but he has several kilos of it in the built-in bedside locker in his tiny room in the new Queen Elizabeth block, a short walk beyond Fellows' Pieces (i.e. grass area reserved to dons). The block was opened by a princess only three years ago and in the entrance hall of the building, next to the commemorative plaque, there's a picture of her standing in one of the little cells, smiling at the president, with the bedside locker in view behind them. The brickwork of the wall is exposed because they discovered when the building was completed that the size of each room was smaller than the minimum required for single human habitation by the Department of Housing. By removing the plasterboard they were able to add just enough volume to go legal.

In his bedside locker, Glynn keeps polished scales and brass imperial weights. *Mene, mene, tekel, upharsin:* you have been weighed in the scale, balanced and found wanting. Not that I'd argue with Glynn Powers or tell him he was wanting in any way at all. He wears a leather jacket with a thin fringe of tassels halfway down the back; he has a thick, trimmed beard and a motorbike. I have neither. He is studying Engineering. He doesn't smoke himself, which I find sinister.

And tonight is Folk Club, as I said. This happens in the college bar, because you can't have folk music without beer – in this case Double Diamond or gassy Worthington E. Brian, the professional barman who does the first two hours (after which the students take over), offers a free pint if you can drink one in less than five seconds. I have seen it done.

Bicycles start to arrive at about seven. There are striped scarves,

coats; small, cheap cigarettes; most of the boys have hair to their shoulders, much of it grown out from a previous schoolboy style, so they still have a parting in the undergrowth. There are printed posters in the quads and linking passages. Hobgoblin, they announce. Avalon. With support: The Tim Wills/Steve Murray Band. After the interval: Lyonesse. With special guests: Split Infinitive.

When there are enough people in the bar, I move in among them. It must once have been a cellar, I suppose. The walls are white brick. They start to sweat.

I've drunk some gin in my room and have taken a Nembutal, which makes you feel detached. I'm smoking a cigarette. I really love cigarettes. I like the moist fragrance of the ones you roll yourself and I like Rothman's King Size, advertised by a man's hand emerging from a sleeve with gold hoops to grasp a gear lever. (Why is the pilot or naval officer still wearing his uniform in his car? Is he trying to impress an unseen woman? Is the gear lever a symbol? In which case, shouldn't it be *her* hand on it?) I like the small piece of paper, like a miniature bookmark, that you pull up inside to arrange the fags in a little castle shape that makes it easier to extract the first one. (Now I come to think of it, this is one of the most courteous, customer-loving things any manufacturer has ever done. To go to the trouble of folding in this thin strip of paper, just so the smoker shouldn't be irritated by trying to fish the first one out of a tightly packed bunch and risk squashing the others . . . Ingenious, thoughtful and quite irrelevant after the first cigarette, whose absence leaves space for the remainder to be slipped out easily. One day an accountant will calculate that the infinitesimal saving of not including the strip, magnified by the huge number of packets sold, will enable the companies to make an extra one thousand pounds a year profit, and they'll stop doing it. For the sake of one thousand quid.) Another thing I like about smoking is allowing a small amount of smoke to escape from my lips then reeling it in again with a fast and deep inhalation. I like Gold Leaf, which used to be advertised on television by a man on a hillside with a red setter, or was it a spaniel? I like the mildness of Piccadilly. I like the toasted taste of Lucky Strike

and Chesterfield and the way that French cigarettes hit the back of the throat like a blowtorch when you inhale. The best thing is the combined effect of nicotine with alcohol, greater than the sum of the two parts.

I change brands a lot. I'm smoking white-tipped Kent tonight and have a pleasant taste of tobacco and red vermouth, which I've bought from the bar. The boy on the bar doesn't know how much to pour, which is all right because he's given me a full wine glass, into which I have put ice. I'll try to make this last an hour.

On the sofas and armchairs there are piles of coats, and as the evening goes on and people dance, there are also sweaters, jackets, bags. I can see Jennifer and Molly and Anne, and I keep a close watch on them. Avalon have a violinist and a girl with very straight long hair in a crushed velvet dress who sings with a warble in her voice.

I imagine these folk songs go back many years, into some oral tradition. I make a note of some words. 'I have for to say,/My own true love,/Is gone far away/In the [inaudible] lights of noon./And weep shall I never/Keen no more/'Neath the mantle of the moon./ So fare thee well and fare thee well/Said the sailor to his lass/For the silvery light of the Hebden Down [?]/Has brought us to this pass, kind sir,/Has brought us to this pass.' It's hard to hear exactly what she sings because the drums are so loud. I don't think the first bard envisaged a mike with a grey blanket in the body of the bass drum.

I'm now propped up by a sweating pillar . . . I'm watching. My body stays supported. ''Neath the mantle of the moon, kind sir . . .' I shall return to Folk Club, to the present moment, loud and smoky, but for the moment I let myself go.

I have a car which I keep in the car park of the Queen Elizabeth building, which is reserved for the Fellows. Sometimes the porters glue pieces of paper with strong reminders (and a split infinitive as a matter of fact) to the windscreen to dissuade me from parking there. I peel them off.

Then I drive out to one of the villages. They have three-digit

fingerposts dug into turf in the triangle where the roads meet. They have milestones leaning back a little by the hedgerows that in summer are heavy with hawthorn and cow parsley. They have war memorials (which I, perhaps alone, read) and brick-and-flint churches. They have pubs. Above all, they have pubs, and the beer in them doesn't come like the stuff in the college bar from a metal cask, pressurised by the addition of carbon dioxide, which makes it taste of chemical soda water. In these pubs the untreated beer is drawn by a hand pump from the cellar through a long thin tube and makes a whoosh as it swirls up the glass, chestnut-amber, then falls as the handle is returned to its upright; then surges again, sparkling to the rim as the handle is pulled a second time; stops with a thin white froth, then receives a final half-squirt; after which the base of the glass is wiped on the towelling mat where you leave it for a moment for the beer to catch the light from the false-antique light brackets of the Wheatsheaf, the Green Man, the Red Lion – a place where anyone can go, where social ties are cut, so you're frictionless, you're no one.

Does it sound as though I'm trying to keep something at bay here? Perhaps, but I don't know what.

Occasionally I stay the night, but not because I'm worried about driving. They normally have a room or two: damp, with a candlewick bedspread and a bathroom at the end of the landing. It's not an idyll. I don't bother with breakfast. I just want to be on the road. Undergraduates aren't allowed cars, but I joined a golf club called Royal Worlington (I never go there) and that was enough for them to make an exception. They encourage sport. My car's a bottle green Morris 1100, bought fourth-hand for £125, most of which I earned by working in a factory. It's never broken down, though once the exhaust pipe fell off and I had to wire it back. I drive all over eastern England, in fact. Sandy, Potton, Biggleswade, Newport Pagnell, Huntingdon, Saffron Walden; even up to King's Lynn or Lincoln. There are houses on modern estates, houses by the side of the road, houses up drives with laurel hedges.

Who are these people? I ask myself. Who on earth are they? I carry golf clubs in the boot of the car and sometimes stop and play

a few holes when I see a course. Usually, the club secretary is unfriendly and the green fee is expensive.

. . . And now, back live, we have special guests Split Infinitive. No one can hear themselves talk. I see Jennifer crane up to Nick, who bends his head to bellow in her ear, but she pulls away and smiles and shakes her head to say she still hasn't caught what he had to say, and he shrugs, as though to say it wasn't much anyway, which I can believe. Molly, Dave, Julia and several other people I don't know are dancing. When I try to move over to the bar to get another drink, I find my shoes have stuck. The rubber of the soles makes a sound like tearing paper as it pulls away from the soaked floor. The air smells of beer and sweat and No. 6.

It's cold outside where people in unironed tee shirts go to cool off and find the moisture dry on their faces. The breeze comes through the funnelling passage and makes your chest ache. Folk Club. It's the best night of the week.

I went to a meeting of Jen Soc the other day. It was in Jesus, where I've never been before. There were queues to see a play called *The Crucible*. I think the charter of every college obliges it once a year to stage either *The Crucible*, *The Threepenny Opera*, or *The Good Person of Szechwan*. *The Crucible*'s about a group of American Puritans called Goody this and Goody that; it has self-righteousness and modern parallels. Students like it because it makes them feel enfranchised.

Jesus is unforgiving. Lose your bearings as you come in, and you're in trouble. Other colleges follow a pattern: a wooden door within a larger gate off the pavement by the street. But Jesus is unique; it's more like going to a school set in its own grounds. Next to one of the games pitches is a half-timbered pavilion.

By the time I found the room in a creeper-covered courtyard such as Billy Bunter might have lived in, the meeting was under way. I crept in to see a vote being taken on what our line was on Allende's Chile,

whether we should vote aid to Nicaragua, if the sub should go up to fifty pence a time and if so whether this should include wine or only, as now, coffee and biscuits. I was for wine, perhaps from Chile, but didn't think I should say so at my first meeting, especially since on the way I'd drunk two pints of Abbot's Ale at the Footballers to wash down the blue ten-milligram pill I take each evening. Then there was the question of the summer outing and where this should go. Managua, it seemed, was out of the question, but Paris was a possibility. Several boys complained that they didn't have enough money; they did this in such a way as to make Jennifer (who'd suggested Paris) sound like Marie Antoinette. The word 'working class' was used by one, of himself, and caused a warm ripple; I sensed at least two of the girls edge in their seats towards the boy who wouldn't go to Paris.

After the meeting we hung around and talked and worked through the coffee and the biscuits. Jennifer remained relaxed and indiscriminately friendly, despite the Paris thing. I wondered what her room was like. What was her life like? Lymington High School. Did her parents still live there? Where exactly was Lymington? She was wearing new flared jeans over leather boots and a grey polo neck in what might have been cashmere. In fact, it wasn't quite a polo neck; the collar fell away at the front, as part of the design, like a small hood in reverse. I don't know what that's called; but it showed the skin of her throat, which was slightly flushed. Her hair was fair and wavy, but quite fine; when she pushed it back behind her ear on one side I saw a couple of small moles beneath her ear, just above the grey cashmere. She was gathering papers into her bag and saying goodbye to people; her bag was of dark tan leather with a suggestion of the cartridge belt or Sam Browne.

Sometimes I imagine what it must be like to be in a young women's college. This is what I think it could be like:

> It's teatime on Friday in November. Mist is coming off the river and is drifting up towards the Victorian buildings where the girl

students live, a short distance out of town. The road is lit by the lamps of bicycles; cars pass at their peril, slowly, because the pedalling girls, some frizzy and stout, some slight and eager, the girls with their lights front and rear, are the queens of the highway.

In the college, the kettle's on and the curtains are drawn since there's no daylight left in the Fens. East of the town, there are no hills until you come to the Urals, so they say, which explains why it's so cold, because there's nothing to stop the wind from the Russian steppe. This is one of those things they tell you when you first arrive, and you're meant to pass it on or tell your family about it in a letter. It's like a shibboleth or password, to show you're local now.

Back from games, the girls are flushed; their faces are red from the Ural wind. Red Russian wind from communist mountains, from the giant Soviet factories. Some girls are returning on foot from town, where they've been to the University Library or to the shops. Jennifer is running down the corridor, lively with the sense of her good fortune. Her friend Anne's a Northern girl, dark. They're having tea now in Anne's room, which has a gas ring. Molly comes in with cake she bought in town: a sponge cake with cherries. They sit on chairs and floors and beds. There isn't much room, but there's always music on Anne's cheap record player at this time of day: a balladeer, a minstrel, shock-haired with a guitar – afternoon songs for girls in jeans with coloured silk scarves knotted or held with silver woggles from Morocco. They wear little make-up; Anne has small round glasses. Cat Stevens is the singer. It's said the *Jewish Chronicle* had an article wondering if his real name was Steven Katz. He *looks* quite Jewish; he could be.

They ought to work, but they have to go to dinner in the dining hall at six-thirty and by the time they've finished tea it won't seem worth opening books for half an hour. So they talk instead. Jennifer's reading Carlos Castaneda, Anne has *Jonathan Livingston Seagull* hidden under a pillow. Anyway, they've already been to lectures

today in History, Physics and Anthropology, and to supervisions with a don. They talk and talk over the music. Molly's family is from Portsmouth. She talks of her boyfriend and whether he'll come to visit; her breath is warm with tea and cherries. Will he at least come to the summer ball? The other two are sympathetic. Boys are difficult to understand, in their opinion. They're like stage flats: colourful, exciting. Flat.

Jennifer has enough friends in her girls' college not to mind about boyfriends. Anne sometimes tries to make her more interested in them because she finds Jennifer's detachment unconvincing. She doesn't want to admit how much she herself thinks about men, or more particularly, a man, *the* man – a being as yet so incompletely imagined that all aspects are provisional, except one: he's male.

There are noises in the corridor. Laughter, crockery, music suddenly through an open door, which is then banged shut.

The lives of these young women make a sort of harmony. Their goodwill towards one another sets a tone in which intimacy can flourish; they're happy.

Dinner bell rings. Lights fade . . .

That's what I think it might be like, but I don't really know.

Perhaps all that mist and goodwill, that music and cake . . . It's just *sentimental.*

The truth is probably more like this:

Anne, Molly and Jennifer are, like all women, weirdly obsessed by appearances – looks, colours, fashion, surfaces; they have no interest in ideas or deeper truths, only 'style' and status and the rapacious purchase of goods to underline them. Their cordiality conceals a sense of bitter rivalry that they'll carry to their deaths, without ever acknowledging it. Anne and Jennifer pretend to care about Barry or Gary or whatever Molly's boyfriend is called, but what they're really both intent on is finding a richer, handsomer and better man of their own.

They have no genuine interest in one another, because they are beings who live close to the ground. For all the lecture notes they've taken today, they're really machines for surviving in the competition for resources. Carrying the species in their wombs, they have to be.

Maybe that's a little too much the other way, a bit severe. I wonder if we can ever know what it's like to be someone else. I doubt whether even Jennifer or Molly or Anne *really* know what it's like to be themselves. They probably take the crucial things for granted – because they've never known what it's like not to have them. What they talk about, or try to change, or think of as being important, are really trivial things, I expect. They're like a cat who wonders about its tail or eyes without knowing that the really distinctive thing about it is that it's feline.

I don't imagine they can help that. They can't see it any more than I can see what's peculiar about me. One thing I feel reasonably certain about, however, is this: that these girls are better adapted than we are. They have balance; they have a flair for living.

Most nights, I go out alone. There's this hotel called the Bradford where the barman's a transvestite. I quite often look in there for a drink. Come to think of it, the barman in the Waterfall is also a transvestite; at least, he has a wig and make-up, though he does wear men's trousers. No one seems to comment on the fact that the barmaid in the Bradford is obviously a man, but I quite like it. There are a lot of pubs in this city. There's a tiny one called the Footballers just near the one I mentioned before, where I go for dinner. In the Footballers, the landlord sleeps on the floor behind the bar all afternoon and you have to wake him up at six o'clock when he's meant to reopen. His dog does a trick with bottle tops.

After the Bradford, I usually go to the Kestrel, where American aircrews burned their names into the ceiling while they were stationed nearby in the War. There are too many alcoholics in the Kestrel for

my taste. What is an alcoholic? Someone who'll steal money from his only friend to buy a drink because the drink is more important and he'd rather lose the friend. I can't admire that.

A pair of goofy scientists came swaggering into the Kestrel at lunchtime one day many years ago to say that – just an hour earlier – they'd figured out the shape of human chemistry, of the molecule itself. I don't think the boozers in the Kestrel were impressed. I don't think this discovery was an answer to any of the top one hundred questions the Kestrel regulars would have liked an answer to – even if you allow for the fact that numbers one to fifteen were probably 'Whose round is it?'

That's part of the trouble with science. It doesn't always help. I don't find it useful to know that particles may appear in different places without having travelled the distance in between. I don't find it enlightening that the only truthful way of thinking of Herr Schrödinger's cat is as being simultaneously alive and dead. In fact, I don't believe it is the only truthful way of thinking of it. It may be the only logical way of thinking of it, but that's a different matter, isn't it? The real problem, though, is that I don't recall asking after the welfare of his cat in the first place.

'Here, this'll interest you . . .' I used to dread what was to come when someone said that to me as a child. Or worse still, 'Have I told you my cat story?' 'Do you have a dog story?' I felt like countering. Or rather, 'I'll tell you what *would* interest me. Then you tell me if you have anything in that line.'

Heisenberg and Bohr and Einstein strike me as being like gifted retriever dogs. Off they go, not just for an afternoon, but for ten years; they come back exhausted and triumphant and drop at your feet . . . A vole. It's a remarkable thing in its way, a vole – intricate, beautiful really, marvellous. But does it . . . Does it help? Does it move the matter on?

When you ask a question that you'd actually like to know the answer to – what was there before the Big Bang, for instance, or what lies beyond the expanding universe, why does life have this inbuilt absurdity, this non sequitur of death – they say that your

question can't be answered, because the terms in which you've put it are logically unsound. What you must do, you see, is ask vole questions. Vole is – as we have agreed – the answer; so it follows that your questions *must therefore all be vole-related.*

After the Kestrel, I sometimes drive out to one of the villages, it doesn't matter which one or what it's called – it might be Great, Little, Much or Long Standing. I listen to the car radio, which has been adapted by a garage to take audio cassettes, and I put the music up loud and think of Julie, my younger sister. She's keen on music, though of course we don't like the same things because she's only twelve. T. Rex, she likes. 'She's faster than most,/And she lives on the coast.' Get away, Jules. When she was very small, we used to put the record player on and make her dance. She used to like that. She wasn't much good at dancing, she just used to jump from one foot to the other in a short dress and you could see a big bulge of nappy under her navy blue woollen tights; but she had this look on her face, as though she was surprised at her good fortune in being alive at all.

I prefer not to think of it because it makes me feel bad.

I don't like staying in my room at night. I want to go out. There's nothing to do in my room. It has a poster for a concert by Quicksilver Messenger Service and a cork noticeboard on which I've stuck some pictures I pulled out of magazines. It has a sort of drinks cupboard in one corner, though I don't suppose it was intended for drinks. I keep some glasses and a bottle each of red and white vermouth in it. Plus gin if I can afford it. I have a plastic ice bucket I got from a petrol station and there's a fridge in the communal kitchen halfway up the stairs where I can get ice. The furniture is about twenty years old. It was worn out by people discussing Jean-Paul Sartre and the Korean War. I wouldn't say it has seen better days, because by all accounts that I've read, those days weren't better: the 1950s were like a tundra that they had to cross; but it's certainly past its best, the furniture.

On the other side of the sitting room, I have a bedroom. Just off it is a shower. It's in a glass cubicle, and the shower head is on a three-inch spout. Most students have to walk a long way to a bathroom block because their rooms were built before people understood about washing. To have your own shower is pretty much unheard of; I think it's a privilege that may be connected to the prize I won.

I tried it once. The nozzle of the shower head is about the diameter of a ten-pence piece. The water was very cold, then very hot. The degree of wetness I achieved was about what you might expect from the thing that squirts a car windscreen, but without the wipers to spread the water round.

There was something typical of my university in this, I thought. At some places, the senior dons go on television. They sit on panels and give opinions on the news, write columns in the papers or get paid to travel the world explaining the origins of language, minerals or cave paintings. They turn up at the Prime Minister's birthday party or at the opening of a new play at the National Theatre. They're pictured at the Ritz or driving down Piccadilly with a slightly intellectual actress. But the most famous philosopher from my university spent the last ten years of his life in his college room designing the lettering for his headstone.

I sleep late in the morning, and the woman who's meant to clean my room, the bedmaker as she's called, doesn't disturb me. I've only met her once. She looked like a female impersonator. Now I lock the outer door when I go to bed. This means that my room is not very clean, but then again the terms are quite short. And if I know I'm going to sleep out somewhere, I leave the outer door open, so this woman can come in occasionally and change the sheets.

When I was young, I used to worry a good deal. We lived in a red-brick terrace in a dingy part of town where the malt smell from the brewery hung over us. My father worked in a paper mill and

suffered from asthma. He also had a heart murmur and we were afraid he might not be able to go on working. Disability pay, early retirement, chronic invalidity . . . These were the phrases I overheard; I didn't know what they meant, except for one thing: no money. My mother worked as a receptionist at a hotel called the Waverley on the Bath Road. She tried to be at home when I came back from school, but from the age of ten or eleven I was given a key and told to make my own tea. This was fine by me, as I could watch television without fear of being nagged to do homework. I also read books which I took out of the library on my way home, and there was no charge for them. This struck me as inexplicable, but good.

I knew we were poor, but I also knew there were people poorer than us. The Callaghans, for instance. There were twelve of them in a house smaller than ours, two streets away. It smelled damp and stale. They had an outside toilet – a double-seater, as I knew from having used it when my mother left me with Mrs Callaghan one afternoon. And all those places by the railway. You'd see the laundry flapping in the soot-grimed yard. How would it ever be clean?

There was a pretty young woman I used to see pegging out sheets and I was worried that she would grow old there and that no one would know how beautiful she was. And maybe she would die without ever having really lived.

I was concerned about West Germany as well. I'd seen newsreel pictures of how their cities had been bombed by our planes in the War and wasn't sure how they could manage to get going again. Then they were occupied by us and the Americans and this must be humiliating because it wasn't as though they were savages in far-off islands who knew no better. It was like being in permanent detention. It was like being forced to wear short trousers even when you were a man. I wondered how I'd feel if I was little Hans or Fritz in Düsseldorf or Hanover. I didn't think I'd like my life to be restricted by the consequences of what my parents had done.

I waited for my father's step on the path every night and the rattle of his key in the lock. I ran out from the kitchen to see how he looked in the light of the sixty-watt hall bulb. I became an expert in summing him up. By the time I'd reached him to say hello I knew by the movement of his ribs beneath his work shirt whether his breathing was constricted or relatively free.

It bothered me that people had so many children. There didn't seem to be enough food in the world for everyone even as it was, and we'd have to build more and more houses which meant that in England at any rate there would soon be no fields left. And then where could we grow the food?

Perhaps when the next world war started, all this would become irrelevant, because the next world war, which would be between us and the Russians, would be a nuclear one. I knew that my grandfather had fought in the first one, my father in the second, so it followed that my turn would come in the third.

Near the railway bridge was a large institutional building. I never knew what it was, but it made a big impression on me. Was it a hospital, or a poorhouse? Or a workhouse? What was the difference? In the winter, when the lights were on, you could see figures moving behind the uncurtained windows. There was something in the lights themselves that made me anxious. They can't really have been gaslight, but they looked like it; perhaps they'd wired up the old gas brackets and put low-wattage electric bulbs in them. That was probably it. Certainly it gave the building a look of something from another time, from the last century. The men I glimpsed through the windows were old. Perhaps they too belonged to that century; in fact, they must have been born in it.

I think I once saw a matron with a starched headdress. Because I could only see into it on winter afternoons, it seemed to me that it was always teatime in this place. This didn't mean nice food or cake or anything. It meant the beginning of a long institutional evening. And I always had this feeling that somehow the inmates of this place were immune to time, that they were somehow stuck at five o'clock in perpetuity.